

Jacqui Frost

# Rejecting Rejection Identities: Negotiating Positive Non-religiosity at the Sunday Assembly

## 1 Introduction

On a sunny Saturday morning in May of 2015, a group of over 80 non-religious Americans and Britons gathered in the basement of a Presbyterian church in the heart of Atlanta, Georgia. As individuals and groups of two and three trickled in, grabbing bagels and coffee and finding their seats, a band was setting up in the front of the room. At 9:00 a.m. sharp, the band gathered the room's attention and soon everyone in the basement was belting out the lyrics to the themesong from the 1980s comedy *Ghostbusters*. Some sang, clapped, and danced in the aisles, while others laughed sheepishly and followed along as best they could by reading the lyrics displayed on the large overhead behind the band. The band was equipped with a saxophone, a piano, a guitar, and both lead and backup vocals, and they quickly orchestrated a "call and response" dynamic with the audience during the choruses. When the band asked, "Who you gonna call?" the audience yelled back gleefully, "Ghostbusters!" Everyone was on their feet and smiling, looking around at their neighbors with knowing glances that signaled shared memories of the movie and the irony of singing about ghosts at a gathering devoted to secular worldviews.

The occasion for this secular sing-a-long was the second annual international conference of the Sunday Assembly, a growing network of "secular congregations" that selectively appropriate and replicate the Protestant church model to build community among the *non*-religious. Organizers and members had come from all over the United States and Britain to meet one another, share questions and concerns, and celebrate their successes as a growing organization. The organization, which began in London in early 2013, has quickly spread to over 70 local assemblies across the globe, though primarily within Britain and America. Local assemblies meet on Sundays, sing songs and listen to speakers, and they focus their gatherings on building community and pursuing a more meaningful life.<sup>1</sup> They seek out ways to volunteer and engage with their local com-

---

<sup>1</sup> See the organization's website for more detailed information on the organization's vision and mission at [www.sundayassembly.com](http://www.sundayassembly.com)

munities and they organize small group activities among assembly members, including game nights, potlucks, and movie outings.

In this chapter, I draw on data I have collected from 21 months of ethnographic observations and interviews with a local Sunday Assembly chapter in a Midwestern American city<sup>2</sup>, as well as observations from the larger organization's annual conference in 2015, to detail the ways in which this organization is attempting to collectively construct a *positive* non-religious community. The organization is intentionally drawing on aspects of religious ritual and practice that facilitate community building and meaning making, while at the same time selectively rejecting the aspects that are not amenable to a non-religious worldview. While I argue that the non-religious individuals who populate the assemblies are attempting to move beyond rejection identities and anti-religious activism, this does not mean that they agree on what it is that they should *affirm*.

Jesse Smith (this volume) developed the concept of “communal secularity” to describe the ways that Sunday Assembly is both like and unlike organized religion in important ways. In this chapter, I detail how this tension between being both like and unlike religion is negotiated in everyday decisions and interactions among Sunday Assemblers. Both within and among local Sunday Assembly chapters, debates and conflicts abound regarding where the organization should draw boundaries in regards to the inclusion of spirituality and ritual, as well as how much they should exclude explicit anti-religious rhetoric and activism that is prevalent in other non-religious organizations. More specifically, three major themes have emerged that highlight this boundary-making process: (1) the explicit goal to be “radically inclusive” of all individual beliefs while simultaneously maintaining a non-religious and non-theistic orientation as an organization, (2) the attempt to cultivate a “secular spirituality” and a collective transcendence that is devoid of supernatural rhetoric or beliefs, and (3) the selective appropriation of the institutional form of a Protestant church that attempts to eschew the hierarchy and dogma found in many Protestant religions while attempting to replicate their ritualized, emotionally engaged communality.

---

2 The city has been anonymized to protect participant identifications.

## 2 A Shift in Non-religious Identities

Non-religious identities<sup>3</sup>, including atheism and agnosticism, have often been seen as identities that are built on the rejection of religion and, indeed, many of the prominent organizations and figures of modern atheism in the West have fueled this image (LeDrew 2015; Kettell 2014). From the anti-religious rhetoric of the New Atheists to the image of embattled nonbelievers fighting against religious discrimination promoted by many national and local non-religious organizations, non-religion is indeed a “rejection identity” for many individuals (Cimino and Smith 2007; Smith 2011, 2013). However, as this population has expanded and evolved, there is a growing sense that an identity based on the rejection of religion and the politicization of nonbelief is insufficient for building a “positive” non-religious community. The rapid growth of “secular congregations” that focus on community, inclusiveness, and meaning making *instead* of criticism and polarization is evidence of a larger trend in which non-religious individuals are attempting to move beyond religious rejection to construct more “positive” non-religious identities and practices (Cimino and Smith 2014; Lee 2014, 2015).

While I am not the first to highlight the increasingly diverse individual and collective identities being constructed among the growing non-religious population (see Cotter 2015; LeDrew 2013; Lee 2014, 2015; Smith 2011, 2013, and Shook in this volume), there is still much work to be done in this area. As Smith (2011, 232) explains, the non-religious do not step into a “ready-made” identity with a “specific and definable set of roles or behaviors.” Without the ready-made identities, rituals, and communities that the religious so often have available to them, the non-religious are forced to get creative in their search for new ways to engage with their communities and make meaning out of their beliefs and experiences. By describing the ways that one non-religious community is navigating this process, this chapter builds on previous research that “recognizes the non-religious” as a rich and diverse population full of complexity that is characterized not just

---

<sup>3</sup> Terminological debates abound in the nascent study of non-religious identity, so in order to be clear and consistent, I draw on Lois Lee’s (2015) definition of non-religion as “any phenomenon – position, perspective, or practice – that is primarily understood in relation to religion but which is not itself considered to be religious” (32). I will use “non-religion” as an umbrella term to denote a wide variety of identities and beliefs, including atheism and agnosticism, but also less clearly defined differentiations from religious belief and practice. While many of my participants use the terms secular/ism, atheist/ism, and non-religion/ous interchangeably, I follow Lee’s (2015) lead and keep these terms distinct, using “secular” to denote areligious phenomena and “non-religious” to denote phenomena built in relation to religion.

by a *lack* of beliefs and practices, but as having the potential to construct substantive, *positive* identities and practices (Lee 2015).

### 3 The Sunday Assembly: Changing the World with Joy and Jon Bon Jovi

The Sunday Assembly is the perfect example of the recent move to make non-religious communities more positive. The organization in many ways replicates the Protestant church model; they just simply do so with no reference to a deity or the supernatural. In fact, they avoid discussions about both religion *and* non-religion, striving to be “radically inclusive” and welcoming to people with a variety of beliefs and worldviews. The organization attempts to be non-hierarchical, and while there are a handful of paid organizers who run the international organization that manages the various local assemblies, individual chapters have no equivalent to a pastor or a leader. All the organizing at the local level is volunteer based, and speakers, who come from both inside and outside of the assemblies, rotate each month. Despite its radical inclusivity, however, the Sunday Assembly is explicitly non-religious and a majority of its organizers and active members identify as atheist, agnostic, or non-religious.

The Sunday Assembly was founded by two British comedians in 2013, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. As Pippa detailed during her introductory comments at the Sunday Assembly Everywhere conference in May of 2015, the two met a few years prior on a road trip to a comedy gig in Bath. They connected on the idea of a church-like environment where non-religious individuals could sing songs and listen to inspirational talks together, offer emotional and social support for fellow non-religious individuals, and collectively construct non-religious rituals and practices that might produce a deeper sense of meaning among the non-religious. They initially set out to organize such a community in London and were met with a surprising amount of success. They began to put together a “Make Your Own Assembly Kit” online, making it widely available in order to see if they could build a network of assemblies across Britain and beyond. Since then, the number of assemblies has exploded to over 70 individual assemblies across the globe, from Hamburg, Germany, to Sydney, Australia, to Cleveland, Ohio.

The Sunday Assembly motto is “Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More,” and this is reflected in what the local assemblies center their services and activities around. To “Live Better,” they sing songs together, form small groups based on interests like watching Ted Talks and playing games, and they have a section

in their service called “One Thing I Do Know,” which is a space for members from the community to share an experience that taught them an important lesson. To “Help Often” they put on monthly volunteering activities and advocate for helping each other out by starting phone trees and cooking food for people who are sick or going through a hard time. To “Wonder More” they bring in speakers who impart knowledge about a topic, much like a Ted Talk, and a portion of their services are devoted to non-religious inspirational readings. They have a moment of silence in their services as well, asking those who came to reflect on the things they learned and how they might apply them to their lives going forward.

The organization is explicitly apolitical and avoids inserting itself into any political or social debates that might hinder the chances of collaborating with religiously-affiliated groups or individuals; while the organization and its activities are explicitly non-religious, the Sunday Assembly charter states that the organization is open to anyone who wants to join, regardless of beliefs. As such, the talks, readings, and music are, for the most part, free of any anti-religious or pro-atheist rhetoric. Instead, the assemblies focus on topics like science, personal empowerment, healthy lifestyle choices, and community betterment.

The organization’s rapid expansion has even caught the attention of the media, and many have dubbed Sunday Assembly “the first atheist mega-church” (e.g. Walshe 2013; Winston 2013). While there are a handful of assemblies in other Western European countries like Germany, Denmark, and Hungary, a large majority of assemblies are located in the United States and the United Kingdom. The goal of the organization is to be a positive community environment for non-religious individuals and a major piece of that positivity stems from the collective singing of pop songs that the Sunday Assembly is becoming known for. As Sanderson jokingly quipped at the conference, the Sunday Assembly is attempting to “change the world with joy and Jon Bon Jovi.”

## 4 Data and Method

I have been involved in ongoing participant observation with a local Sunday Assembly in the Midwestern United States since March of 2013 (Midwest Assembly, hereafter). I started attending their organizing meetings before they held their first assembly, so I have been able to observe the founding and evolution of this local chapter and its interactions with the founding assembly and other local chapters over time. I’ve gone to almost all of their monthly assemblies, I attend a majority of their organizing meetings, and I have access to their correspondence with other assemblies. In addition, I have interviewed 15 of the Mid-

west Assembly's organizers and active members, talking with them about their reasons for joining, their non-religious identities, and their visions for Sunday Assembly's future. I've gone to a couple potlucks and a few volunteer activities they have put on as well. Finally, as mentioned above, I attended a three day conference in May 2015 where I met numerous organizers from other chapters in the United States and the United Kingdom, spoke to and listened to the founders speak about the organization and its goals, and sat in on workshops and organizational meetings where members debated and discussed the organization's charter, motto, and the structure and content of the monthly assemblies.

Data for this chapter come primarily from my interactions and interviews with members of the Midwest Assembly, though I do draw on my observations from the conference as well. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for common themes; observations, both at the Midwest Assembly and at the conference, were transcribed into field notes and analyzed alongside the interviews. Demographic data on Sunday Assembly membership is not yet available, but the average Sunday Assembly participant I have encountered is a white, middle-class, professional in their 30s or 40s.

The main limitation of this data is that the conclusions I draw in this chapter are primarily based on my in-depth ethnography with one chapter of a much larger, international organization. Thus, my data is inevitably influenced by the specific cultural context of the Midwestern United States. However, the three days I spent observing the conference, where numerous other chapters were represented and the views and goals of the larger organization were detailed in depth over the course of the conference, offered a chance to corroborate the data collected from the Midwest Assembly with observations from the larger organization. Further, while the conclusions I draw in this chapter are representative of the Sunday Assembly as it is now, it is a new organization that is quickly growing and evolving. Its goals and vision are constantly being debated, and regional and national differences are likely to influence the trajectory of individual assemblies and the organization as a whole. With these caveats in mind, however, this chapter is meant to highlight some of the boundary making and identity construction processes at work in this new non-religious organization and the ways in which they are similar to and distinct from the ways non-religious identity in the United States has been understood in the past.

## 5 The Sunday Assembly in Context

While the combination of religious rituals and non-religious messages embodied in the Sunday Assembly is interesting in and of itself, it is even more so consid-

ering the prominence of the highly politicized, *anti*-religious rhetoric espoused by non-religious organizations and their leaders over the last decade. In both the U.S. and the U.K., the recent rise in visibility of atheism in the public sphere is due in large part to the popularity of New Atheism, a political movement centered around a critique of religion and the promotion of a rationalistic, scientific worldview (Bullivant 2012; Cragun 2015; Kettell 2014; LeDrew 2015). New Atheism has become a dominant ideological force driving atheist activism and non-religious organizing coming out of these two countries, and prominent atheist and secular activist groups like the Freedom From Religion Foundation and American Atheists in the United States and the Richard Dawkins Foundation in the United Kingdom promote a minority discourse and identity politics that emphasize the politicization of atheist identity and the need to battle religion's hegemony in public and political spheres (Cimino and Smith 2007; Smith 2013a; LeDrew 2015).

The often polarizing and negative message cultivated by the New Atheist movement has produced a large population of atheists who describe and enact their atheist identity as one built on religious critique (e.g. Kettell 2015; LeDrew 2015). Similarly, Smith (2011) found that atheism was a "rejection identity" for a majority of the atheists he interviewed, an identity built in direct opposition to religious beliefs and institutions. Consequently, he draws on the idea of the "not self" to describe how atheists, lacking a ready-made atheist identity to conform to, instead frame their identity as "biographical and rejection-based; a product of interaction, and an achieved identity to be sure, but one constructed out of negation and rejection, rather than filling culturally defined social roles" (Smith 2011, 232). For Smith's participants, atheism was often a way to describe what they did *not* believe in or agree with, as opposed to a marker of specific values, beliefs, or practices that they *affirmed*.

However, as the number of non-religious individuals continues to grow, researchers are finding that non-religious individuals do not always understand their identity as rejection-based. Lee (2014, 467) asserts that non-religion can also signal "substantive nonreligious and spiritual cultures more commonly than scholars and even respondents themselves appreciate" and that "we cannot therefore assume that their use indicates disaffiliation or non-identification rather than affiliation and identification." Lee (2014, 477) finds that non-religion can be used to describe "an array of concrete spiritual and nonreligious affiliations," and argues that social science research to date has been too heavily focused on atheism and non-religion as a negative, as opposed to a positive, affirmation (see also Baker and Smith 2015; Pasquale 2009). Similarly, LeDrew (2013b, 465) argues that "we should understand atheism not in terms of losing beliefs, but rather, in terms of the development of other kinds of beliefs."

Indeed, Smith (2013b, Chapter 10) agrees that not all atheism is rejection-based, and argues that the continued development and growth of organized atheism will likely lead to a wider variety of orientations to religion and identity. In line with these new empirical and theoretical developments, in their study of new non-religious communities in America, including the Sunday Assembly, Cimino and Smith (2014) describe what they call a “new new atheism” in which nonbelievers are attempting to build a positive identity around their non-religion in an attempt to move past rejection identities. Like the secular death practices (MacMurray, Chapter 13) and non-religious weddings (Hoesly, Chapter 12) described in this volume, many of Cimino and Smith’s interviewees were seeking out non-theistic rituals and rites of passage, non-religious alternatives to traditional religion, and even “secular spirituality.”

However, scholars like Kettell (2014), LeDrew (2015), and Baggs and Voas (2009) would warn against positing these trends as especially “new,” and their historical treatments of non-religious organizing in Britain and the United States reveal that the seemingly disparate identities espoused by the New Atheists and Sunday Assembly are products of a long history of tension within the Western non-religious community. These scholars identify a major fault line within Western non-religion that was formed in many ways at its inception and continues to divide the movement today. LeDrew (2015) defines the two sides of this divide as “scientific” and “humanistic,” a divide that dates back to the scientific revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, LeDrew explains, two types of atheism emerged: *Scientific atheists* were affirmed and fueled by Darwin’s theory of evolution and began attempting to expose religion as a bi-product of ignorance that is now superseded by science and reason. *Humanistic atheists*, however, considered religion a social phenomena; humanists were more inclined to see religion as capable of addressing social and emotional needs, and were thus less inclined to criticize religion and were instead open to compromising and working with religious individuals and institutions. And similar debates occurred between self-acclaimed “secularists” who clashed over the definitions of secularism and whether it signified an absence of religion or a substantive category in its own right (Rectenwald, this volume).

This divide is still salient today. Kettell (2014) details how disputes within the modern atheist movement are characterized by a divide between *confrontational* atheists, who utilize a combative approach to religion, and *accommodationist* atheists, who take a more conciliatory stance. Kettell explains that the internal structure of the atheist movement is diverse and absent of any central organization or ideology; some groups embody a more confrontational and political approach by engaging in legislative battles over church/state violations, while other groups are more geared toward acting as a substitution for religious insti-



tutions, providing secular celebrants for weddings and secular answers to larger questions of meaning and value. As Schutz (this volume) and Mastiaux (also this volume) describe, there are a wide variety of non-religious organizations and reasons for joining them, including social, political, communal, and intellectual. Similarly, Kettell (2014) identifies four major aims and campaigns found within this heterogeneous movement: reducing the influence of religion in the public sphere, criticizing religious belief and promoting atheism, improving civil rights and social status, and community building and group cohesion. He argues, “These disputes about identity and the use of labels also reflect more fundamental strategic frictions within the movement about the best way for atheists to present themselves and approach religious beliefs” (Kettell 2015, 383).

It is in this context that Sunday Assembly emerges, an undoubtedly distinct deviation from the anti-religious, scientific atheism of the recently prominent New Atheism, but not entirely unique from other accommodationist non-religious communities that have come before.<sup>4</sup> In this environment where non-religious individuals exist on a continuum of accommodation and confrontation, the Sunday Assembly has been attempting to strike a balance between the two poles – affirm a scientific, non-theistic worldview while also incorporating bits and pieces of religious ritual and spiritual practice where they are useful. In the following sections, I detail some of the ways the Sunday Assembly balances its goals of being both explicitly non-religious *and* radically inclusive, of cultivating transcendence *and* reason, and of being *like a church* while at the same time *different enough from a church* to attract the widest range of non-religious identities and beliefs possible. I will argue that these boundary-making processes illustrate how the positive non-religion that Sunday Assembly is attempting to construct is shaped by the tensions between rejection and accommodation, and while the members of Sunday Assembly are attempting to move beyond rejection identities, they are constantly negotiating what it is they should affirm.

## 6 Rejecting Rejection Identities

That was something that I'd missed, I'd missed that community aspect of having a place to go to on a regular basis that was less about bashing god and religious people ... Because I'd been to [other non-religious groups] who were just so negative. And that was something

---

<sup>4</sup> For example, the British Humanist Association that came to prominence in the 1960s embraced humanism as their rationalistic moral philosophy and focused on providing concrete alternatives to religion instead of criticizing religion and engaging in political battles to lessen its influence in society (Bagg and Voas 2009).

that I started thinking about, this whole idea of a negative identity. Of having an identity that was formed against something else. And with Sunday Assembly, now we are formed around this identity of becoming something else.

*Eric, member of the Midwest Assembly*

Like Eric, many of the members of the Midwest Assembly I interviewed have been or still are members of other local non-religious groups and organizations.<sup>5</sup> They often used their experiences with these other groups and organizations, groups Kettell (2014) would describe as more confrontational, as a foil to describe what they hoped Sunday Assembly would become. Many expressed that they found the activist and political groups useful at first, and they supported these organizations' efforts to maintain the separation of church and state and fight for non-religious citizens' rights, but they grew tired of talking about "how religion got them down" and wanted to "start seeing what else was out there."

For some, the constant rejection of religion and affirmation of nonbelief is simply not something they are interested in. Zack, a younger member who attends frequently, told me that he did not identify strongly with atheism and did not "feel the need to talk about it all the time." He joined because he liked the music and the possibility of making some new social connections. Amy, an active organizer of the Midwest Assembly, echoed Zack's sentiments, saying, "I hope we can move *post* atheism in which it's just accepted that we don't have to make our life's mission to prove there is no god. We just live secularly as if god was never presumed in the first place."

For others, however, the constant critique of religion that is prevalent in the more activist non-religious groups conflicts with the way they want to enact their non-religious identity. For Amanda, leaving Catholicism was a painful and lonely process, and to ask others to have that same experience before they were ready felt wrong. She explains:

Despite, you know, really, coming into this identity of atheism, I never felt like it was my place to dissuade others. Just because this break had been so painful for me, I did not want to inflict that on other people. If they weren't having that crisis, people were living their whole lives happily with these beliefs, who am I to take them away?

---

<sup>5</sup> All names are pseudonyms. As this is a small community, very little identifying information is given about individual interviewees in the attempts to protect participant identifications as much as possible.

Brad, a newer member of the Midwest Assembly, also disliked what he saw as the requirement to reject all the comforts of spiritual beliefs if you become an atheist. He described himself as an agnostic, but one that still sometimes relied on the belief that “some force” was holding everything together when he was going through trying times. He said, “I want to be an atheist at some point. A lot of people I know are very comfortable being atheist, but the thing I’m holding back from is that some atheists really hate Christians. I don’t want to hate anybody. I don’t agree with them, but I’m not going to hate them.” Brad’s experience with other non-religious groups led him to believe that atheists were overwhelmingly negative toward other religions and even toward other non-religious ideologies like his. His hope for the Sunday Assembly is that it can be more open to exceptions and alternative ways of being non-religious.

Overall, the members of the Midwest Assembly express a desire to move *beyond* rejecting religion or building an identity around that rejection. Eric, like Amy above, uses the term “post-atheism” to describe this new orientation to non-religious identity. He said, “I more consider myself a post-atheist, rather than necessarily an atheist. Because my worldview really isn’t defined by an absence of god. I’m really only an atheist in the presence of religious people. The rest of the time, I’m just me.” For Eric, to be an *atheist* means to consciously reject religion and build your identity against that. But to be *post-atheist* means he can move beyond that rejection and live his life in a more positive pursuit of knowledge and meaning. The Sunday Assembly is a space that this new identity and community formation can take place, a space that is not built on the rejection of religion, but of “becoming something else.” However, as I will describe in the next three sections, what this new positive identity should look like is much less clear, and the members of the Sunday Assembly engage in a constant process of negotiation as they attempt to balance between non-religious and non-theistic worldviews and beliefs, selective accommodation of religious ritual and practice, and a sense of the transcendent that is entirely this-worldly and devoid of the supernatural.

## 6.1 Negotiating Radical Inclusivity

At the beginning of every monthly organizing meeting for the Midwest Assembly, one of the five to seven organizing members in attendance reports the “Sunday Assembly Everywhere Network News.” The Sunday Assembly has set up an email list-serve in which any member of any local Sunday Assembly chapter can email all the other members on the list-serve questions and concerns about their individual assembly or the organization more broadly. At each Mid-

west Assembly organizing meeting, we spend some time reviewing what has been discussed on the list-serve. During one such meeting, it was reported that a self-identified Christian had attended a service of the Los Angeles Sunday Assembly and sent the organizers a write-up of her experience. In her write up, this woman discussed how she did not feel like she belonged at the Sunday Assembly because she had religious beliefs, but admitted that the Sunday Assembly was not created for her and she understood why it is an important space for non-religious individuals. The result was what is now an infamously long (over 150 emails) debate between numerous members of the Sunday Assembly community regarding just *how* accommodating the Sunday Assembly should be towards religious individuals and their beliefs.

The Sunday Assembly charter, which was written by Sanderson and Pippa during the founding months of the organization, states, “The Sunday Assembly is radically inclusive – everyone is welcome, regardless of their beliefs. This is a place of love that is open and accepting.”<sup>6</sup> This one statement has led to quite possibly *the* most debate and fallout among the different Sunday Assemblies and their members, and in many ways, shapes the other major themes discussed in this chapter as well. To start, many express confusion over what “radical inclusivity” really is and looks like, causing enough of a stir in the community to merit an entire workshop devoted to the topic at the conference in Atlanta.

During this workshop, over 30 of the conference attendees gathered in a small room to hash out what being radically inclusive meant for them as a non-religious organization. While a majority of those in attendance agreed that Sunday Assembly should welcome anyone who is interested, as long as they did not push their beliefs on anyone, some expressed that they felt it was a paradox to say you are radically inclusive while at the same time requiring that the ethos of the organization and its services remain non-theistic in spirit and in content. Others said they were in search of a *secular* community and did not want to compromise their secular commitments to be inclusive of religious beliefs. One person in attendance said, “I will feel cheated if Sunday Assembly becomes an organization that aspires to welcome the religious and the non-religious equally. The religious have plenty of opportunities to voice their concerns and their agenda. Non-believers do not.” While the individuals who felt this way do not want to focus on rejecting religious ideas, they were concerned that being *too* accommodating of religious ideas would shut down real discussions about non-religious beliefs and values.

---

<sup>6</sup> See full charter at [www.sundayassembly.com/story](http://www.sundayassembly.com/story).

These debates came up during the town hall meeting that was held on the second day of the conference as well. During this meeting, anyone at the conference who wanted could participate in discussions about making changes to the Sunday Assembly charter, motto, and mission statement. When it was founded, the Sunday Assembly charter stated that it was a “godless congregation that celebrates life,” and the Sunday Assembly mission was to support a “godless congregation in every town, city and village that wants one.” The media picked up on this, and began to call the Sunday Assembly an “atheist church.” I noticed that many of the Midwest Assembly members took issue with this during the first few organizing meetings, both because they felt that calling it an *atheist* church was too exclusionary of non-atheists who might want to attend, and calling it a *church* risked turning off potential members who thought it would be “too churchy.” Further, many felt the term “godless” was needlessly confrontational and made it difficult to connect with organizations that might be offended by the term. Despite these reservations, the Midwest Assembly continued to describe themselves as an atheist church in their press releases, and many told me that it was the term they used when they described the organization to their friends and family. However, during the town hall meeting at the conference, members of other assemblies expressed similar reservations with the terms “atheist church” and “godless congregation,” and the organization ultimately voted to change their descriptor to “secular congregation” in order to be as inclusive as possible without losing their secular designation.

This conflict between accommodation and confrontation is also present within individual assembly’s decision making processes. For example, the Midwest Assembly recently began volunteering once a month at a homeless shelter that is affiliated with a Catholic charity. The organizing members discussed the pros and cons of partnering with the Catholic church, agreeing that while some of the more anti-religious members might protest, the cause was worth the compromise. However, a few months later, an organizing member suggested that the Midwest Assembly partner with Habitat for Humanity for another volunteering opportunity. Although Habitat is a Christian organization, the organizer said she had a good experience volunteering with them in the past and had never been talked to about religion at any of their events. After some discussion, the board decided to hold off, deciding that they already volunteered with one religious organization and agreeing that they should seek out secular organizations to volunteer through instead.

The Midwest Assembly has also had a number of debates about whether or not to include references to god or magic in the songs they sing at their gatherings. For example, when the Midwest Assembly band wanted to cover “Rainbow Connection” from *The Muppets*, there was a debate as to whether they should

keep the words “it’s probably magic” in the song. The band ended up including the words, but many of the organizers expressed that the reference to magic made them uncomfortable. Sue, an organizer who disagreed with the word’s inclusion, stated, “We don’t stand against anything but we do stand for something. Reality.”

These examples illustrate the ways that the goal to be radically inclusive requires the Sunday Assembly to constantly balance between an accommodating stance toward religious and spiritual beliefs and institutions while at the same time maintaining a boundary around the non-religious identity of the organization and its members. There are disagreements about the decisions that are made and where the lines are drawn, but this is what many say they like about the Sunday Assembly. Brad from the Midwest Assembly, for example, said that “to be radically inclusive means to make exceptions.” He saw these debates about the “gray areas” as a necessary part of building something new like the Sunday Assembly. He said, “We all have so many different ideas of what this secular assembly looks like, which means that compromises will need to be made and some small transgressions like the word ‘magic’ in a song will have to be overlooked.”

## 6.2 Negotiating Secular Spirituality

The way people speak about how much they love god, I was like, that is how I feel about life. And not in a supernatural way, but in a totally materialistic way. I didn’t even have the words to describe those feelings that I had...there is not language about how that can happen if you aren’t religious.

*Sanderson Jones, co-founder of Sunday Assembly*

The above quote comes from another workshop I attended at the Sunday Assembly conference in Atlanta, a workshop on the topic of “secular spirituality.” A major goal of the Sunday Assembly is the formation of secular rituals and traditions, like those found in religious institutions, that cultivate a sense of connectedness, transcendence, and wonder. Indeed, to “wonder more” is one of the organizations main objectives, but this, too, has been met with resistance from members of the Sunday Assembly community.

At the secular spirituality workshop, around 30 of the conference attendees, including Sanderson, attempted to collectively define “secular spirituality” and if and how Sunday Assembly should try to cultivate it. Many voiced that they disliked the word “spirituality” and its association with supernatural beliefs, so one of the main objectives of the workshop was to come up with some new terminology to express feelings of secular transcendence and connectedness. After dis-

cussing some possible vocabulary options, none of which really stuck, Sanderson asked that everyone join in trying to *cultivate* a feeling of secular spirituality right there in the workshop; we tried clapping together, humming together, and some even “testified” to the group in a way similar to what you would find in a religious service. As Smith (in this volume) would say, this workshop was meant to construct new ways to “sacralize the secular” and imbue secular beliefs and practices with meaning. After these attempts, Sanderson gauged people’s reactions. While some expressed that they were uncomfortable with the experience and said that it felt forced and “too much like church,” others said they could see these practices really working and would be trying them in their own assemblies.

Explicit attempts to ritualize non-theistic spiritual practices and define a secular spirituality has been less of a focus at the Midwest Assembly, and some of the members I interviewed expressed a real discomfort with the idea. Angela, a more peripheral member, said that she is uncomfortable with secular rituals, saying, “I don’t attend the assemblies for spiritual or personal growth. I’m enjoying it as having a party with friends, which is a very different approach than many others in the assembly.” Angela is concerned that more and more members of the Midwest Assembly are coming for spiritual growth and she is hoping that they can strike a balance between their position and hers, or she might have to stop coming. However, others at the Midwest Assembly are more open to the idea of a secular spirituality. Jeff, for example, said:

When you see atheists in the news, it’s them trying to stop Christians from doing something. Their stance towards people who are not atheist is a negative stance ... It’s more of an intellectual kind of a belief system, which has its purpose and maybe it’s just an evolution of this community ... But a lot of people don’t want to make an intellectual argument out of their reason for living. They want it to be more holistic. I don’t think you ever get away from the emotional.

For Jeff, and many other Midwest members I interviewed, a purely intellectual approach to non-religious identity lacks a sense of the transcendent and the emotional connectedness that they are hoping to cultivate at the Sunday Assembly. By singing together, quietly reflecting together during moments of silence, and trying out new rituals and activities that might potentially produce a sense of wonder and collective effervescence, these Sunday Assemblers are attempting to cultivate a secular spirituality that balances their secular commitments with their desires for a more holistic approach to the pursuit of meaning and happiness as non-religious individuals.

Like the debates surrounding Sunday Assembly’s stated goal to be radically inclusive, the attempts to cultivate non-theistic rituals and spirituality are met

with resistance and compromise. While some members joined the Sunday Assembly in pursuit of these rituals, others have stayed in spite of them or left all together. Consequently, the organizers of the Midwest Assembly are constantly assessing whether or not their gatherings are *too* church-like or *not enough* like a church. In the next section, I will describe conversations surrounding the church-like structure of the Sunday Assembly as a final example of the ways that the Sunday Assembly operates as a space of negotiation and compromise, of both accommodation and rejection.

### 6.3 Negotiating Structure: Church-Like, But Not Too Much

The intentional replication of the Protestant church model is one of the defining features of the Sunday Assembly. The organization's primary gathering is on a Sunday, it consists of group sing-a-longs, fellowship, moments of reflection, inspirational talks, and coffee; it lasts about two hours and people often go grab lunch or drinks afterwards. As Smith (this volume) describes, the Sunday Assembly is participating in a *congregational culture* that structures the relationships and experience of its members. Not surprisingly, Sunday Assembly has received a lot of media attention for their enthusiastic appropriation of the contemporary Protestant church model, but it is in fact a common source of conflict and confusion for its members.

When I asked members of the Midwest Assembly why they liked the idea of replicating the church model to build community for non-religious people, the most common answer was: "We don't know how else to do it." At the same time, they talked about how they saw nothing wrong with the church model in and of itself; they had been disappointed by the way that the more activist non-religious communities were organized and felt like the church model had a lot going for it. For example, Eric told me, "Why not take from the best parts of religion? The things that actually work that are making us better people and just ditch the rest." Similarly, Beth, an older organizer with a long history of church attendance, said:

I don't think the church model, in and of itself, is bad. I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It's been very successful, so to me I think there isn't anything wrong with modeling it after that. I'm not even sure what we would do if we didn't. I think the Sunday Assembly has done a good job at not having a hierarchy, like, there's no 'minister' person. So I think they've got rid of the things I don't like about the church, but I think that model is good, like I said, I don't know how else to do it.



However, others express that the Sunday Assembly is often *too* churchy for them, and there are frequent discussions about how to balance being *too* churchy and *not churchy enough* at the Midwest Assembly's organizing meetings. Luke, who has stopped participating in the Midwest Assembly since I interviewed him, told me that he liked the idea of a non-religious church but found the Sunday Assembly to be too much like a church. He said it was "too formalized" because everyone stood for the songs and bowed their heads during the moment of silence. Josie, another member who has since stopped attending, attributed the "churchiness" to the frequent music breaks and a lack of casual interactions between the assembly attendees. As a result, the organizing team has reorganized the service in attempts to cut back on the churchy aspects, while attempting to keep enough of the Sunday Assembly structure so as not to lose the concept entirely. They agreed to rename the "moment of silence" to a "moment of reflection" and began displaying a quote or question to reflect upon during these moments. They also agreed that there would be one less song during the service and more social time to increase interaction and to cut down on the transitions from sitting to standing.

Like the debates about radical inclusivity and secular spirituality, the selective appropriation of the church model is rife with contradictions and exceptions that members of the Sunday Assembly continuously navigate. This sentiment is exemplified in Amanda's statement to her fellow organizers below, in which she explains to them that the discussions about how to balance being like a church and not like a church were never going to be fully resolved, and that that was okay. She said:

We will always have the conversation that it is too much or not enough like church, but the whole purpose of this is to toe the line. And we will never get it right, and we have to be okay with that. We have to embrace the fact that this is the balancing act. I have been on both sides of the argument, and the perfect decisions are going to make up for the ones that are not so perfect.

## 7 Conclusion: Constructing Positive Non-religion

Like Amanda, who sees the Sunday Assembly as largely a balancing act, most Sunday Assemblers are open to compromising and negotiating the boundaries of what the Sunday Assembly is and will become. The Sunday Assembly is a space where non-religious individuals come to move beyond an identity built on rejection, but who are nonetheless unsure of what that might look like in practice. By selectively drawing on aspects of church organizational structures

and spiritual rituals that they have seen work in religious settings, the members of Sunday Assembly hope to cultivate a positive non-religion that is focused on building community, pursuing deeper meaning, and celebrating life.

In this chapter, I have detailed three major themes emerging from my field work with the Sunday Assembly that illustrate how the process of constructing positive non-religion is full of compromises and exceptions; it is a constant negotiation between selectively accommodating religious and spiritual practices and simultaneously maintaining a boundary around the non-religious identity of the organization and its members. Both within the Midwest Assembly and among the members of the larger Sunday Assembly organization, debates abound about the viability of radical inclusivity, the cultivation and promotion of non-theistic rituals and secular spirituality, and the selective appropriation of the contemporary Protestant church model as its organizational structure. But despite disagreements about the shape and content Sunday Assembly, its unifying goal is to move beyond a negative non-religiosity and towards “becoming something else,” something that can be positively affirmed and cultivated in practice.

However, my findings here are only one piece of a much larger non-religious landscape. The Sunday Assembly alone is made up of over 70 chapters, and future research should explore the ways that regional and cultural differences among the individual chapters influence the types of individual and collective non-religious identities and practices that take shape. Research should also explore in more depth the organizational dynamics between various non-religious groups and organizations. The organizers of the Midwest Assembly often discuss how they want to maintain a good relationship with other non-religious and atheist groups in the area, but that they are aware that they are competing with them for resources, members, and a space in the larger community. Future research should build on Kettell (2014) and Bagg and Voas (2009) to explore the ways that accommodationist and confrontational non-religious groups interact, both on the local and national level, and the extent to which there are conflicts over representation and resources. Further, do these positive and negative sides of non-religion present themselves in other times and contexts? This chapter has focused on the U.S./U.K. context, but are there other kinds of divisions among non-religious individuals in other countries and historical periods (see for example Quack 2012)? Beyond the Sunday Assembly, more research is needed that more explicitly compares accommodationist non-religious groups like the Sunday Assembly with religious organizations and groups. How do ritual practices like collective singing and moments of silence work differently in religious and non-religious settings?

In mapping the boundary work of the nascent Sunday Assembly, I set out in this chapter to contribute to the growing literature on the substantive beliefs and practices of non-religious individuals and the rich, complex identities they are constructing in relation to religion (e.g. Lee 2015). While non-religious identities have largely been understood as negative identities that indicate a *lack* of beliefs and practices, the Sunday Assembly is made up of non-religious individuals who explicitly reject rejection identities and who are working together to construct new communities and practices that allow them to express a positive non-religion. And while the shape and content of this positive non-religion is still very much under construction, the negotiations surrounding its construction exemplify the nuanced nature of non-religious identity and practice that researchers will need to attend to going forward.

## Bibliography

- Bagg, Samuel and David Voas. 2009. "The Triumph of Indifference: Irreligion in British Society." In *Atheism & Secularity: Volume 2: Global Experiences* edited by Phil Zuckerman, 91–111. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Baker, Joseph O. and Buster G. Smith. 2015. *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bullivant, Stephen. 2012. "Not So Indifferent After All? Self-conscious Atheism and the Secularisation Thesis." *Approaching Religion* 2(1): 100–106.
- Cimino, Richard and Christopher Smith. 2007. "Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism." *Sociology of Religion* 68(4): 407–424.
- Cimino, Richard and Christopher Smith. 2014. *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cotter, Christopher. 2015. "Without God Yet Not Without Nuance: A Qualitative Study of Atheism and Non-religion Among Scottish University Students." In *Atheist Identities – Spaces and Social Contexts*, edited by Lori Beaman and Steven Tomlins, 171–196. London: Springer International Publishing.
- Cragun, Ryan T. 2015. "Who Are the 'New Atheists'?" In *Atheist Identities – Spaces and Social Contexts*, edited by Lori Beaman and Steven Tomlins, 95–211. London: Springer International Publishing.
- Kettell, Steven. 2014. "Divided We Stand: The Politics of the Atheist Movement in the United States." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29(3): 377–391.
- LeDrew, Stephen. 2013a. "Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism." *Sociology of Religion* 74(4): 431–45.
- LeDrew, Stephen. 2013b. "Reply: Toward a Critical Sociology of Atheism: Identity, Politics, Ideology." *Sociology of Religion* 74(4).
- LeDrew, Stephen. 2015. "Atheism Versus Humanism: Ideological Tensions and Identity Dynamics." In *Atheist Identities – Spaces and Social Contexts*, edited by Lori Beaman and Steven Tomlins, 53–68. London: Springer International Publishing.

- Lee, Lois. 2014. "Secular or Nonreligious? Investigating and Interpreting Generic 'Not Religious' Categories and Populations." *Religion* 44(3): 466–482.
- Lee, Lois. 2014. 2015. *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pasquale, Frank. 2009. "A Portrait of Secular Group Affiliates." In *Atheism & Secularity: Volume 1: Issues, Concepts, and Definitions*, edited by Phil Zuckerman, 43–87. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Perspectives.
- Quack, Johannes. 2012. "Organised Atheism in India: An Overview." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27(1): 67–85.
- Smith, Jesse. 2011. "Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism." *Sociology of Religion*. 72(2): 215–237.
- Smith, Jesse. 2013a. "Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52(1): 80–99.
- Smith, Jesse. 2013b. "Comment: Conceptualizing Atheist Identity: Expanding Questions, Constructing Models, and Moving Forward." *Sociology of Religion* 74(4): 454–463.
- Smith, Jesse. 2017. "Can the Secular Be the Object of Belief and Belonging? The Sunday Assembly." *Qualitative Sociology* 40(1), 83–109.
- Walsh, Sadhbh. 2013. "Atheist 'Mega-churches' Undermine What Atheism's Supposed To Be About." *The Guardian*.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/15/atheism-contrary-to-mega-churches>. Accessed May 11, 2016.
- Winston, Kimberly. 2013. "Atheist 'Mega-churches' Look for Non-believers." *USA Today*.  
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/11/10/atheist-mega-churches/3489967/>. Accessed May 14, 2016.