The Sociology of the Sunday Assembly: 'Belonging Without Believing' in a Post-Christian Context

Josh BULLOCK

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As with the academic participants above, this PhD would not have been possible without the support of my loving family, my sister Jodie and my parents, Lyn and Bob Bullock. My parents have always provided unbelievable support in every possible way. To my Mum, who has read every single word that has made it into this PhD, and the countless words that were stripped out. To my dad, who tells everyone he meets in Bristol about his son's research.

I would like to dedicate this research to my grandma, who sadly is unable to see me submit my thesis, but who was certain beyond measure that 'they must like you' when I would tell her about all of the adventures my PhD took me on, and the opportunities presented by my supervisors and Kingston University.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Signed: *Bullock*

Parts of this thesis appear in revised form in the following publications:

Abstract

The Sunday Assembly, a secular congregation with the motto 'Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More', took centre stage in the nonreligious marketplace in 2013. Since then, over 70 franchised global congregations have opened their doors to the nonreligious affiliated market. If Britain is displaying how religions can fade, the Sunday Assembly becomes the perfect case study to examine what comes next. This thesis is an ethnographic study of the Sunday Assembly London and utilises 35 semi-structured interviews with members of the congregation. It addresses what the Sunday Assembly reveals about believing, belonging and community, and their relationship with religion, secularisation and wonder.

The study highlights generational trends towards nonreligion in the UK and, in particular, how the Sunday Assembly uses existing religious structures, rituals and practices to flourish. It is through this post-Christian transition that religion is understood as a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000); that people are still seeking to belong, but do not wish to believe in a religious doctrine, thus 'belonging without believing' is transpiring. I argue that the demographic profile of Sunday Assembliers is homogeneous, with similar life experiences and values, the majority of whom once held a religious belief and now do not, are not hostile towards religion, are from the same ethnic group (white British), are typically middle class and seek to congregate, and thus represent a very different nonreligion estranged from its 'New Atheist' predecessors.

The growth and initial demand of and for the Sunday Assembly indicate that a Christian culture still exists and the congregational community structure is still sought in a post-Christian transition. By rejecting Christianity, but with a heritage of Christian memory still persisting, the Sunday Assembly offers a suitable alternative to a congregational religious community. The Sunday Assembly warrants attention in the 21st century as it offers explanations to the changing nature of the religious landscape and nonreligious discourse in the West.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCING A SOCIOLOGY OF THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY

Early on Easter Sunday 2013, I waited outside The Nave in North London, a deconsecrated Anglican Church. A queue of people already snaked around the building and was visible to the busy road in Islington. Passers-by stopped, intrigued; one man even hung his head out of his van in wonder at what warranted this large queue outside a church at 10:30am. After all, how often do you see people queuing up in the UK to guarantee a seat at church?

Rationale

The Sunday Assembly was set up as an 'atheist church' or 'godless congregation' by stand-up comedian co-founders Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. They wanted to start a 'global movement for wonder and good'. With 70 congregations in eight countries, the Sunday Assembly's motto is 'Live Better, Help Often and Wonder More' (Sunday Assembly, 2013a). Its goal is to be 'a global network of people who want to make the most of this one life we know we have' (Sunday Assembly, 2013a). The Sunday Assembly is an example of organised nonreligion that has become newly visible both within the public sphere and academic scholarship. The purpose of this thesis is to provide a sociological account of the Sunday Assembly in the context of a trend where more and more people in the UK are identifying as nonreligious; transitioning the UK towards what can be considered a post-Christian society.

Bullivant (2017, p. 6) contends that 'the rise of the nonreligious is arguably *the* story of British religious history over the past half-century'. Evidence (Quack, 2013) suggests that, far from conforming to a homogenised set of beliefs and values, this population exhibits a diversity of manifestations of unorganised unbelief. 'Unbelief', as defined by Lee & Bullivant in the *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism* (2016), is a term that is often used in a wide sense, implying a generalized lack of belief in God or gods. Mahlamäki (2012, p.64) argues that the varieties and forms of everyday-lived nonreligion remain mostly invisible in public discussion, and that academic research on this topic is limited. Yet the more we understand about unbelief, the better

positioned we are to comprehend the role of faith and belief in modern society (Bainbridge, 2005, p.24).

Jong (2015, p.20) calls for researchers to be 'vigilantly specific about the aspect of 'nonreligion' that they are interested in'. To be specific, this study has sought to explore lived nonreligion through organised unbelief as one aspect of an individual's nonreligious experiences. McGuire (2008a, p.12) defines 'lived religion' as 'how religion and spirituality are practised, experienced and expressed by ordinary people in the context of their everyday lives' and has been used in recent scholarship (for example, Thiessen, 2015). Historian David Hall (1997) advocates the notion of using lived religion to better comprehend, historically, the religious worldviews of individuals both in their experiences and their collective shared practices. Orsi (1997, p.7) contends that "lived religion' is an awkward neologism' (as is 'lived nonreligion'), but he argues that religion is best approached 'by meeting men and women… in all the spaces of their experience' and, as such, lived nonreligion should be approached in the same way. Sociologists of religion have always been interested in new religious movements and how they come into being (Davie, 2013, p.163). I would argue that secular communities or godless congregations such as the Sunday Assembly warrant at least the same amount of attention, if not more, as they offer clues to the changing nature of the religious landscape.

The following sections outline the key shifts in religion and nonreligion in geographic contexts where the Sunday Assembly has franchised locations: England and Wales, Europe, the United States of America. The section on the rest of the world will illustrate the importance of researching the Sunday Assembly as emerging nonreligious trends transpire.

Nonreligion in England and Wales

According to the 2011 Census, approximately 25% of the population of England and Wales reported that they self-identify as having 'no religion' (derived from 'none of the above' when surveys have asked: 'What is your religion?'). This was a notable change from the 2001 Census, when only 15% of the population identified as such. The growth in the number of people identifying as being nonreligious was in parallel

with a sharp decline in the number of people choosing to identify as Christian —
from approximately 72% in the 2001 Census to 59% in 2011.

In a separate study, Lucy Lee reported from NatCen's British Social Attitudes
(BSA) survey 2012 (2012, p.173) that the largest decline in religiosity had been
affiliation to the Church of England, which, since 1983, had halved from 40% to
20% of the British population. The survey had asked 'What is your family's
religion?' — to which 79% of the British public answered as having been brought
up in a particular religion. However, 40% of those now identified as having no
religion (Lee, 2012, p.175). This trend, Lee concluded, was set to continue as the
largest demographic of non-believers was 18-24 year olds, nearly two-thirds of
whom did not belong to a religion (Lee, 2012, p.178). 'In 2016, seven in ten (71%)
of young people aged 18-24 said they had no religion, up from 62% in 2015… And
when it comes to the Church of England, young people are particularly
underrepresented. Just 3% of those aged 18-24 described themselves as Anglican,
compared to 40% of those aged 75 and over' (BSA, 2016).

In comparison to the 2012 report and the UK Census, the 2014 BSA survey
suggested further growth in the 'no religion' group — 49% identified as having no
religion, outnumbering Christian denominations (43%).[1] 'In 2016, more than half
(53%) of the British public now describe themselves as having "no religion" (BSA,
2016), just 15% of people in Britain consider themselves Anglican, half the
proportion who said this in 2000' (BSA, 2016).

The 2011 Census revealed that the Christian population of London is lower (48.4%)
than the overall Christian population of England and Wales. 'No religion' makes up
the next largest population (20.7%). London is the most religiously diverse region in
England and Wales, with higher proportions of people identifying as Muslim,
Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu than in other regions. Thus, research has found that
London has the highest proportion of those who belong to non-Christian religions
(Bullivant, 2017, p.7). Bullivant (2017. p.3) reports that proportionally London has,

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[1] The BSA survey asked: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?'
whereas the UK Census asked: 'What is your religion?' I will return to the significance of
question wording in **Chapter Three**.

by far, the fewest 'nones' in Britain at 31% (but the most in absolute terms, given the populace nature of London). Nones are the fastest growing group of people in the West who have no religious affiliation which is inclusive of atheists and agnostics. Not all nones are atheists; nones are defined by sociologists as religiously unaffiliated. Some nones report engaging in religious practice such as prayer, but most do not (Bullivant, 2017, p.16). 'Nonreligious nones' make up the largest proportion of all nones (85%), equating to around 21 million British adults (Bullivant, 2017, p.16). Further exploration is needed to understand their diversity (or lack of) and significantly this thesis will focus on why now they choose to congregate and what this reveals about the current religious landscape.

These statistics illustrate a shift from a Christian to a nonreligious society, more specifically a shift to a post-Christian society. It is this story of change that creates the foundations for the Sunday Assembly to thrive and the basis for this thesis. The data for England (London being home to the first Sunday Assembly) and Wales suggests key points:

- Nonreligion is increasing.
- Christianity (particularly the Church of England) is rapidly diminishing, with falling service attendance.
- Nearly four in five people grew up in some degree of religious tradition; however, two in those four now have no religion (Lee, 2012, p.175).
- Pew Research Center (2015b), which carries out extensive statistical analysis on global religions, contends that young people (born after 1980 and sometimes referred to as 'Millennials' or 'Generation Y' [Savage et al., 2007]) are accounting for the growing numbers of so-called nones and thus there are generational trends towards nonreligion. 'The massive cultural shift from Christian to nonreligious Britain has come about largely because of children ceasing to follow the religious commitments of their parents', rather than adults abandoning their religion (Woodhead, 2016, p.249).

Nonreligion in Europe

The European Values Study (2002, 2014) asked the question 'how religious are you?'; the number who answered 'not at all religious' grew in the UK from 14.5% in 2002 to 22.9% in 2014. In Europe as a whole, it grew from 11.9% in 2002 to 18.7% in 2014. The Sunday Assembly has a presence in Europe, particularly in Holland where three congregations exist to date — in Amsterdam, Utrecht and Apeldoorn. Pew Research Center (2015) estimates that, by 2050, the Netherlands will follow a similar trajectory of religious decline to England and Wales, but shifting completely from a Christian majority (2010) to an unaffiliated majority. More broadly, in Europe, it is projected that the Christian population will shrink by approximately 100 million people in the coming decades (by the year 2050) dropping from 553 million to 454 million (Pew Research Center, 2015). While Christianity will remain the largest religious group in Europe (by 2050), Christianity is projected to decline from three-quarters to less than two-thirds. Furthermore, nearly one-quarter of Europeans (23%) are expected to have no religious affiliation (projected to be the second biggest grouping).

Nonreligion in the US

The Sunday Assembly, outside of the UK and Holland, has found the most success in the United States, with approximately 45 of its 70 franchised congregations being situated in North American towns and cities. This could be explained through a 40-day tour created by co-founders Jones and Evans (see **Chapter Two** for more information) that helped (with media attention) form many new start-up congregations. Pew Research Center (2015) projected the unaffiliated to grow in the US from an estimated 16% of the total population in 2010 to 26% in 2050. This projection chimes with the 2012 American Values Survey (2012) proclaiming: 'The religiously unaffiliated represent the fastest-growing group in the American religious landscape and they are more complex than previously understood'. The survey found that the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion is continuing to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the American public has no religious affiliation, with one-third of adults under 30 (Generation Y) having no religion. This includes more than 13 million self-described agnostics and atheists that make up nearly 6% of the US public. Consequently, the US appears to be following a similar

path to England and Wales (although at a slightly slower pace) of a post-Christian generational transition.

Nonreligion in the Rest of the World

In this study, the 'nones' and the Sunday Assembly are Western based. Outside of England and Wales, Europe, Australia[2] and the US, the Sunday Assembly has had limited success worldwide. However, with the launch of the Understanding Unbelief project in January 2017, unbelief will become increasingly researched and visible globally.[3] Zuckerman (2009, p.950) estimated that there are 'between 500 million and 750 million non-believers in God worldwide'. According to Pew Research Center, 'In 2010, censuses and surveys indicate there were about 1.1 billion atheists, agnostics and people who do not identify with any particular religion' (Pew Research Center, 2015). Pew Research Center has forecasted that, globally, there will be a projected cumulative change of religious switching to unaffiliated of 97,080,000 individuals, compared to switching out from unaffiliated of 35,590,000, resulting in by far the largest net change (+61,490,000 million) of people swapping from religion to nonreligion (Pew Research Center, 2015).

However, Pew Research Center (2015) has also projected that the religiously unaffiliated global population in 2010 of 16.4% (1,131,150,000 people) will reduce to 13.2% by 2050 (1,230,340,000). Over the same period, there will be a worldwide population growth of 99,190,000. Notably, the unaffiliated have a birth rate (1.7 children per woman) lower than religious groups, meaning birth rate, rather than a decline in the population share, may offset the current trend towards nonreligion. As a result, the religiously unaffiliated population is projected to shrink as a percentage of the global population, even though it will increase in absolute terms. Within these projections, however, the unaffiliated are expected to continue to increase as a share of the population in much of Europe and North America (Pew Research Center, 2015).

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[2] The Sunday Assembly has two successful congregations in Melbourne and Sydney.
[3] Understanding Unbelief is a major new research programme aiming to advance scientific understanding of atheism and other forms of 'unbelief' around the world in over 30 countries (for example, Egypt and Japan). Recent projects exploring the diversity of nonreligion outside of Europe and the US include Quack's (2012) research on the rationalist (atheist, humanist, or freethinking) movement in India.

Profile of the 'Nones'

LeDrew (2013a, p.432) contends there has been a recent surge of interest in the quantitative studies of the 'nones'. These studies offer the demographics of the nonreligious population but do not provide any insight into lived nonreligion or organised unbelief, which is found at the Sunday Assembly. Baker and Smith (2009, p.1257) found that people living in the West, younger respondents and those with higher levels of education (Hayes, 2000, p.192) are more likely to identify as having no religion. Furthermore, for as long as statistics on religion have been collected, in countries all over the world, they confirm that women have a higher degree of religiosity than men (Mahlamäki, 2012, p.60). Thus, the stereotype of the 'white, middle-class, well-educated male atheist' emerges and fulfils a 'New Atheist' profile, a 21st-century movement of atheist authors who criticise religious belief.

The statistics do not show any qualitative narratives of what it means to be situated in the ambiguous category of 'none'. As Bainbridge (2005, p.3) argues, 'we know surprisingly little about atheism from a social-scientific perspective. One would think that it would have been studied extensively in comparison with religiosity, but this is not the case'. In the past decade, we have begun to learn more about the profile of a none. Woodhead (2016, p.250) found that only a minority of British nones are convinced atheists and thus, rather than focusing solely on atheism, unbelief in general presents a larger problem of understanding.

Woodhead (2016, p.249) designed surveys with representative samples of British nones to find out about their belonging, beliefs, values and practices. 'One thing they reveal clearly is that nones are not straightforwardly secular' (Woodhead, 2016, p.249). She argues that if you understand 'secular' in a strong sense to mean hostile to public religion (e.g. faith schools) and religious belief, only 13% of nones are secular in this sense. 'So the growth of "no religion" cannot be conflated with the growth of the secularism championed by the "New Atheists"' (Woodhead 2016, p.250). I suggest 'new-new atheism' exists, with focus placed on community and not on a distaste for religion, which is found at the Sunday Assembly (see **Chapter Seven**). Furthermore, regarding nones' ethical values, Woodhead (2016, p.251) discovered:

nones are different in degree rather than in kind from the wider population. Most British people place great value on the freedom of the individual and are decidedly liberal when it comes to matters of personal morality — they believe that it is up to individuals to decide for themselves how they live their own lives. Nones share these attitudes, but with even greater commitment.

Woodhead revealed that:

> a typical none is younger, white, British-born, liberal about personal life and morals, varied in political commitment but cosmopolitan in outlook, suspicious of organised religion but not necessarily atheist, and unwilling to be labelled as religious or to identify with a religious group (2016, p.252).

In summary, Britain is no longer an indisputably Christian country (Collins-Mayo et al., 2010, p.4) and a distinct new 'none' profile exists. Survey data suggests an increase in nonreligion, particularly in England and Wales, Europe and the US. The study of unbelief is becoming a prominent area for investigation in the sociology of religion and nonreligion, and scholars (e.g. Zuckerman, 2008) argue that society without God might not be such a bad thing after all. The Sunday Assembly emerges as a novel case to understand the shifting religious to nonreligious landscape. This research illuminates the profiles and communities of the nonreligious (see **Chapter Five** and **Eight**) and analyses their values (**Chapter Nine**).

Research Questions

Given the above trends and the profile of the nones, this thesis aims to address four key research questions:

1. In what ways have secular congregations contributed to the formation of a new nonreligious identity?
2. What does the recent growth of secular congregations, specifically the Sunday Assembly, reveal about believing, belonging and community?
3. In the transition to a post-Christian British society, has wonder and secular enchantment replaced belief in a deity, and if so, how?

4. What does the growth of secular congregations reveal about the relationship between religion and secularisation?

The first research question was developed early on in this project as the Sunday Assembly's motto, structure and service constructed a new way of being nonreligious through community involvement, which does not resemble the atheism of the mid-noughties or the rise of the 'New Atheists'. I will show how a lived nonreligious identity is embraced in *active* unbelief or belief in something other. This question is answered throughout **Chapters Seven** and **Eight** ('Live Better' and 'Help Often').

The second research question explores the changing nature of 'believing without belonging' (Davie, 1994). Through studying the Sunday Assembly as organised unbelief and active lived nonreligion, I will argue that the Sunday Assembly is an example of 'belonging without believing' (see **Chapter Ten**).

The third research question focuses specifically on one part of the Sunday Assembly's motto, 'Wonder More'. With the rise of popular television shows (such as Brian Cox's Wonders of the Universe and David Attenborough's Planet Earth I and II), has a Sunday Assembly style of wonder and curiosity displaced religious thought or does it cater for an already absent belief in God. This research question is the centre of focus in **Chapter Nine** ('Wonder More'), as to wonder more suggests Sunday Assembliers were not wondering enough.

The fourth research question is to be understood more broadly as to recognise what the formation of the Sunday Assembly articulates about religion in contemporary society. This research question is explored throughout the thesis by adopting an innovative theoretical framework, which is to understand the Sunday Assembly by contextualising it through the transitioning to a post-Christian society at the beginning of the 21st century and understanding religion as a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). In summary, these research questions ask what the growth of the Sunday Assembly tells us about the changing nature of belief, community, belonging, nonreligious identity and the post-Christian individual and/or society.

Order of Chapters

The structure of this thesis is as follows:

Chapter One: Religion, Secularisation and the Post-Christian considers key terms that are applied throughout this thesis — that is, 'religion', 'nonreligion' and 'atheism'. In this chapter, I describe sociology's relationship to religion/nonreligion. I explore the secularisation thesis and argue that Britain can be viewed as transitioning to a post-Christian society through Generation Y. It is this generation that is living through this transition and is seeking to 'belong without believing'. I argue that religion exists as a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) and the Sunday Assembly holds a link in that chain.

Chapter Two: Sunday Assembly — Internet, History and Organisation presents the Sunday Assembly as a gathered community of non-believers in a historical context. I provide perspective on the Sunday Assembly by looking at the rise of the 'New Atheists' and by considering other non-believing congregations and communities. I focus on religious humanism, Unitarians (New Unity, London), Houston Oasis atheists, Alain de Botton's *The School of Life*, the Sea of Faith network and modern expressions of secular communities that foster belonging, such as Morning Gloryville. Once the Sunday Assembly has been situated among other nonreligious communities, I then shift focus to the timeline of the Sunday Assembly's development. In doing so, I provide a historical account of the social movement from 2013 (the opening of the Sunday Assembly in London) to 2016 when the fieldwork finished. This section includes a worldwide scope, looking at how the Sunday Assembly utilises social media and its strong emphasis on branding. Furthermore, it provides information on how the Sunday Assembly operates both locally and internationally and how it is financed and funded.

Chapter Three: Researching Sunday Assembly, Part I — An Ethnography of a Secular Congregation focuses on the methodologies behind this study. In this chapter, I discuss the rationale for conducting ethnographic research, which utilises participant observations, unstructured and semi-structured interviews. I give an account of how I gained access to the Sunday Assembly London congregation.

Furthermore, I discuss the sampling process, serendipity in research, entering in and recruitment, digital data collection and the research site. Finally, I conclude by explaining how I analysed the data, which was through a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Chapter Four: Researching The Sunday Assembly, Part II — Emotions and Positionality in Ethnographic Fieldwork presents the reflexive nature of doing fieldwork. I reflect on the ethical considerations and on my own positionality and emotions that arose during my time in (and leaving) 'the field'. I also present the professional dilemmas that occurred.

Chapter Five: The Demographics of the Sunday Assembly and the Participants focuses on the individuals who make up this secular community. I begin by providing a detailed table of the 35 participants who were interviewed throughout the study. I offer a summary of the participants and highlight that many of the participants followed a comparable path and have transitioned into a post-Christian identity by leaving their religious background (almost always Christian faith), and now identify as being nonreligious, atheist, agnostic, humanist, or all of the above. I then present the demographics of the Sunday Assembly London using a Weberian ideal type called 'Jane', who was created to reveal similar narratives across the sample of participants. In this chapter, I describe an ethnographic visit to the Brighton Sunday Assembly to illustrate the homogeneous demographic found within the Sunday Assembly congregations and question the Sunday Assembly's claim to be 'radically inclusive'.

Chapter Six: An Ethnographic Picture of the Sunday Assembly Rituals and Liturgies offers a detailed account of an archetypal Sunday Assembly gathering, as well as the small groups that were explored ethnographically (Article Club, Wonder Club and Theatre and Dance Club). Based on further ethnographic observation, this chapter provides analyses of Bristol, Brighton, Guildford and Utrecht (Holland) Assemblies and how they compare to the exceptional Sunday Assembly London (the founding assembly). This chapter also offers theoretical analysis on the nature of ritual and liturgy and post-Christian culture. I explore particular rituals and liturgies that take place at each Sunday Assembly and analyse what functions these rituals

perform and who participates. I then signify that in a post-Christian transition, the Sunday Assembly uses existing rituals, structures and practices found within a particular style of modern evangelical church to build community and belonging. As such, the Sunday Assembly resembles, for example, Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), which pioneered the Alpha Christianity course around the world, and St Mary's Church London.

Chapter Seven: 'Live Better' — Sunday Assembly in the Lives of Individuals is the first chapter on the tri-part Sunday Assembly motto, 'Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More'. I address the draw of attending the Sunday Assembly. I argue that the nonreligious are seeking a familiar structure during times of crises. Additionally, I explore what it means to 'live better' for the Sunday Assembly as an institution (macro), within the community groups (meso) and at an individual level (micro). I foreground what constitutes a 'nonreligious identity' within a post-Christian (albeit transitioning) society. This chapter directly answers the research question: *In what ways have secular congregations contributed to the formation of a new nonreligious identity*? that disassociates itself from 'New Atheism'.

Chapter Eight: 'Help Often' — Sunday Assembly as a Secular Community contributes to an understanding of community and congregation within a post-Christian transition and also in relation to organised unbelief. This chapter draws on theory from Putman's (2000) understanding of 'social capital' and explores what community is and if post-Christian congregations offer a distinctive alternative to community, otherwise found in, for example, sports teams and choir groups. I argue that despite 'Help Often' suggesting an outward perspective for community building, its focus is on helping the community to belong.

Chapter Nine: 'Wonder More' — Sunday Assembly (Un)Belief, Values and Wonder contributes to an understanding of (un)belief and its relationship to belonging by examining what members of the Sunday Assembly *do* believe in and value? It explores wonder in relation to religion and how it can be associated with 'awe' and religious experience. I offer examples of how the Sunday Assembly wonders more and what members of the congregation wonder about? This chapter directly answers the research question: *In the transition to a post-Christian British*

society, has wonder and secular enchantment replaced belief in a deity, and if so, how?

Chapter Ten: Reimagining the Secular in an Unimaginative Way analyses the concept of 'belonging without believing' in reference to post-Christianity, and as a spin on Grace Davie's (1994) seminal work on *Believing Without Belonging*. In this chapter, I connect the themes found in the previous three chapters and return to a theoretical analysis of belonging. I answer the research question: *What does the recent growth of secular congregations, specifically the Sunday Assembly, reveal about believing, belonging and community?*

Concluding the Phenomena of the Sunday Assembly in a Transitioning post-Christian Culture is the final chapter, in which I summarise the contributions of this thesis towards an understanding of the sociology of religion and nonreligion in regard to organised unbelief. I answer the research question: *What does the growth of secular congregations reveal about the relationship between religion and secularisation?* Furthermore, I discuss the implications of the research findings for the Sunday Assembly and present potential problems it may face as an organisation attracting the next generation. Finally, I also note limitations of this study and identify areas of further research.

CHAPTER ONE

RELIGION, SECULARISATION AND THE POST-CHRISTIAN

Introduction

This chapter begins by identifying the difficulties in defining religion and examining the discourses surrounding religiousness (Glock and Stark, 1968). I argue in favour of understanding the Sunday Assembly through a post-Christian lens rather than it being understood in its own right as a religion. Subsequently, I define key terms (such as 'atheism' and 'nonreligion') that are located in this research. I then analyse the secularisation theory to situate this study in a broader context. Lastly, I argue that the UK is in the process of transitioning to a post-Christian society through the trends outlined in the (main) introduction, which has allowed the Sunday Assembly to flourish as it builds upon, and secularises, the Christian memory.

Religion

If you sat in a Sunday Assembly without any prior knowledge of its purpose, you might assume it to be a religious service. The congregation meet on a Sunday morning, they stand to sing, they bow their heads for a (secular) moment of reflection and they borrow from existing Christian church structures. Brown (2013) describes such meetings as 'Pentecostalism for the Godless'. Therefore, this section explores the Sunday Assembly's relationship to religion. By its very name, non-religion is in relation to religion. Lee (2012, p.131) building upon the work of Campbell (1971, p.20-21) understands nonreligion as an 'object of study that cannot be defined substantively but "only as a general form of response" or "a characteristic set of responses" to religion'. Therefore, it is crucial to understand what the 'non' in non-religion is referring to. By offering how religion is understood functionally and substantively will provide understanding throughout this thesis on how the Assembly is similar to and how it differs from religion.

A single universal definition of 'religion' is near impossible. A critical perspective of religion would argue that:

there is no such thing that answers to the name "religion"; there are only

distinct phenomena that sometimes co-occur and are contingently related to one another, sometimes in things we habitually label religious and sometimes in things that we habitually label secular (Jong 2015, p.20).

Woodhead (2011, p.122) argues that the 'definition of religion is not the same as the concept of religion' and offers a solution to its social scientific study by proposing that scholarship be more 'self-critical and self-conscious in its approach to "religion"', and be aware of how religion is understood in its various forms rather than trying to explicitly define it. Thus Woodhead (2011) offers a taxonomy of five major concepts of religion that individually and collectively help us to understand the phenomenon:

1. Religion as culture
2. Religion as identity
3. Religion as relationship
4. Religion as practice
5. Religion as power

The first, religion as culture, concerns the belief in certain things and their meanings. This could be accepting certain doctrines, which as Woodhead (2011, p.123) points out is how the 'New Atheists' (see **Chapter Two**) often understand religion, as belief in the supernatural. Where the Sunday Assembly does not offer a doctrine, its beliefs and values are analysed in **Chapter Nine**.

The second major concept, religion as identity, understands religion as 'first and foremost a matter of the creation and maintenance of social bonds' (Woodhead, 2010, p.127).

The third concept, religion as social relationships, draws attention to how religion 'is directed more to interconnections and networks than differences and boundaries, and what is of greater concern than how religion defines identity is how it relates people together' (Woodhead, 2011, p.130).

Fourthly, religion as practice places emphasis on how 'ritual is said to engage individuals in orchestrated and formalized social performances, serving to co-ordinate bodily movements in synchronized and harmonious ways which may have the effect of reinforcing and intensifying certain emotions and commitments and

banishing others' (Woodhead, 2011, p.132). This concept is addressed in **Chapter Six,** which looks at the roles of nonreligious rituals in creating secular communities.

Lastly, religion as power understands power as being central to person's relationship with a higher power. Woodhead (2011, p.134) contends that, in using this perspective, religion 'allows people to enter into relation with it by understanding it, revering it, worshipping it, appeasing it, drawing upon it, manipulating it, railing against it, meditating upon it, making offerings to it, and falling in love with it'.

All five types are equally valid in providing a focus for investigation. Yet two types of definition tend to prevail in sociological approaches to religion — *substantive* definitions that focus on the content of religion (i.e. culture and practices) and *functional* definitions that consider the role played by religion in society, usually to create social cohesion (i.e. focus on identity, relationships and power). To understand what constitutes religiosity substantively, Glock and Stark (1968, p.14) identify five core dimensions: *belief, practice, knowledge, experience* and *consequences.*

The *belief* dimension adheres to the expectation of the religious person holding a particular theological outlook. However, the scope and spectrum of these religious beliefs will vary. While no theological worldview is promoted at the Sunday Assembly, beliefs are usually held in negation of religion and the supernatural, yet collective values exist and will be discussed at length in **Chapter Nine**.

The second dimension that Glock and Stark (1968, p.15) identify is *practice*, which includes acts of worship, ritual and devotion. This dimension of religiosity does relate to the Sunday Assembly. Rituals and practices like the structure of the Sunday Assembly and particular liturgies are discussed in **Chapter Six**, which explores the Sunday Assembly ethnographically.

The *experience* dimension identifies the religious expectation of achieving a direct, subjective knowledge of ultimate reality. Essentially, the *experience* element is the feelings, sensations and perceptions of contact (moments of awe and wonder) with a supernatural agency. Although the Sunday Assembly does not promote the supernatural, moments of secular enchantment, wonder and awe are found, for example, in the themed talks given at the Assembly.

Glock and Stark (1968, p.16) categorise *knowledge* as the fourth dimension — a religious person has the expectation of possessing some minimum information surrounding the basic tenets of their faith. The Sunday Assembly has no doctrine or set texts (see **Chapter Two**); rather, it finds knowledge, wisdom and wonder in a range of sources (including religious sources).

Lastly, *consequences* refer to the effects of religious practice, belief, experience and knowledge in everyday life. The Sunday Assembly states: 'We won't tell you how to live, but will try to help you do it as well as you can'. Its motto: 'Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More' reflects its outlook and worldview, but can be ambiguous and differently interpreted by Sunday Assembliers. The saliences of these terms are discussed at the beginning of **Chapters Seven**, **Eight** and **Nine**. Viewing the Sunday Assembly as organised unbelief, which mimics and draws eclectically on existing religious practices and structures to create belonging and community, presents a more nuanced understanding. This suggests a more functionalist perspective (religion as identity). Durkheim (1954, p.47) defined religion as:

> a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices which united into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.

In this respect, Durkheim (1954, p.47) saw religion as 'an eminently collective thing' as it provides social cohesion, binding communities together through a common belief system. Durkheim understood that, in modern societies, traditional religion might not be able to function and a practical alternative could arise. For Durkheim, function expressed a form of utility, which points to the needs of society (Furseth & Repstad, 2006, p.33).

Durkheim's central focus was on the binding qualities of religion. The precise nature of a particular religion will differ between each society and between periods of society to assume an appropriate fit between religion and the prevailing social order (Davie, 2013, p.30). But what happens in contemporary (British) society when the Church of England and other Christian denominations fail to find this appropriate fit? (Brown & Woodhead, 2016) Durkheim contended that religion in modern

society would be rational, expressing the sacred values of society and its unity —
faith would be based on reason and also individualism (Furseth & Repstad, 2006,
p.33).

The Sunday Assembly (2013a) has adopted the worldview that life is a celebration:
'we are born from nothing and go to nothing, let's enjoy it together'. As Christian
adherence declines, Sunday Assembly practices serve to bind people together and
perform the function of religion. However, the Assembly does not have the scope of
a national church and it is not growing as fast as the Christian adherence is
declining; for example, it is attracting just a fraction of all Church of England ex-
members.

Employing a Durkheimian definition of religion, the Sunday Assembly could
identify as being religious for the following reasons: Durkheim states that a religion
is a unified system of beliefs and practices, which could adhere to the Sunday
Assembly's motto 'Live Better, Help Often and Wonder More'. Durkheim (1954,
p.37) argued that all known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present
one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all things into two
distinct groups — the sacred (things set apart and forbidden) and the profane
(understood as the mundane, everyday individual concerns). By 'sacred', one must
guard against associations with a deity or personal god. In this respect, for
Durkheim, anything could be considered sacred — particular rituals located in the
Sunday Assembly could be regarded as sacred to the Assembly itself or to its
congregational home, Conway Hall. Then of course, there is the unifying nature of
the Sunday Assembly, it brings people together into a distinct moral community.
Hence, the Sunday Assembly could be considered 'religious' through this broad
definition.

I adopt a functionalist perspective of religion that looks at what purpose religion
serves in society. Through this perspective and through a post-Christian transition, I
identify what role(s) the Sunday Assembly is playing as Christian church attendance
and affiliation in the UK declines. Second, I draw upon the work of Hervieu-Léger
(2001, p.82) who argues that religion might be practically defined as 'an ideological,
practical, and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and

collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained and developed and controlled' — in other words, religion embedded in memory and rooted in tradition constitutes community. Through this approach, the Sunday Assembly is finding its niche while existing with a fragmented chain of memory.

The Problems With Defining Key Terms

Ledrew (2013, p.431) argues that we know very little about atheists and that the nonreligious have largely been ignored in the sociology of religion. This was the case 10 years ago and often nonreligious scholarship would open up its discussion along these lines. However, the sociology of nonreligion is burgeoning and we know more about the nonreligious than ever before. This has resulted in the formation of new journals (*Secularism & Nonreligion*) and research networks (the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network [NSRN]) dedicated to studying and understanding all different aspects of nonreligion and secularity. Terms like 'irreligion', 'nonreligion', 'atheist', 'agnostic', 'secular' and 'humanism' are often used loosely and interchangeably, but it is important to define such terms in this research.

Cotter (2015:3) in his work on undergraduate students from the University of Edinburgh demonstrated the variety in the category of 'non-religious'. Cotter asked students to select from a list of 33 non-religious and religious labels and found that individuals were often happy to adopt multiple labels. For example, Cotter (2015:10-11) reported students selecting agnostic, atheist, Buddhist, freethinker, humanist, non-religious and spiritual as labels that all represented one individual. Thus, the need for unpacking non-belief is apparent within an individualised society. Madge and Hemming (2016:2) argue that the concept of individualisation as a result of social change and a decline of traditional authorities (i.e. organised religion and the family) have allowed individuals to have more opportunity to construct their own identities. In recent years, rather than irreligion, atheism has been used in popular culture as the term that encapsulates all nonreligious identities. This is evident in *The Guardian* (Van Mead, 2014) when it reported on where atheists 'live', grouping together 'nones' (those who choose no religion) into the single category of 'atheist'.

As an area of sociological interest, the study of nonreligion has an interesting legacy. Secularisation theorists (such as Berger, Wilson and Martin) suggested that, accompanying modernisation, there is a move towards a society that is increasingly organised along secular (or nonreligious) lines. Insofar as social life no longer makes reference to a transcending religious order, so it is likely that individuals will become less, or at least differently, religious. Given this suggestion, Campbell argued in the 1970s for a new field of research —that of a 'sociology of irreligion' (Campbell, 1971).

However, Campbell (2013, p.17) notes the need to define the scope of investigation when he argues: '[t]he claim of the sociology of irreligion to be accepted as an important and viable sphere of study clearly cannot be admitted until its specific subject of investigation has been outlined. Irreligion itself must be identified, delineated and defined and its various forms described'. Campbell's first edition of *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* was printed in 1971. More recently, Campbell (2013, p.21) states that '"irreligion" is those beliefs and actions which are expressive of attitudes of hostility or indifference toward the prevailing religion, together with indications of the rejection of its demands'.

Building upon this definition, Lee (2012, p.132) has encountered examples in her research of those who do not fit into this category of hostility or indifference, and others who would like to believe in a deity but simply cannot. Thus, a shift has occurred, with many academics adopting the term 'nonreligion'. As a result, Lee states (2012, p.132) that discussing 'nonreligion' increases the scope of the field and becomes far more intelligible to people rather than 'irreligion'. Since Campbell, Lee's (2012) research on existentialism and Lee & Bullivant (2016) have developed frameworks and definitions for unified terminology. This research draws upon Lee's (2012) work on defining the terminology of nonreligious studies. Lee (2012, p.131) defines nonreligion as 'anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion'.

The Sunday Assembly describes itself as a secular congregation that has the trappings of religion, but without the core belief in God(s) that normally accompanies a religion. Its early representations in the media were oxymoronically

as an 'atheist church', which attracted some criticism (Winston, 2013). It therefore has a distinctive way of defining itself in relation to, but against, the Christian Church. As such, it is different from other nonreligious beliefs and practices (e.g. Buddhism and mindfulness), but closely resembles Comte's Religion of Humanity, discussed in the following chapter.

The word 'atheist' requires some clarification. It is important to recognise that the nonreligious phenomenon would accommodate atheism, for example, but it only should account for part of the field of nonreligion as other manifestations of unbelief exist (Lee, 2012, p.134). The word is of Greek origin — 'atheos' originally meant 'ungodly', though it came to mean 'without Gods' (Stephens, 2014, p.5). Baggini (2003, p.3) explains the definition: 'atheism is, in fact, extremely simple to define; it is the belief that there is no God or Gods'.

However, many atheists would argue that atheism is not the belief that God does not exist; it is simply the lack of belief in a God, which is not the same thing. It is important to recognise the difference between saying 'I have no belief in a God' and saying, 'there is no God or Gods'. Atheism is usually defined in two ways. The first encompasses those who are without a belief in the existence of a God or Gods; this is sometimes called 'negative' or 'weak' atheism. The second, Bullivant (2013, p.x) argues, refers only to those who believe with varying degrees of strength and conviction that there is no God or Gods, sometimes called 'positive' or 'strong' atheism, which echoes Baggini's (2003, p.3) definition. Agnosticism, on the other hand, is a theory, belief or ideology that nothing is known or can be known of immaterial things, with particular reference to the existence or nature of God (Lee & Bullivant, 2016).

For the purposes of this research, I will use the first definition for atheism: a lack of belief in God. In practical terms — frustratingly but equally captivating — what atheism means to one individual is not identical to another. Just as varieties of religion (and religious belief) exist, so do varieties of unbelief. Jesse Smith (2013) emphasises the use of the 'many paths, many meanings' view of atheism to express the plurality of viewpoints, identity trajectories, backgrounds and outcomes connected to the seemingly simple idea of atheism. Therefore, it is important to

recognise that there is a spectrum of non-belief and that, although not all atheists share the same views, they do all broadly concur on the significant common feature that God does not exist (Bullivant, 2013, p.x). Silver & Coleman (2013) have recently shown that the homogeneous category of 'nones' has too readily assumed that all non-believers have the same atheistic belief. In their study of 1,153 participants, six typologies of non-believers emerged:

1. Intellectual atheist/agnostic.
2. Activist atheists (in the sense of independently vocalising their opinions on current religious and nonreligious issues, which would differ from the Sunday Assembly's organised nonreligion).
3. Seeker-agnostic (still searching for knowledge and evidence of God).
4. Anti-theists, as defined by Lee & Bullivant (2016), is the opposition to, or a rejection of, theism. Anti-theistic exponents emphasise conviction, passion and, in some cases, aggression with which they hold and express their views.
5. Non-theist (no interest in pursuing or involving themselves with religion).
6. Ritual atheists or agnostics — those who may be misidentified as spiritual, as they see religious teachings as philosophical teachings on how to live a contented life and therefore are willing to engage with them.

Thus, atheism may have an apparent simple definition on surface level, but those who identify as being nonreligious cannot simply be seen as a homogeneous group, as their lack of belief in God(s) boil down to individual experiences, similar to religious belief. One term popular with participants of this study is 'humanism'. As defined by Humanists UK, a humanist:

> trusts scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic). Makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals. A humanist believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

In **Chapter Two**, I detail the journey of the Sunday Assembly, including its rebranding from an 'atheist church' to a 'secular congregation'. What does it mean to be secular? Talal Asad (2003, p.25) asked what might anthropology of the secular look like, and the Sunday Assembly offers a unique viewing point into organised secular congregations. Asad (2003, p.25) argues that, just like religion, the secular 'brings together certain behaviours, "knowledges", and sensibilities in modern life... "the secular" obviously overlaps with "the religious" ... the secular is neither singular in origin, nor stable in its historical identity, although it works through a series of particular opinions." Zuckerman (2014) argues that secular Americans do share key traits and values, like self-reliance, 'basing morality on empathetic reciprocity embedded in the golden rule' (the principle of treating others as one would wish to be treated) and 'living in the here and now... as it's the only existence we'll ever have'. Furthermore, Zuckerman (2014) found that being secular involves 'seeking to do good and treating others right simply because such behaviour makes the world a better place for all'. Secular, as defined by Lee & Bullivant (2016), is a term 'generalised to distinguish civil, lay, or other worldly affairs from all religious and spiritual affairs... [that is] majorly concerned with "this world" or "this time"'. Whereas, 'secularism is a theory, belief, ideology, or political modality that demarcates the secular from other phenomena usually religious but also sacred and/or metaphysical ones' (Lee & Bullivant, 2016). The other 'secular', which is instrumental in understanding the current trends on nonreligion and provides the setting for the Sunday Assembly, is the "secularisation thesis".

Secularisation

'Who still believes in the myth of secularisation?' (Casanova, 1994, p.11).

To begin, there is no agreed definition of secularisation. However, Bryan Wilson argues, 'by secularisation we mean the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose their social significance' (1966, p.31-32). Western intellectuals and social scientists have anticipated the death of religion, at least since the enlightenment (Stark, 1999, p.249). Each new generation of sociologists, including Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p.3), was becoming more confident of religion's disappearance than the last. Consequently, they

believed humanity would simply outgrow its superstitious belief in the supernatural and religion during the modern industrial era. Thus, the death of religion had been recognised as a universal wisdom in the social sciences (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p.3). Secularisation half a century ago was considered by Western sociologists to be a global phenomenon of the modernising world (Berger, 1967); but within different societies, the decline of the importance of religion has not been uniformly accepted or observed.

The secularisation thesis sustained growing criticism towards the end of the 20th century. Stark (1999, p.254) presented the argument that secularisation was not taking place, because in America, religious belief appeared not to have undergone any decline. On the other hand, Davie (1999, p.65) questioned if secularisation was in relation to a linear decline in religious belief particular to Western Europe, the exception to other modernising parts of the world.

In this section, I offer a brief history of this theory by comparing Western Europe to America. I analyse the work of Davie (1999, 2000, 2006, 2007) and Bruce (2006), both of whom are situated in England. I also explore the work of Casanova (1994, 2006, 2009), Stark (1999) and Norris & Inglehart (2004), all located in America.

Norris & Inglehart (2004, p.7) explain how the Enlightenment produced a rational perspective of the world based on empirical scientific knowledge that would erode rituals and faith and cause religion to somewhat unravel. This became a pervasive and false assumption, that modernisation was damaging to religion (Davie, 2007, p.2). To support this, Hervieu-Léger (2001, p.161) draws attention to rapidly changing societies where social, cultural and technological differences emerge, with religion and spirituality proliferating.

Pew Research Center (2016) found that Americans are becoming less religious, but feelings of spirituality are on the rise. It also found that, among US Christians, there has been a 7% increase from 38% to 45% (between 2007 and 2014) who say they feel a deep sense of wonder about the universe at least weekly. This is paralleled by a similar rise in US 'nones' who admit to the same (from 38% to 45%) while 40% of nones say they frequently feel spiritual peace (from 35% in 2007 to 40% in 2014).

This would support Hervieu-Léger's (2001, p.161) statement that 'individual interest in the spiritual and the religious has not gone under any decline', which would indicate the secularisation thesis to be incorrect.

Norris & Inglehart (2006, p.75) conclude that evidence in Western Europe presents two things: first, traditional beliefs and individual involvement in conventional religion differ from each nation state; second, participation and faith have both steadily weakened throughout Western Europe, most significantly since the 1960s. This period of change has created the fertile conditions in which movements like the Sunday Assembly can thrive in a post-Christian transition. Heelas & Woodhead et al. (2005, p.126) contend that a 'religion which tells you what to believe and how to behave is out of tune with a culture which believes that it is up to us to seek out appropriate answers for ourselves'. Therefore, what we see is an increase in spiritual but nonreligious (SBNR) on both sides of the Atlantic.

Anderson (2004, p.144) argues that the 'pews of Europe's churches are often empty'. Only 21% of Europeans believe religion to be still 'very important' and the demographic of those who do attend church slants towards the older generations (Anderson, 2004, p.144). These statistics are concurrent with the trend towards nonreligion mentioned in the introduction. In 2016, the number of people attending Church of England services dropped below one million (less than 2% of the population) for the first time, with Church of England attendance on an average Sunday declining to 760,000 (Botting, 2016). Virtually everything about Western Europe's religiosity suggests fatigue and defeat (Anderson, 2004, p.145). Stark & Innaccone (1994, p.230) note that, for years, it has been argued that numerous nation states in Europe are exceptionally secularised. Where once the ecclesiastical authorities exercised control, this appears to be withering. Western European societies are among the most modernised, industrialised and educated in the world, and this progressive and apparently continuous decline in religion would suggest that the secularisation thesis is correct. The historic European churches, despite their continuous presence, are losing their capacity to discipline the religious thinking of the masses (Davie, 2006, p.33).

There has been a popular argument that America proves the secularisation thesis to be incorrect. Anderson (2004, p.146) maintains that, in America, religion is a very different consideration than in Western Europe. Pew Research Center presented in the introduction suggests that nonreligion will increase significantly in the US by 2050. Furthermore, Pew Research Center (2015) reports that 'the share of Americans who say they are "absolutely certain" God exists has dropped more sharply, from 71% in 2007 to 63% in 2014'.

The trends outlined in the introduction for both the UK and the US show that Generation Y is much more likely to be nonreligious than their parents. Voas & Chaves (2016, p.1520) note that 'American religiosity has in fact been declining for decades, and second, that decline has been produced by the same generational patterns that lie behind religious decline elsewhere in the West', thus counteracting the claims made by Anderson (2004). Voas & Chaves (2016, p.1548) establish three empirical claims. First, there has been a slow decline in religiosity in the US from high levels over decades. Second, like the UK, lack of cohort replacement is the driving factor behind American religious decline, which results in (thirdly) religious commitment weakening from one generation to the next. Voas & Chaves (2016, p.1548) show that, since the early 20th century, each generation is less likely to have a strong religious affiliation, less likely to attend church and less likely to have a firm belief in God. 'The number of people who never attend religious services has doubled in two and a half decades, going from 13% in 1990 to 26% in 2014' (Voas & Chaves, 2016, p.1523).

The United States is one of the youngest societies to detach the church from its state (Taylor, 2007, p.2), but also *the* Western society with the highest statistics for religious practice and belief. Although recent surveys (UK Census, Pew Research Center, British Social Attitudes) suggest a new trend, the assumption is that American religious belief and participation is stable and vigorous but not uniformly accepted (Hadaway et al. 1993, p.742). This is because there are contradictions and implications in the way the church statistics are collected. For example, Hadaway et al. (1993, p.747) suggest the Catholic Church weekly attendance in the US is approximately half of what it is reported to be. Consequently, it can be suggested that survey respondents over-report their church attendance, so as to be seen as

socially acceptable and attain social desirability (Hadaway et al., 1993, p.748-749). Hadaway et al. (1993, p.749) reason that individuals like to present themselves as better than they actually are because of the traditional social or moral norms associated with attending church in America. Torpey (2012, p.298) upholds that it is more socially desirable to express religious belief in America than being an atheist, as 'atheism' is stigmatised (Edgell et al. [2006], Smith [2010], Acarao [2010], Gervais et al. [2011]). Additionally, Casanova (2007) states that new immigration in both Europe and America has created a dramatic growth in diverse religious beliefs.

The progressive decline of an institutional Christian religion in Europe is unquestionable (Casanova, 2006, p.14). Since the 1960s, the majority of the European population has ceased to partake in conventional religious practice on a consistent basis. However, few Europeans proclaim themselves to be outright atheists, and the majority would still proclaim themselves to be Christian (Anderson, 2004, p.145). Furthermore, many maintain high levels of private belief (Casanova, 2006, p.14).

'Secularisation could not happen until discursive Christianity lost its power. From 1800 until 1950, the British Christian churches had no state sanction to force people to be adherents or believers as had been the case before 1800' (Brown, 2009, p.175). The 'decline of formal Christian religiosity occurred after 1958' (Brown, 2009, p.187). Prior to this during the late 1940s and 1950s, Britain witnessed the greatest church growth since the mid-ninetieth century (Brown, 2009, p.170). If the 'British schoolgirl of the mid-1950s faced play-ground taunts for proclaiming atheism; by contrast, the 'atheist' schoolgirl of the mid-1960s was rapidly becoming the norm' (Brown, 2009, p.192). 'The really important group that is missing from church is young women and girls. There is no longer any femininity or moral identity for them to seek or affirm at the British Christian church' (Brown, 2009, p.196). Brown (2009, p.227) argues:

> By the early 1970s, feminism was clearly an important factor in the continued changes to women's lives and identities in Britain. Some women became alienated from organised Christianity as a result of their involvement in the women's movement, but the far greater impact was to put many

women off from joining churches.

However, 'women still make up the majority of churchgoers. But they are overwhelmingly older women, raised under the old discourses, and who continue to seek affirmation of their moral and feminine identities in the Christian church' (Brown, 2009, p.201). The chain of religious memory was breached in Christian culture – 'especially between mother and daughter' since the 1960s (Brown, 2009, p.209).

'The next generation, which came to adulthood in the 1970s, exhibited even more marked disaffiliation from church connection of any sort, and *their* children were raised in a domestic routine largely free from the intrusions of organised religion' (Brown, 2009, p.190). 'At the start of the third millennium, we in Britain are in the midst of secularisation… what is taking place is not merely the decline of organised Christianity, but the death of the culture which formerly conferred Christian identity upon the British people as a whole (Brown, 2009, p.193).

Davie contended at the turn of the millennium that, although regular religious practices and church attendance had dropped substantially, 'believing without belonging' was still occurring (Davie, 2000, p.3). In response to this, Voas and Crockett (2005, p.13) argued 'that religious belief has declined at the same rate as religious affiliation and attendance, and is not even necessarily higher than belonging' and thus question the durability of Davie's 'believing without belonging' (BWB). They see believing without belonging as a transitional phase (which might lead to a thoroughly secular age), rather than to be understood as a central feature of modernity (Voas and Crockett, 2005, p.13).

Voas and Crockett (2005, p.12) understand BWB to have two interpretations, a strong, stable and persistent account that proposes much of Europe 'continue to believe in God and to have religious (or at least 'spiritual') sensibilities'. On the other hand, a weak understanding of BWB where 'belief is allowed to be non-Christian, vague, and even non-religious' that supposes 'belief in the supernatural is high and reasonable robust while religious practice is substantially lower and has declined quickly' (Voas and Crockett, 2005, p.12). Voas and Crockett (2005, p.24) maintain that religious change in Britain, 'has occurred because each generation has

entered adulthood less religious than its predecessors' and 'that the only form of BWB that is as pervasive as Davie suggests is a vague willingness to suppose that "there's something out there", accompanied by an unsurprising disinclination to spend any time and effort worshipping whatever that might be'.

Voas and Crockett (2005, p.25) conclude that "believing without belonging' was an interesting idea, but it is time for the slogan to enter honourable retirement'. If Davie's notion of BWB is ready to enter retirement as growing unbelief continues in Britain, perhaps it is time to test the durability of the opposite — 'belonging without believing' — which I will return to in **Chapter Ten**. Davie (1990, p.395) was interested not in why people no longer believe, but why individuals persist in believing in something, yet feel no obligation to partake with any consistency in religious institutions.

There is the argument that religious belief, rather than simply declining, has become privatised. Casanova (2009, p.207) states that the majority of Europe still affirms a belief in God but does not feel any need to partake in religion (notable exceptions being the former East Germany, which was subject to forced atheism under communist rule, with only a quarter of the population believing in God; and also, the Czech Republic, where belief in God is less than 50%).

Davie (2006, p.24) asserts that religion has become vicarious rather than privatised. This is when an active minority practices religion on behalf of the majority, which approves of what the religious individuals do; this is especially true in Northern Europe (Davie, 2006, p.26). As a result, the churchgoing becomes a matter of choice rather obligation; individuals can choose when and how frequently they visit church. Religion has refused to be restricted to the private sphere, hence the secularisation thesis *for now* transpires to be incorrect. Nevertheless, nonreligion/unbelief is a prominent trend.

So, have we entered into desecularisation or post-secularisation? For the UK, I argue that we have entered at least into a post-Christian transition. Rather than debating whether the secularisation thesis is correct or not, which is highly problematic due to there perhaps never being a universal consensus on what counts as religion or

secularisation (Casanova, 1994, p.16); more nuanced research (Jakelic, 2006, p.134) can be achieved through understanding the role and complexity of (lived) religion and nonreligion within the current European and American socio-political framework.

On the other hand, Swatos & Christiano (1999, p.222) contend that religion has become 'à la carte'. With the growth of nonreligion and England remaining largely secular, the development of a secular congregation offering the same functions as a theist church (belonging, community and collective identity) could flourish. Stark & Innaccone (1994, p.232) reason that a religious economy exists, in which a market of current and potential customers emerges.

But what happens when the nonreligious are the fastest growing potential customers? I argue that the Sunday Assembly, with all its publicity (both bad and good) has put the secular congregation within the (non)religious marketplace. The Sunday Assembly is not a religion, but it is in direct competition with theistic churches. When individuals lose faith in America or grow tired of their congregation, they are showered with new proposals and compromises by the religious marketplace and have the option to pick a new church. In Europe, with the lack of competition, those who lose their faith may not seek an alternative religion. They may be interested in a congregation that offers similar aspects of communal integration, social cohesion and belonging without doctrine or deity. With the Sunday Assembly marketing itself as a congregation open to all beliefs, faiths and practices, it would appear to be a strong alternative. It may seem an obvious point, but one I feel still warrants mentioning: the Sunday Assembly would not be flourishing if there were not a gap or need in the post-Christian marketplace for a secular congregation that fulfils similar functions of a church congregation.

Religion and Secularisation Post-9/11

Davie (2013, p.7) states that the global religious situation is changing; it is becoming more and more difficult to ignore the presence of religion in the modern world. Davie (2013, p.7-8) provides leading examples of the changing nature of religious academic study during the late 20th century and how the shock of the events of 9/11

has ensured that religion continues to remain on the world's agenda. Davie (2013, p.182) states that, since 9/11, it has been harder to build an accepting and mutually considerate society. The world, with some exceptions in Western Europe and increasingly in America, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in several areas even more so. Religion remains at the forefront of our attention in 2017, primarily in the form of Islam linked to extremism in the media and Donald Trump's Muslim-country travel bans in the US for example. Wooldridge (2016, p.137) presents the argument that 'God is back', 'wherever we look today, religion is shaping the world'. Wooldridge (2016, p.138) provides the examples of a repressed China and Russia tentatively weighing up which religious direction they will take and how the 'hotter bits of Islam have gained ground'. While Christianity may be on the decline, Pew Research Center (2015a) has projected, by 2050, that 10% of Europeans will identify as being Muslim. Berger (1999, p.2) thus declared 'the assumption we live in a secularised world is false', as secularisation is not uniformly spreading across the world.

A prominent trend post-9/11 that emerged during the mid-noughties was the 'New Atheist' movement, which sought to activate atheism as a collective identity and a basis for mobilisation (Guenther et al., 2013, p.458). Arguably, however, of most importance has been the changes in the religious landscape as outlined trends transpire, whereby we are witnessing a staunch decline in Christianity in the UK and an increase in those who identify as nonreligious, thus a transition to post-Christianity.

Post-Christianity

After exploring the literature on the secularisation thesis, a new framework for understanding organised unbelief became apparent. In this research, post-Christianity has become a focal theme that becomes integral to the creation, success and understanding of the Sunday Assembly. I argue that the Sunday Assembly is born from a Christian society and is a visible display of an element of post-Christian culture. In this section, I analyse what a Christian society looks like before detailing and defining what constitutes a post-Christian society. Later, I argue the Sunday Assembly's current franchised model structure will only work in societies that have

or are in the process of transitioning to post-Christianity. I then offer the example of why the Sunday Assembly failed to launch in Japan (Osakabe, 2015), with reference to the society not being post-Christian. I then present the argument that the Sunday Assembly is fulfilling a need as a 'half-way house' in the UK's transition to post-Christianity. I tentatively conclude with a look at the future of the Sunday Assembly at the end of this thesis (**Chapter Ten**). I question how, and if, their updated secular church model will operate and fulfil a purpose in a 'post-post-Christian' society, or one with no Christian influence at all.

Before tackling what post-Christianity is, an important starting block is to understand the different models of a Christian society. Truman Noel (2015, p. 2-4), in *Pentecostalism, Secularism, and Post Christendom*, cites the work of Redekop, who summarises what a Canadian Christian society might look like in the future. Although not using a UK reference point, I feel Redekop eloquently summarises gradations of Christian culture in post-Christendom and summarises the options.

Firstly, 'A Christian country is one in which there is an official or unofficial fusion of church and state'. In the UK, the Church of England is the established Christian church and an official fusion of church and state. The Queen of England holds the title of The Supreme Governor of the Church of England. But the Church of England has undergone secularisation to the extent that it has lost authority and can thus be described as caught up in a post-Christian transition.

Secondly, 'A Christian country is one in which Christianity is the dominant faith and the government, while separated from the religious structures, ensures that the values of the dominant Christian religion are upheld at times with coercive force'. In the UK, this does not apply. We are witnessing a huge decline (as detailed earlier) in its population affiliating with the Church of England and a huge increase in those who identify as nonreligious. As such, secular values and structures (humanist funerals and weddings), as well as an increase in and prominence of organisations like the Humanists UK (formerly the British Humanist Association, changing their name in May 2017 to represent a friendlier branding), demonstrate how dominant Christian values are not always upheld; for example, abortion legalisation (1967), the ordination of women in the Anglican Communion (1994), same-sex marriage

legalisation (2013). Specifically, Mark Chaves (1999, p.5) demonstrates this by arguing that 'rules about women's ordination are, in large part, generated by external pressure on denominations'. This was a concern of the Humanists UK (Phillips, 2010), which wants to abolish the remaining significant ties between church and state, and to tackle misogyny.

Thirdly, 'A Christian country is one in which Christianity is the dominant religion and its values are reflected in the laws of the land, but the government does not use coercive power to assist religious organisations'. Despite the Church having 26 seats in the House of Lords for bishops, as well as funding faith-based schools, the UK is considered reasonably secular with limited links between the government and the Church of England.

Fourthly, 'A Christian country is one in which Christianity is the dominant religion, but while some government policies may still incorporate certain religious values, these are generally described by the government, the media and educators in secular terms'. In relation to this gradation, is Christianity still the dominant religion? Or, is 'no religion the new religion' as detailed in Woodhead's (2016) British Academy lecture? Recent Pew Research Center (2015) studies outline the future of world religions, detailing that, in the UK, there will be a changing religious majority of Christianity to nonreligion by the year 2050 and as previously mentioned the BSA (2016) report more than half of the British population have no religion.

Lastly, Redekop (2015, p.4) argues that 'A Christian country is one in which Christianity is the dominant religion, but within the public and private sphere, institutions strive for secularism, whereby anything overtly and publicly Christian is removed'. This gradation of a Christian society describes the privatisation and pluralisation of faith, with terms like spirituality and wellbeing flourishing.

From these five gradations, the UK cannot be solely labelled as a nonreligious society or equally one exempt from Christianity. 'Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief'. (Taylor, 2007, p.727) Given Charles Taylor's statement, the label of post-Christian is a reasonable postulation as the UK witnesses a transition to a nonreligion majority, but it is yet to relinquish a Christian memory

and practice. An age of uncomfortable unbelief will become central to the arguments made in **Chapter Six** on analysing the need for rituals and the overall conclusion.

Importantly, 'post-Christian society' is not an applicable label for a society where nonreligion becomes the norm but with its roots still deeply and historically embedded within Christian culture. Many of the same rituals may still exist, if not changed or evolved. This is because even after religion has departed, a cultural memory and heritage would still exist. Simply put, only particular societies can be described as post-Christian, societies that have been and continue to be shaped by Christian culture. To support this, Paas (2011, p.11) argues that a society that has secular institutions, but which also has a large church-going, practising population would not be understood to be post-Christian, thus the US cannot be fully classed as post-Christian. Rather, a largely unbelieving population with an established church (the UK, for example) could be defined as post-Christian (ibid). This means that the majority of the population in these countries used to, but no longer, identify as being Christian. Furthermore, I echo Paas' (2011, p.10) important distinction that a post-Christian society is not a synonym for a secular society. This is because a country may be secular, but not necessarily post-Christian or even nonreligious. Post-Christian societies describe a particular era of the secularisation process that could be applied to the UK, where nonreligion is rapidly increasing and Christianity is changing. Secularisation is understood here as a de-institutionalisation.

One of the best clarifications can be found nearly four decades ago from Alan Gilbert. He (1980, p.ix) defines a post-Christian society as:

> not one from which Christianity has departed, but one in which it has become marginal. It is a society where to be irreligious is to be normal, where to think and act in secular terms is to be conventional, where neither status nor respectability depends upon the practice or profession of religious faith. Some members of such a society continue to find Christianity a profound, vital influence in their lives, but in doing so they place themselves outside the mainstream of social life and culture.

More recently, Paas (2011, p.11) defines post-Christian societies as:

> societies where so many individuals have declined from Christian beliefs and practices that Christians have become or are becoming a minority. Also, it could signify the diminishing importance and relevance of Christian beliefs and practices on the motivational level, even if people do not leave the church formally. Where many people used to invoke Christian teachings to motivate their own behaviour and decisions, but they no longer do so, a post-Christian society is in the making.

Lastly, Possamai (2009, p.152) argues that a post-Christian society is one where 'fewer and fewer people embrace Christian values and attend church', as well as Christianity 'losing momentum in the western world' (p.140) and society 'no longer fully dominated by Christian values' (p.7).

The meaning of a post-Christian society is often misunderstood, assumed, simplified or discussed freely without definition. Given the definitions above, I am adopting my own definition of post-Christian society: one that is born from a predominantly Christian culture, where (importantly) a cultural memory and established church is still present, or in decline, but where religious and historical practices and beliefs, values, culture and traditions have weakened substantially and thus would be described as not normative.

This cultural shift was noted by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who declared that Britain is no longer a society of practising believers and, despite a relatively strong Christian cultural presence and memory, the habitual practice has destabilised and as such has become post-Christian (Sparrow, 2014). With the UK having an established church, I present the argument that we are transitioning to a post-Christian society and bare many of the prerequisites required (as detailed above) to adopt this label. However, if the Church of England becomes disestablished, a complete separation of 'church and state,' only then can a claim be made for a completely post-Christian society.

Truman Noel (2015, p.186) forecasts how a post-Christian church must:

> spend more time nurturing their core values and community life than
> defining and patrolling their boundaries. They must be welcoming places
> where those exploring faith options and searching for authentic relationships
> feel comfortable; communities of faith that refrain from quick judgement,
> and where all manners of doubts, questions, criticisms and fears are
> embraced.

What Truman Noel describes above is essentially the Sunday Assembly but without 'the faith'. It fits into the Assembly's core statements of 'we won't tell you how to live, but will try to help you do it as well as you can' and 'everyone is welcome, regardless of their beliefs — this is a place of love that is open and accepting'. In the introduction, I outlined the generational shift towards nonreligion. The Sunday Assembly is tapping into this post-Christian transitional phase of church-leavers, who are seeking a culturally familiar atmosphere without a doctrine. What becomes apparent is a need to not completely cast out Christianity and its rituals and traditions. However, Boeve (2005, p.104) identifies the detraditionalisation as a feature of a post-Christian society and defines it as a 'socio-cultural interruption of traditions, which are no longer able to pass themselves from one generation to the next'.

The types of religious organisation found within a Christian society are different to many others. Osakabe (2015), in a Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN) blog post, offered one explanation as to why the Sunday Assembly failed to launch in Japan, which closely relates to my theoretical framework of the Sunday Assembly existing only in a post-Christian society. Osakabe argues that Japanese mainstream religions, whether Shinto or Buddhism, do not provide a place or occasion for collective meetings, unlike Christianity.

Thus, the religious landscape in different countries, especially those who do not have a Christian memory are very different. Modernisation in the UK has transformed religion as we know it, not necessarily causing it to disappear (Boeve, 2005, p.101). Subsequently, Brown (2009, p.197-198) argues:

the "religious life" in which individuals imagined themselves, and which gave them the narrative structure for gendered discourses on religiosity to be located in their personal testimony, seem to have vanished. This is not the death of churches, for despite their dramatic decline, they will continue to exist in some skeletal form with increasing commitment from decreasing numbers of adherents.

Whereas in the case of the Sunday Assembly, I will argue in **Chapter Six** that it has shrewdly adopted the skeletal form of a Christian church and then applied a modern secular spin, thus the format of the church evolves and lives on, but in an adapted version only relevant in the transition to a post-Christian society. Lee (2015, p.30) contends that a post-religious society may be used to:

> describe something shaped historically but not contemporaneously by religion. A post-religious society is not necessarily one in which religion has become irrelevant per se, but one in which its effects are diffuse and indirect.

Where the effects of religion might be diffuse and indirect, this thesis will demonstrate how the effects of a post-Christian transition are still felt. I am adopting the term post-Christian, rather than post-religious as the Pew Research Center (2015) has forecasted that the number of Muslims will equal Christians worldwide by 2070. Furthermore, black majority churches (BMC) continue to grow in London. Rogers (2017) identified a minimum of 240 operating BCMs in the London borough of Southwark, nearly twice the amount of all the other churches in Southwark combined. Therefore, using the term post-religious to understand the changing religious landscape in the UK in problematic. Rather, the Sunday Assembly relates to a specific type of post-Christianity, with particular focus on the decline of the Church of England.

This transition has allowed for the perfect timing for the Sunday Assembly to capitalise and act as a half-way house for those who still seek to congregate, belong, but not believe.

Religion as a Chain of Memory in a Post-Christian Context

Outside of Davie's (1994) 'believing without belonging', Hervieu-Léger's (2000) metaphor of religion as a 'chain of memory' has been a particularly influential theory in this thesis for explaining the Sunday Assembly's positioning in a post-Christian culture. Hervieu-Léger (2000) defines religion not in terms of its function or belief, but rather as being about tradition and collective memory. Collective religious memory is fluid and the Sunday Assembly is borrowing and reconstructing rituals, practices and structures from Christianity, thus tapping into a cultural chain of memory. The memory of a religious group and the tradition as a source of authority is the most important aspect of the religion (Hervieu-Léger, 2000, p.86). However, secularisation crumbles and causes crisis within this chain of memory as the chain of memory is lost. Consequently, Hervieu-Léger (2000, p.25-26) contends:

> Religion is in decline because social change wears down the collective ability to set up ideas; the crisis of ideals loosens social bonds. However, what emerges from this twofold movement is not the end but the metamorphosis of religion. Science in effect is powerless to take over those functions of religion, which lie outside the realm of knowledge. It has no unfailing answer for every-recurring questions about human nature and its place in the universe. It throws no light on the moral issues confronting individuals and the community. It cannot respond to the need for ritual inherent in society.

If science is still unable to answer life's 'ultimate questions', the need for meaning should increase, which should entail a need for religion. Yet nonreligion is on the rise, thus alternative secular modes of 'meaning making' give rise to the Sunday Assembly. Hervieu-Léger (2000, p.33) discusses individualisation in modernity and argues that when modern societies are no longer asked by established religion to provide a structure for the social organisation, religion then becomes fragmented and pluralised. Thus, individuals are then able to collectively or individually construct their own 'universe of meaning' on the basis that their experiences and authority lie with the individual. Hervieu-Léger (2000, p.123) contends:

by placing tradition, that is to say reference to a chain of belief, at the centre of the question of religion, the future of religion is immediately associated with the problem of collective memory. The possibility that a group – or an individual – see itself as part of a chain or lineage depends to some extent at least on mention of the past and memories that are consciously shared with and passed on to others.

Change as a function of modernity has eroded a collective identity. Societies are no longer societies of memory because memories are not consciously shared with and passed on to others (Hervieu-Léger, 2000, p.123). What the Sunday Assembly is attempting to do is to offer a place where individuals can collectively and individually create their own meaning and produce new collective memory born from a post-Christian transition. Collective memories are socially constructed memories and Halbwachs (1999, p.182) contends collective frameworks (like Christianity) are means utilised by a collective memory to construct and reconstruct an image of the past. Subsequently, the Sunday Assembly is seeking to create a new chain of memory that appropriates a post-Christian framework.

Conclusion

This chapter has positioned the Sunday Assembly more broadly by situating the Assembly within the secularisation thesis. It has provided the theoretical framework for this thesis and a starting point — that is, the Sunday Assembly is born from a transitioning (albeit) Christian to nonreligious society. The following chapter marks the rise of the New Atheists. It then discusses other secular congregations and movements and notes their differences and similarities to the Sunday Assembly. I will then provide the history of the Sunday Assembly, detailing its journey as a secular congregation.

CHAPTER TWO

SUNDAY ASSEMBLY — HISTORY, ORGANISATION AND THE INTERNET

'There was a crowd at the door, and I experienced a surreal moment of queuing to get to church. Had I slipped into a parallel universe?' – Jenkins (2014, p.40).

The 'New Atheist' Movement

Galen (2009, p.41) argues that 'the nonreligious segment of the population is not only increasing but is also increasingly visible in the public square'. Colin Campbell's 1971 seminal work, *Toward the Sociology of Irreligion*, laid significant groundwork for the rise of the 'New Atheists' (dubbed so by Gary Wolf in *Wired* magazine, 2006), who have reignited public and academic interest in non-belief. Examples include Sam Harris (*The End of Faith* [2004], *Letter to a Christian Nation* [2006]), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion* [2006]), Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*: *How Religion Poisons Everything* [2007], which reached No. 1 on the *New York Times'* best-seller list) and Daniel C. Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* [2007]). These celebrity atheists and their best-selling books argue against the existence of God. Their preference for scientific understanding and rationality has seen a remarkable growth in membership, visibility and activity within atheist organisations (Ledrew 2013, p.431). Kettell (2013, p.62) states that new atheism:

> adopts an avowedly critical posture towards religion. Claiming that religious views have enjoyed a cosseted and excessively privileged status for far too long, and that they should be accorded no more respect or special treatment than any other viewpoint or opinion, proponents of new atheism call for religious beliefs to be exposed to scrutiny wherever they are found in precisely the same way that one might critique politics, literature or art.

Furthermore, Kettell (2016) questions how new this 'New Atheism' stance really is? Not all atheists identify with this newly coined label, but it has been synonymous with the discourse of organised atheist activism and 'big tent' atheist identity with social change orientations (Guenther et al., 2013, p.458). To clarify, atheism is not a new phenomenon and there are more nonbelievers and sceptics scattered throughout

human history than the history books acknowledge (Stephens, 2014, p.21). Most societies through history scorned those who denied their God or Gods. As a result, atheists often suffered persecution (Mitchell, 2014, p.2). The Sunday Assembly is worlds apart from the 'New Atheist' movement and I will argue in **Chapter Eight** that a new-new atheism has transpired**.**

No known historical account exists for the Sunday Assembly. As its website, branding and vision continue to evolve, it is difficult to understand where the Sunday Assembly is at present without recognising the journey it has taken. I will document this journey, from a simple idea to 70 franchised congregations. I will illustrate significant moments from the Assembly's start-up in January 2013 up until my ethnographic research finished in 2016. This chapter will be descriptive, but in so being, it will provide context to my methodological choices, theoretical framework and sociological analysis made in future chapters.

The first notion of a 'Sunday Assembly' came about during a car journey taken by two comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, who decided they wanted to create a community that had all the 'best bits of church' but without the religion, and that would appeal to the nonreligious. This was not the first idea of its kind, and before I document the history of the Sunday Assembly, I will briefly touch on historical and modern expressions of secular communities and how they differ. The Sunday Assembly shares similarities with these organisations but, ultimately, differs through its close connections and resemblance of a secular-style church service (Holy Trinity Brompton) from which other secular communities distance themselves.

Religion of Humanity

Often referred to as the founding father of sociology, French philosopher Auguste Comte discussed what a secular religion might look like in the 19th century, long before the Sunday Assembly. Comte, in *Système de Politique Positive* (1851/1968, p.4), discussed the creation of an atheistic, positivist, supernatural-free religion. The creation would be founded upon humanist principles, including liturgies, priesthood and doctrine (Davies, 1997: 28), which he would call the 'Religion of Humanity'.

Davies (1997, p.29) explains that the Church of Humanity soon declined via schisms into a tiny sect. However, one of its central pillars, altruism, is re-embodied in the Sunday Assembly motto as 'help often'.

Secular Humanism

Another early expression of a secular community can be found within secular humanism in the United States, which has its roots in religious humanism, although humanism has gradually disassociated itself from the ties of organised religion (Cimino & Smith, 2007, p.408). Cimino & Smith (2007, p.408) detail the religious roots of humanism, tracing it back to the 18th century when universal and Unitarian ideals emerged from the rejection of key Christian doctrines. In 1933, the *Humanist Manifesto* (Kurtz & Wilson) was written, calling for a secular world community based on liberal values — the movement was called 'religious humanism' (Cimino & Smith, 200, p.408).

> Although the use of the term "religious" was meant to stress experiences and activities which are humanly significant while excluding any supernatural beliefs and explanations of reality, some religious humanist leaders and participants objected to any uses of religion (Cimino & Smith, 2007, p.408).

As a result of the objections to the term religious, the authors of the *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973) removed all references to religious humanism (Cimino & Smith, 2007, p.408). In the late 1970s, the American Humanist Association (AHA) debated whether to use the pre-existing religious framework or create a secular philosophical structure. Cimino & Smith (2007, p.409) describe the attempts of the Council for Secular Humanism to organise freethinkers into congregations (in some cases holding church-like services) as a dismal failure. A divide emerged between 'religious humanists', who defined the movement as a non-theistic movement, whereas 'secular humanists defined their movement as a strictly secular philosophy value system and eschew any religious language' (Cimino & Smith, 2007, p.409). Cimino & Smith (2007, p.417) provide the evangelical critics' argument that secular humanism is actually a religion in which humanity, reason and science are 'worshiped' instead of God(s). Fast-forward to the present and humanist expressions

of community are prominent. In this sense, the Sunday Assembly could be regarded as 'religious humanism' over secular humanism due to its borrowing of religious structures and practices. Harvard's Humanist Chaplaincy is another popular secular community dedicated to nurturing a diverse community of nonreligious people, headed by Humanist Chaplain Greg Epstein. Similarly, Bart Campolo, Humanist Chaplain at the University of Southern California, is dedicated to regular inspiration, pastoral care and supportive fellowship. In conducting my research for this thesis, informal conversations with Sanderson Jones have indicated that secular chaplaincy or secular vicars may transpire in the future of the Sunday Assembly.

New Unity London

It is worth mentioning Unitarian Universalism (unification between Unitarianism and Universalism, two liberal Christian denominations), which has no official dogma but principles that relate to moral living rather than belief (Adam, 2015). The Sunday Assembly has close links with New Unity, a popular Unitarian congregation in North London, and shares its 'no official dogma' thinking. New Unity believes in good (a spin-off from God) and focuses on social justice and community. It strives for growth and love and uses similar terms to the Sunday Assembly, like 'radically inclusive', which is found in the Sunday Assembly's charter.[4] At present, the Sunday Assembly does not take on social injustice and is apolitical in its views.

Houston Oasis

Months before the Sunday Assembly was founded in January 2013, Houston Oasis, a community with a similar premise, was born (September 2012). This American expression of secular community, which has also gathered sociological interest (see Schutz, forthcoming), aims to celebrate human experiences as opposed to any deity. It talks about real-world principles based on reason and rationality, not tradition. Set up in Texas, Houston Oasis was created as a place for freethinkers to celebrate and come together. It welcomes anybody who wants to join a community that explores life through reason. Houston Oasis explains that it is fundamentally different from a church — for instance, it does not have the same ritualistic and liturgical elements that resemble a modern-day church. The Sunday Assembly, on the other hand, is *not*

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[4] See p.52 for the Public Charter.

fundamentally different to a church; it was set up with the vision of having all the 'best bits of church without religion'.

School of Life

Philosopher Alain de Botton has also created his version of a secular community called the 'School of Life'. De Botton also published *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believers' Guide to the Uses of Religion* (2012). The School of Life website states that it holds 'secular sermons', sings songs (not hymns, similar to the Sunday Assembly) before and after, and is 'devoted to developing emotional intelligence through the help of culture'. It addresses such issues as how to find fulfilling work, how to master the art of relationships, how to understand one's past, how to achieve calm, and how to better understand and, where necessary, change the world. They have a London based classroom, where they hold these classes often on weekday afternoons and evenings, charging approximately £55. The Sunday Assembly bears similarities to the School of Life; in fact, De Botton has recognised the Assembly as imitation and has been quoted as saying it 'is a blatant rip-off of what we do' (Lukowski, 2013). However, the Sunday Assembly focuses more on community building than the School of Life. The School of Life tends to attract a homogeneous, middle-class, ethnically white demographic like the Sunday Assembly London.

The Sea of Faith

Davies and Northam-Jones (2012, p.227) trace the origins and formation of the Sea of Faith network to Don Culpitt, an Anglican Priest and Cambridge theologian born in 1934; 'Culpitt coined the phrase "non-realism" to label an approach which explores the nature of religious beliefs as human projections of existential fears and aspirations'. In 1984, Culpitt presented a BBC television programme entitled 'The Sea of Faith' and also published a book later in the year, in response to this, in 1988 the Sea of Faith conference was formed (Davies and Northam-Jones, 2012, p.227). Davies and Northam-Jones (2012, p.228) detail how the Sea of Faith 'has no statement of belief, its mission statement announces its purpose as exploring "the notion of religion as a human construct"'.

To better understand the lives of these individuals, Davies and Northam-Jones (2012, p.228) conducted a survey with 55 responses from members of the Sea of Faith network. They found that 62% of respondents were male, which is a reverse of the Sunday Assembly London congregation. The mean age of respondents was 68; this cohort would be around the age of most Assemblier's parents. All respondents had a higher education and in this respect are similar to the Sunday Assembly. Like the Sunday Assembly, the Sea of Faith meets in most major towns and cities within the UK. They meet less frequently (but regularly) than the Sunday Assembly, they organise annual conferences, seminars and smaller workshops (Davies and Northam-Jones, 2012, p.230).

They found that only 11% of participants surveyed never attended church and the majority (62%) attend once a week or more (Davies and Northam-Jones, 2012, p.231), and thus they are still involved in their church communities despite the majority believing 'religion is the outcome of human imagination' (Davies and Northam-Jones, 2012, p.229). However, 'alongside regular church attendance…despite strong doctrinal differences with those expressed within the institutional church… the majority of respondents were strongly committed to exploring non-church-based alternative and eclectic spiritualties', for some of their respondents, 'the sense of wonder in relation to nature and sacred places plays an important part in their reformed value systems' (Davies and Northam-Jones, 2012, p.231-232). The wonders of nature, life and connection are central elements of the Sunday Assembly.

Similar to the Sunday Assembly, 'one musical [Sea of Faith] workshop featured hymn singing, but with "non-realist" lyrics, while the conference's grand finale was an extended celebration of the Network's creative resources, featuring stories, poems, dances, singing and people telling jokes' (Davies and Northam-Jones, 2012, p.240)

'The religious knowledge of their inherited traditions is used to foster innovative ways of knowing and being' just like members of the Sunday Assembly and 'reveals the transformed retention of a very English style of religiosity' (Davies and Northam-Jones, 2012, p.242), or non-religiosity in the case of the Assembly.

Morning Gloryville

My research focuses on key trends which show how Generation Y is less likely to be religiously affiliated and how this is set to continue. However, Generation Y is looking for new organisations to develop community and is gathering in different ways outside of organised religion. It became apparent during my interviews that Morning Gloryville was popular with the same sort of people who attend the Sunday Assembly. Morning Gloryville is an immersive early morning dance party, a sober rave *before* you go to work. It was mentioned several times by people in my research. It was born on the 29th of May 2013 in East London just four months after the Sunday Assembly opened its deconsecrated church doors in January 2013. Morning Gloryville has witnessed a similar trajectory to that of the Sunday Assembly. Within a year, people from all around the world had approached its founders, asking for one in their city, from Sydney to San Francisco to Brighton to Bangalore. This is similar to how Sunday Assembly planted several of its congregations. The Sunday Assembly's mission 'is for a Sunday Assembly in every town, city and village that wants one'. By May 2014, Morning Gloryville had expanded to New York (which was also one of the first Sunday Assemblies to launch in July 2013) and now occupies 22 global cities sharing many of the same cities as the Sunday Assembly. These include Paris (Sunday Assembly Paris stopped meeting), Sydney and Brighton. Morning Gloryville stirred media frenzy similar to that of the Sunday Assembly. It describes itself as a 'movement, not a party' with a soul-shaking mission to 'expand hands and minds by turning clubbing upside down and transforming mornings into something truly remarkable', and to build communities across the globe.

Morning Gloryville shares many similarities with the Sunday Assembly, becoming a global community of events that empower people to 'rave your way into the day'. With a comparable energy, it was only fitting that Morning Gloryville staff spoke at the Sunday Assembly on the theme of 'the power of dance' in March 2015. The morning rave takes place monthly between 6:30am and 10:30am (not held on a Sunday), challenging people to wake up differently before work, instilling positivity. Notably, the rave is completely sober — drug- and alcohol-free — meaning this safe space is popular with families. The event is not just exclusively raving (several

famous DJs have played in the past), but also offers yoga, massages, smoothies and free hugs. Morning Gloryville is a secular community movement that does not resemble a post-religious structure, but they are finding a niche in a post-Christian transition. Like the Sunday Assembly, it offers alternative forms of community and belonging outside of the church.

Expressions of organised non-belief/unbelief are not a new phenomenon (Alexander, 2014), and the history of nonreligious congregations–or at least societies–has a long and rich history, further examples include the National Secular Society, the Theosophical Society, or indeed the Conway Hall Ethical Society where the Sunday Assembly gather, all of which were founded in the mid-late 19th century. However, the 'digital era' has certainly helped the growth of the Sunday Assembly while generational transitions to nonreligion have allowed it and other communities such as Morning Gloryville to flourish much more successfully than previous expressions like the Sea of Faith for example. Furthermore, the Sunday Assembly differs from these expressions of non-belief due to closely mimicking existing Christian structures and practices.

2013: The Sunday Assembly Is Born

After exploring historical variations and modern expressions of secular communities, I now return to the Sunday Assembly and document its remarkable growth, branding and rebranding. Given the above other expressions of secular communities, the Sunday Assembly is perhaps the most well-known. The first ever Sunday Assembly launched on 6th January 2013 with an opening 'service' theme of helping people stick to their new year's resolution, and the topic of beginnings. The founders, Jones and Evans, had low expectations of turnout. In fact, 200 people attended the first meeting and 300 then filled the second service held at The Nave, a deconsecrated church situated in Islington, North London. Jones and Evans had a clear message and branding (see *Figure 2:1*):

> The Sunday Assembly is a godless congregation that celebrates life. Our
> motto: live better, help often, and wonder more. Our mission: to help
> everyone find and fulfil their full potential. Our vision: a godless

congregation in every town, city and village that wants one (Sunday
Assembly, 2013a).

Figure 2.1: Image of first branding for the Sunday Assembly Motto. The image has
the connotations of community.

Unsurprisingly, the large crowds that gathered, often snaking around the church long
before the doors opened, were largely down to the media and social media attention
that the Sunday Assembly had received. Similar to the Sea of Faith where 'it was
only after the broadcast of Cultpitt's BBC documentary that these previously
unconnected, but like-minded people were brought together' (Davies and Northam-
Jones, 2012, p.236), it was the media attention the Assembly received that helped
share their idea.

Originally, the Sunday Assembly was marketed as 'the atheist church'. This term
rapidly worked its way through various social media platforms and newspapers. In
these early days, the Sunday Assembly labelled itself as 'part atheist church, part
foot stomping show' (Blake, 2012). As the saying goes, *there is no such thing as
bad publicity,* and the term 'atheist church' stuck and soon became viral. However,
the problems associated with such a label would soon become apparent, and it did
not fit with the Assembly's public charter of a congregation that is radically
inclusive and open to all. In short, the label created an exclusivity — those who
associate with or can identify with atheism, please join our club. But the word
'atheist' itself often carries a stigma, especially in America (Smith, 2010). Edgell,
Hartmann and Gerteis (2006, p.212,218) found that approximately 40% of
Americans see atheists as a group least likely to share their vision of an American
society, and 48% of Americans are more likely to disapprove than approve if their

child were to marry an atheist. The Sunday Assembly is a congregation marketed at the nonreligious, but not all nonreligious people identify with atheism. Therefore, in July 2013, the Assembly dropped the label 'atheist church' (though subsequently difficult to shake) and opted for 'godless congregation'. Godless, as defined by Lee & Bullivant (2016), is a term 'principally used to describe a person or thing espousing or evincing negative atheism (i.e. "without god") or, more broadly, some form of nonreligion. It often, especially historically, carries implications of negative moral judgements'. The Sunday Assembly would later rebrand as a 'secular community', which will be my chosen terminology when describing the Assembly hereafter.

Having had personal conversations with Sanderson Jones, I am not sure he imagined the splash that his and Pippa Evans' joint vision of 'all the best bits about church, but without religion, and awesome pop songs' was going to create. But soon, they had to hold two 'services' a day to meet the demand of interest. These would often be with two separate speakers, one service held in the morning at 11am and another in the afternoon at 1:30pm.

Within four months of operation, the Sunday Assembly had registered as a limited company, with the goal of then changing it to a community interest company and eventually a charity. In March 2013, just three months after hosting its first event, Jones and Evans announced: 'Sunday Assembly Everywhere — an initiative that allows everyone to have a godless congregation' (Sunday Assembly, 2013k). By June/July, the Assembly saw monumental change and growth as congregations in Exeter, Brighton, Bristol, Southend-on-Sea and Melbourne were launched. The Assembly worked with these pilot towns and cities to design a framework to be used for other franchised locations and announced 470 people had enquired about setting up their own secular community.

Shortly after its first 'Easter for atheists' in 2013 (a paradox typical of the community's blurring the lines between the sacred and the secular, at least in those early days), the Sunday Assembly announced that it was being evicted from its 'shabby chic' deconsecrated church. This was for various reasons, primarily a space issue, but it did not help that the Steiner School, which owned The Nave, decided

that the Assembly and its motto did not fit in and was 'antithetical with their own ethos' (Sunday Assembly, 2013b).

Hence, 5th May 2013 marked the venture to a new (400-person capacity) home — Conway Hall, London. An impressive building assumed to be home to the oldest freethought organisation in the world, and an ethical society with a history of advocating secular humanism, Conway Hall remains the Sunday Assembly's meeting place to this day. With a new larger venue, the Assembly decided to meet just once (at 11am) on the first and third Sunday of every month. Subsequently, May 2013 also marked the need for a board of advisors to support the community's rapid growth. The Assembly advertised for help from people with knowledge of fundraising, operations, community action innovation, and other organisational skills. Foundational to the Sunday Assembly is social media, something with which it is incredibly savvy.

The Sunday Assembly consists of a main 'service' supplemented by midweek group meetings consisting of a book club, philosophy club, attended by small groups and 'interest groups'. June 2013 marked the creation of peer-to-peer, self-help groups, each consisting of 12-15 people. Initially referred to as 'resolve groups' and later renamed 'live better' groups, these were designed to chime with the Sunday Assembly's motto ('Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More'). Group members would meet weekly over eight weeks to encourage and support each other in their life endeavours. They would discuss a problem that an individual faced, with a determination to hit 'goals, fulfil…ambitions and, well, live better!' The intimate setting found in these groups and in weekly Sunday Assembly interest groups was designed specifically so that members of the congregation could foster closer social connections with one another.

With increasing public attention and interest, the Sunday Assembly was growing, but it was not quite the 'megachurch' that the media portrayed (Walshe, 2013). A megachurch needs a weekly attendance of 2000 members or more (Turner, 2010). In order to grow the Sunday Assembly to reach this level of popularity, one particularly significant moment came when Sanderson Jones took to 'atheist missionary' work in an attempt to evangelically spread the word to America. Jones

visited five major cities that were interested in starting up their own version of the London congregation. The term 'atheist' at this point was still prominent in the Assembly's marketing and the 'missionary' referred to 'converting atheists to the idea of positivity, community, congregation and celebrating life' (Sunday Assembly, 2013c). Significantly, this was not to convert Christians to atheism, but to convert atheists to congregational forms of community.

The first tour took place at the end of June 2013 and finished in New York. Appealing to a different market, the theme of the event was 'coming out' because it was the day of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) pride. The term 'coming out' has been adopted by many in the atheist community, borrowed from the LGBT movement in reference and rebuttal to the stigma and accusations of immorality and deviance sometimes associated with the term. The Sunday Assembly noted this on its website: 'atheists have to come out too and, heck, we've all got to come out as someone'.

At a similar time, it was decided that, although the monthly meet-ups (later changed to the first and third Sunday of each month) were successful, the Assembly wanted to create a congregation that was 'big small' — appealing on a macro level as a congregation, but also on a micro level to build community outside of the monthly meets. Therefore, July 2013 saw another significant milestone in the history of the godless congregation — the first 'Sunday Assembly social' was born. The congregation would gather outside of their big meets twice a month and go to the pub. Social events would soon become a key element of the Sunday Assembly (London, especially, leading the way) and my visits to these will be discussed at further length (in **Chapters Six** and **Eight**).

In September 2013, three formal documents were shared among the congregation that would form the basis of the 'Sunday Assembly Everywhere'. This consisted of a motto, vision and mission.

The Sunday Assembly Public Charter:

The Sunday Assembly is a secular congregation that celebrates life. Our motto: live better, help often, wonder more. Our vision: to help everyone find and fulfil their full potential. [5] *Our Mission: a godless congregation in every town, city and village that wants one. We are here for everyone who wants to:*

- *Live Better. We aim to provide inspiring, thought-provoking and practical ideas that help people to live the lives they want to lead and be the people they want to be*

- *Help Often. Assemblies are communities of action building lives of purpose, encouraging us all to help anyone who needs it to support each other*

- *Wonder More. Hearing talks, singing as one, listening to readings and even playing games helps us to connect with each other and the awesome world we live in* (Sunday Assembly, 2013a).

Figure 2.2

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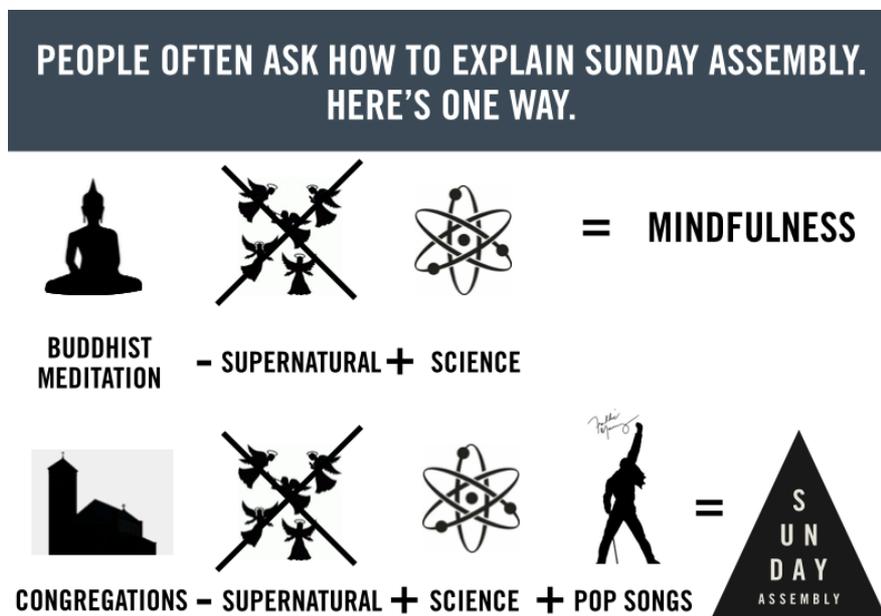
[5] The Sunday Assembly vision changed in 2015 to 'help everyone live life as fully as possible'. It was decided on by the committee that not everyone may want to find and fulfil their full potential, and to live life as fully as possible was more suited to their aim as a secular community.

The above image was created by Sanderson Jones to explain what the Sunday Assembly is. It emphasises the importance of congregations (**Chapter Eight**), singing songs collectively (**Chapter Six**) and scientific worldviews (**Chapter Nine**). An important part of the Sunday Assembly is the congregational model and the people who attend, as opposed to a privatised meditation. Hence, community and communal singing separate the Sunday Assembly from mindfulness.

The Sunday Assembly (2013m) also developed its public charter as points of aspiration and principles, which states that the Sunday Assembly:

1. *Is 100% celebration of life. We are born from nothing and go to nothing. Let's enjoy it together.*

2. *Has no doctrine. We have no set texts so we can make use of wisdom from all sources.*

3. *Has no deity. We don't do supernatural but we also won't tell you you're wrong if you do.*

4. *Is radically inclusive. Everyone is welcome, regardless of their beliefs — this is a place of love that is open and accepting.*

5. *Is free to attend, not for profit and volunteer-run. We ask for donations to cover our costs and support our community work.*

6. *Has a community mission. Through our Action Heroes (you!), we will be a force for good.*

7. *Is independent. We do not accept sponsorship or promote outside businesses, organisations or service.*

8. *Is here to stay. With your involvement, The Sunday Assembly will make the world a better place.*

9. *We won't tell you how to live, but will try to help you do it as well as you can.*

10. And remember point 1… The Sunday Assembly is a celebration of the one life
we know we have.

Secondly, a formal ten-page document for accreditation was created to ensure that a congregation adheres to the Sunday Assembly brand and structure. The accreditation involves filming three services, arranging local press coverage, securing a fixed venue, organising a team and accepting the Sunday Assembly's terms and conditions regarding the structure. Like a franchise, the accreditation allows the group to use the name 'Sunday Assembly' along with the branding, digital advertisement on its website and ensuring there's a high quality of service with no 'unacceptable behaviour'.

Lastly, a 'road map' document was created (see *Figure 2.3)* to set a path for sustaining Sunday Assemblies and how to turn initial interest into a Sunday Assembly. This document details how you start at initial enthusiasm, to meeting as a team, applying to join the Sunday Assembly Everywhere accreditation process and Charter, forming a legal entity, training, passing the peer review process (completed by unpaid committee members) during the first 3-6 months, and becoming accredited.

Figure 2.3
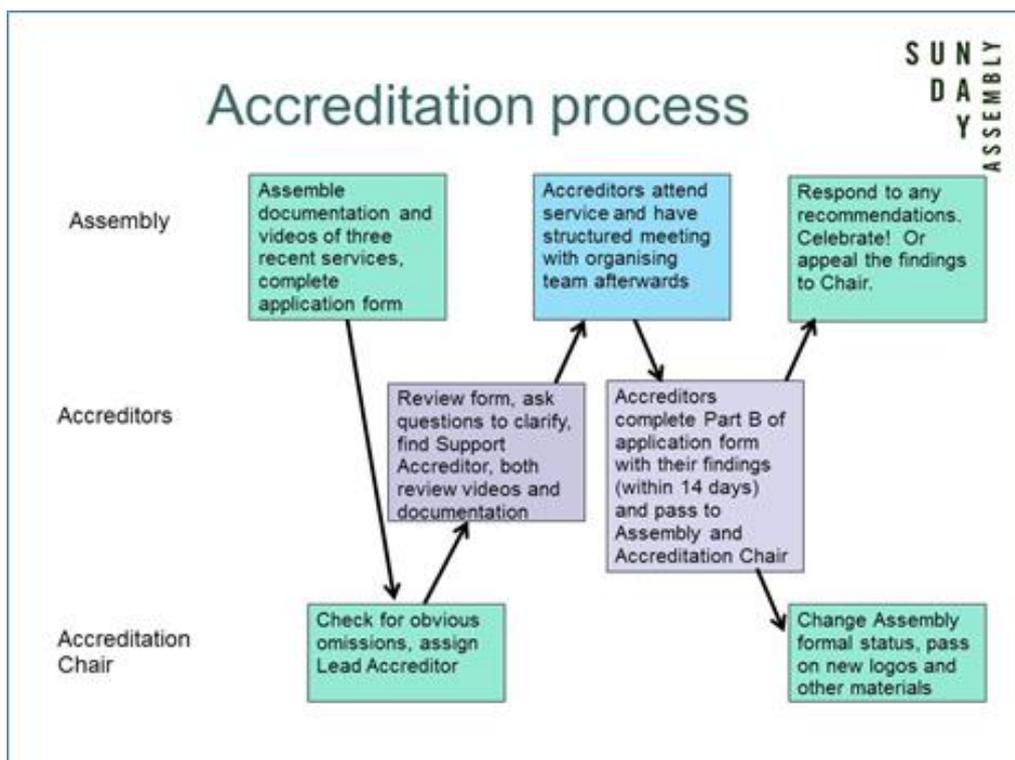
In October 2013, media interest peaked again as the Sunday Assembly started a campaign to raise £500,000 through the international crowdfunding website *Indiegogo*. The fundraising was for money to create a website that would function as a communal digital platform to facilitate the growth of the Assembly.

The Sunday Assembly's vision was one interconnected website designed to provide resources and to help those wanting to start up their own godless congregations. The idea was to build a series of tools to kick-start thousands of congregations. At the same time, Sanderson and Pippa created a second larger global tour called '40 days and nights', an unquestionable biblical reference to promote the Assembly, showing how the sacred and the secular blur (see *Figure 2.4*).[6]

Figure 2.4

Despite their best efforts, the crowdfunding campaign only managed 7% of their £500,000 aim, raising £33,368 (Garrison, 2013). Even so, their ambitious target led to even more press coverage and a squad of programmers; designers and developers donated their time to build it for free. The Sunday Assembly always recognised the impact of social media as a communication channel. Therefore, a website, Twitter account and Facebook page was created for each Sunday Assembly, all connecting to the macro home site.

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[6] In the Hebrew Bible, the number 40 is commonly used in time periods, e.g. rain fell for 'forty days and forty nights' during the flood (Genesis 7:4) and Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days in the New Testament.

Despite the growth and progression of the Sunday Assembly, not everything was plain sailing. Rapid expansion brought a series of problems. Not only did the Sunday Assembly in its first year have to find a new home, but it was also accused of being cult-like and operating for profit. A significant moment took place as the Assembly witnessed its first schism in the New-York-franchised congregation within its first year. Lee Moore, once an organiser at the New York congregation, along with two others, decided they did not like the direction the Sunday Assembly was taking. Rather than taking a more inclusive approach, a split came from those who were more interested in the atheistic nature of the Assembly. This is evident in a blog post by Moore (2013) titled "The Sunday Assembly Has a Problem with Atheists":

> A minority of organizers wished to make the event not a show but an actual church service and agreed with Jones about cutting out the word Atheist, not having speakers from the Atheist community, avoiding having an Atheist audience, and moving the show out of a bar setting to a more formal church-like setting.

As a result, Lee Moore, along with Michael Dorian and Don Albert, who were all Sunday Assembly NYC board members, created a splinter group in November 2013 called The Godless Revival, billed as 'America's first atheist-themed variety show and not in any way a "secular church"'. It was fashioned to be a 'celebration of atheism' that borrowed the Sunday Assembly's ambition for expansion with a 'start your own' message clearly displayed on its website. The schism appeared to fizzle out within 18 months and The Godless Revival is no longer active, showing that the demand for a new-new atheism centred on community building would prove more durable than an atheist group built primarily around a distaste for religion.

As previously mentioned, the term 'atheist church' was hard to shake. 'Atheist church' was still used in marketing on the Assembly website up until July 2013. In an interview in December 2013, Sanderson (in an effort to rebrand) said: 'I would like to make this as un-atheistic as possible. Atheism is boring. We're both post-

religious' (Garrison, 2013).[7] Therefore, the Sunday Assembly carefully rebranded itself as a 'godless congregation', later to rename as a 'secular community'.

In little over a year, 28 Sunday Assemblies had been established across the world based on its congregational model, resulting in a global phenomenon. The average congregation size was 60-80 people. Assemblies in Brighton and Los Angeles were regularly drawing in larger crowds of approximately 200 people (Sunday Assembly, 2014d). In terms of its outreach, Sunday Assembly London specifically donated food to food banks for the September Harvest Festival, donated clothes to CRISIS for Christmas and organised a 'litter pick' in Bethnal Green, London for Clean-up Britain.

Figure 2.5: Shows the changing modern Sunday Assembly brand compared to *Figure 2.1*.

2014 — Focus on Growth

The focus in 2014 was on growth. In January of that year, it was reported that 300 people had contacted the Sunday Assembly with interest in starting up their own congregations. The year would be split into two halves: the first six months focusing on sustaining the existing assemblies and supporting them to thrive; the second half centring on expansion into new cities. With 28 established Assemblies, Sanderson and Evans set an ambitious target in April to grow to 100 new congregations in 15 countries, on every continent in the world.

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[7] The 'both' here is referring to 'like-minded liberal Christians who no longer believe in the supernatural or worship a Father God'.

Early 2014 also marked a milestone: the Assembly had just enough congregational members to host its first annual conference, from 1st-5th May. Assembly organisers from across the world gathered in London to support it. On 7th June, the first Sunday Assembly volunteer day of action saw 'community action heroes' all over the world volunteer on projects and activities in their local area.

It was early in 2014 when the Sunday Assembly acquired free office space on Oxford Street, central London, under a charitable status (it was not yet registered as a charity). The Sunday Assembly, intent on growing its congregational church model, hired interns to support its vision: 'a godless congregation in every town, city or village that wants one'. The group of interns worked through the summer of 2014 at their new office space, assisting and supporting interest in areas of the world that wanted to set up their very own Sunday Assembly. In August, they hired a chief operating officer to take charge of project planning, administrative, internal operations and volunteer management. Prior to the recruitment of a paid intern, volunteers had done all of the work. Although it did not reach its goal of 100 Assemblies by the end of that year, an impressive 36 new Sunday Assemblies did launch on 28th September 2014, more than doubling the number of congregations.

In July, the Sunday Assembly was set on measuring its social impact, and by September it had completed a 350-person impact survey (I actually helped with this; see **Chapter Three** and **Four** for 'the exchange'). After creating 'Easter for Atheists' and the first nonreligious Remembrance Sunday, it was to no one's surprise that a big Christmas event would soon be organised. The Sunday Assembly's nonreligious Christmas service, Yule Rock — an alternative nonreligious celebration — took place on 18th December 2014 at Union Chapel, London. The event was described by the Assembly as:

> the rockingest (sic) Christmas sing-along in the land. Unleash all your favourite holiday classics for an evening of Wham!, Slade, Bing Crosby, Shane MacGowan and Kirsty MacColl and many more. Yule (sic) be belting these out with sounds from the incredible Sunday Assembly house band and choir, with the help of some SPECIAL GUESTS. Good cheer mandatory. Christmas jumpers advisable.

Entering 2015, it was apparent that the Sunday Assembly had 'cracked America', even appearing in Morgan Spurlock's documentary, *Inside Man* (2014). Spurlock met Sanderson Jones and agreed to host a Sunday Assembly in the heart of the Bible Belt — Nashville, Tennessee. As a result of the interest, rather than a European conference, the Sunday Assembly's next conference — A Conference Called Wonder — took place in Atlanta in May 2015.

Commissioned Congregations and Attendance

The Sunday Assembly survives solely on donations. Towards the end of each 'service', bags are passed around and a speech is made about the need to pay for use of Conway Hall. As of March 2015, the Sunday Assembly had saved enough money to hire a community organiser for its London congregation. An announcement stated:

> Our Community Organiser is to make Sunday Assembly London the most life-enhancing, joy-giving, community-boosting organisation we can be! We've come this far in just two years with an amazing team of volunteers, but in order to become even more awesome, we'll need someone fantastic working full time (Sunday Assembly, 2015f).

With 67 Assemblies founded across the world in just over two years, the Sunday Assembly could now also boast of a respectable 186 different global locations (from Yeovil, England to Shanghai, China) expressing interest in an Assembly for their area. Its interest community groups were growing, led by members of the congregation. These now consisted of LGBT, creative, music, article club, photography and cycling groups, to name a few.

In June 2015, the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (HACT) became interested in what the Sunday Assembly was offering. Poplar HARCA, a housing and regeneration community association in East London with registered charity status, then commissioned the Sunday Assembly to build a community for it. Soon after, Sunday Assembly communities in Manchester were commissioned with funding from One Manchester and Trafford Housing Trust. In August 2015 (see

Figure 2.6), the Sunday Assembly recorded a total attendance of 34,604 individuals who had been to a 'service' since January 2015.

Figure 2.6

By September, the secular community had achieved charitable status. It held a harvest festival called 'Top of the Crops' at Union Chapel (a much larger venue than Conway Hall), and donated a large collection of food to charity. The Sunday Assembly introduced card payments and PayPal as means to donate, then also began asking attendees for regular monthly donations.

In December 2015, I attended a 'Day Called Wonder' (*Figure 2.7*) conference in London:

> for a gathering dedicated to celebrating life, building communities and wondering deeply. Sunday Assembly are bringing together inspirational speakers, profound thinkers and great doers who will provide you with tools to improve your life, grow your community and lead change in the world (Sunday Assembly, 2015e).

Figure 2.7

This was a ticketed event being advertised via *Time Out.* The Sunday Assembly had grown very quickly in a short space of time.

2016 —Sustaining Sunday Assembly's Growth

By January 2016, there were 69 congregations in eight countries with an average of 5,000 people attending monthly 'services' worldwide. Los Angeles continued to thrive and had raised enough money to hire a full-time member of staff, as had London. However, with rapid growth, not all Sunday Assemblies survived and some began to burn themselves out. New York, Paris, Crystal Palace, Berlin and Toronto have all shut their doors. Amsterdam closed but relaunched in September 2016, with success. Difficulties with volunteers' commitment is a prime reason why an Assembly collapses. In order to sustain existing congregations, the Sunday Assembly adopted a new business model and started to charge each new organising team for training before they came on board. It created two launch phases per year (September and January) and now requires 10 committed individuals per new Assembly. The training costs £500 per team and is delivered online over eight webinars.

The Sunday Assembly also shared visions for how it may evolve in the future, based on feedback from the community. Here are a few possible avenues (Sunday Assembly, 2016h):

- *We want to work with ex-offenders and in schools.*

- *We want to let the socially isolated know there is a space for them.*

- *We want to visit those who are too ill to leave their houses.*

- *We want to tell an alternative story about the world that might make extremist radicalisation just that bit harder.*

- *We want to be the best in the world at creating joyful, meaningful lives.*

- *We want to provide hundreds of activities and small groups.*

- *We want our community to vibrate with excitement.*

- *We want to give everyone their right to community.*

In May 2016, the Sunday Assembly held its third annual conference (A Conference Called Wonder) in Utrecht Holland (*Figure 2.8* shows a large home-built illuminated 'Life' sign built by the Dutch congregations). This was an opportunity for congregations around the world to share knowledge, experiences and to celebrate being alive.

Figure 2.8

Figure 2.9 Utrecht 2016 shows the changing (and high emphasis on the) Sunday Assembly brand.

Daniel Lee (2000, p.140) observes how congregations who identify with the same signs and rituals are able to symbolically build a community united under a common symbol. This is particularly evident with the Sunday Assembly as a brand and the common symbol of their logo. The logo has even been tattooed on to a member of an American congregation (see *Figure 2.10*).

Figure 2.10

The Sunday Assembly in their brand guide state that 'the triangle is a fitting image for the Sunday Assembly. It's [sic] geometry is a perfect symbol for rational based thought. It is simple, pure, mathematically powerful and has long been imbued with meaning (creativity, harmony, proportion, and balance)'. The Sunday Assembly brand represents being 'vibrant, logical, positive, confident, celebratory, purposeful, approachable, challenging'. Furthermore, the Sunday Assembly's name, motto (Live Better, Help Often and Wonder More) and merchandise (T-Shirts, *figure 2.9*) serve to unite franchised Sunday Assembly congregations globally.

At present (2017), the day-to-day running of the Sunday Assembly is led by Sanderson Jones, co-founder and CEO. Pippa Evans (co-founder) decided to streamline her involvement with the Sunday Assembly, and continues to pursue a successful comedy and theatre career. The current team consists of Liz Slade, Chief Operating Officer, Jacqueline Gunn[8], Chief Community Creator, and Ruth Moir, Community Creator, London. This historical account of the Sunday Assembly ends in August 2016 with a significant milestone. The Sunday Assembly announced it was now part of GCSE Religious Studies on the National Curriculum, as a source of wisdom and authority for dialogue between religious and nonreligious beliefs and attitudes (OCR, 2016).

People and Networks

It is no coincidence that 'organised atheism', or more broadly 'organised nonreligion/unbelief', is thriving in the 21st century; 100 years ago, it would not have been possible on a global scale. The internet has expedited and mobilized an active social godless community, which is evident in the creation of the Sunday Assembly (Smith, 2013, p.80). Social media has been an essential catalyst in the growth and development of the secular congregations and atheist community. Edgell et al. (2006, p.214) argued that American atheists are few in number, unorganised and not a conscious group, with individual atheists not being easily identified. However, in the short period since this was written, much has changed. A thriving atheist community exists online, a space in which atheists feel safe (Smith & Cimino, 2012, p.18). Smith & Cimino's (2012, p.18) research involved studying

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[8] Gunn left the Sunday Assembly in 2017 after my research had finished.

secularist (a term they use that refers to 'atheist, agnostics and all of those individuals and groups that are actively nonreligious while not necessarily self-identifying as atheist') communities online and examined the way the internet facilitated a more visible and active secular identity.

Smith & Cimino (2012, p.19) argue that the internet is not just a tool for communicating information, but a domain that facilitates knowledge of, and actively shapes, the social world. Not only does the internet interpret the world, it also rapidly produces and reproduces it. Smith & Cimino (2012, p.20) contend what happens online is not just reflecting reality, it is also creating a reality. The internet provides a stage for private issues and concerns to be publicly aired.

An abundance of podcasts, deconversion narratives, atheist forums, chatrooms, debates and websites can be found within a couple of clicks. On one of the more popular websites, reddit.com, users can create topics and comment on discussion boards. Discussions on atheism attract half a million users each day (Guenther et al., 2013, p.459). Not all of the views expressed are atheist, of course, but this does illuminate how the subject of atheism has gathered momentum via the internet. Meanwhile, Twitter helps to construct and negotiate atheist identities and atheist communities, with atheists and nonreligious individuals interacting and networking globally. The Internet has facilitated atheist discussion – making it easier to talk openly, using pseudonyms if needed to share ideas, get support and advice but also to organise. It is a tool for believers in doubt, or those in the transition from faith to atheism. Within seconds you can find instant information; you do not have to rely on your local preacher, religious family or classmates. The internet has resulted in a new age of information, simply typing 'atheism' into Google in 2013 shoots back 5.88 million results in 0.32 of a second. In 2017, 'atheism' results in 19.2 million web pages.

Smith (2013, p.80) argues that the atheist community is not limited just to the internet and the Sunday Assembly is the best example of a physical community. This is also evident in the Reason Rally, held 24th March 2012 in Washington and dubbed 'Woodstock for atheists'. Here, the largest secular non-theist gathering was recorded, with an estimated 25,000 participants in attendance.

The Sunday Assembly wanted the relationships created in the 'real world' to seamlessly transfer into the digital world too. Therefore, to make sure members of the congregation were connected, it created a digital platform called the Sunday Assembly Network (SAN). This network is now barely used (Facebook and Twitter have proved more efficient), but it is worth noting as it originally helped the formation of the Assembly. The SAN comprises three elements — people, interest groups and community sites.

The Sunday Assembly has attempted to create a digital community with the congregation in mind and produced what it describes as a 'hipster social network'. The social network is not dissimilar from Facebook — some 3,500 active members can post messages, build up a friends list and link to events and groups. The number of active members appears to be relatively low considering that, from January to May 2015, Sunday Assemblies recorded an approximate global attendance of 22,300 people. This low number is largely down to the Assembly adopting Facebook pages, which I will discuss further in the third element (community sites). Despite stating that it is 'radically inclusive' (a topic that becomes the focus of **Chapter Five**), the Sunday Assembly chooses to use digital and social media means of communication that can have the adverse effect of being *exclusive*, particularly to the exclusion of older, internet illiterate generations. This was teased out during an interview with Benjamin, a 76-year-old member of the congregation. Despite having an incredibly busy social life, he sometimes found it hard to keep up with the Sunday Assembly's mode of communication.

The Sunday Assembly creates large offline community events that bring together micro social, digital congregations. These larger community events serve to connect the various communities. Firstly, the Assembly holds annual conferences in different locations (London 2014, Atlanta 2015, Utrecht 2016, and San Diego 2017). Secondly, as mentioned earlier, it created Yule Rock, an alternative to Christmas for the nonreligious, which connected congregations. The Christian calendar is adopted for the post-Christian era, with the Assembly trialling a harvest festival. As previously discussed, the Sunday Assembly meets twice a month on the first and third Sunday at Conway Hall in London, an historic building with links to secularism and humanism. Branching from its bi-weekly meets, various groups have

developed. Previously, I detailed the Sunday 'service' as the nucleus, this ethnographic study highlights these smaller groups as the heart of the community, where closer social bonds and ties are formed outside of the main service. These interest groups are created by members of the congregation, who have a passion for a particular interest and invite others to join them. Particular groups include article club (similar to a book club, but you read a short article instead), choir, theatre, yoga and mindfulness. These shared common interests act as a mode of connecting the congregation to develop stronger notions of community. Each group also has a Facebook group, events list and mailing list.

Smith (2013a, p.84) argues that social media has been an essential catalyst in the growth and development of the atheist community. Emphasis has been placed on creating a more vibrant atheist community both online and off. The Assembly's Facebook and Twitter pages act as platforms for it to share insights, thoughts and events with its global community. What emerges is an interconnected micro and macro Sunday Assembly community. This is evident in having the main Sunday Assembly Facebook page and Twitter feed connect to each individual congregation to weave a 'web of belonging'. As of June 2015, 74 active Sunday Assembly Facebook groups existed, unlike the SAN with a humble 3,500 membership. Facebook offers a more accurate reflection of the secular communities and how they utilise existing social networks to build community. In 2017, the main Sunday Assembly page boasts 12,000 'likes', with London attaining over 5,000. Many American congregations like Nashville and Portland (1000 'likes') along with smaller assemblies like Bristol (700 'likes') show similar online popularity.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to provide a snapshot of the history of the Sunday Assembly. Word count does not permit discussion about the Assembly at Glastonbury and Wilderness festivals (as well as many other events) and its exposure from these occasions. Aspects such as community and social groups will be the focus in forthcoming chapters. After situating this research more broadly in **Chapter One** and offering a history of the Assembly in **Chapter Two** to better

understand its trajectory, the next chapter will discuss the Sunday Assembly in terms of ethnographic research.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCHING THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY PART I: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A SECULAR CONGREGATION

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the different stages of the research journey and the various methodological decisions that were addressed in the design of the study. I discuss the decision to choose ethnographic research, which utilised semi-structured interviews, as the most appropriate method of research. I detail my research strategies and how digital methods were deployed when searching for participants, and how the participants were sampled. I also discuss how consent was a process. In the following chapter, Researching the Sunday Assembly Part II, I provide a description of my emotions, reflexivity and positionality and the ethical considerations when conducting ethnographic research.

A problem faced by sociologists and other scholars when studying the fast-growing population of 'nones' is how best to analyse this social phenomenon. 'Big data' certainly serves a valuable purpose, with the UK Census recording the changing nature of religious affiliation and the General Social Survey (GSS) having the ability to record belief, levels of prayer and church attendance in contemporary society over a period of time. However, one problem that transcends religious belief and nonreligious belief is that different surveys have different questions for measuring non-religiosity (Ribberink et al., 2016) and therefore produce different answers. The UK Census 2011 asked: 'What is your religion?' Implicitly, this could suggest that respondents do have one, while it says nothing about the level of commitment to the religion or how that religion is interpreted. In contrast, the British Social Attitudes survey asks: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' This raises an additional question as to what qualifies as belonging to a religion. As Davie's (1994) work has shown, individuals can 'believe' without 'belonging'. Measuring one's religion is problematic and even the UK Census 2011 reported that 'no religion' included those who felt that they could not identify as religious if they were not practising. Consequently, Zuckerman suggests the best way to find out

why people have rejected religion is to ask them through conducting interviews (2012, p.13). While this does not negate the potential worth of quantitative surveys, each method has its inherent problems and asking people can present problems of memory and distorting narratives.

Day (2017, p.9) contends that every 'researcher makes choices about method. Ideally these choices should be provoked by the research question'. My research questions were born from an attempt to understand why people are attending a secular community *right now* and what that tells us about the changing religious landscape. Conducting ethnographic research that includes interviews can provide more in-depth data and enhance understanding on why secular congregations like the Sunday Assembly are currently flourishing.

Ethnography

Ethnographic research involves the systematic study and description of people and their cultures, focusing on their customs and mutual differences. It allows a researcher to explore a culture, providing a lens to understand the social world from the inside out. Applied to the Sunday Assembly, I believe the rich narratives that (previously) lay silent and unheard behind large data sets can offer a more valuable insight into why people attend the Assembly. Ethnography can also assist in the understanding of the changing nature of belief, belonging, identity and community that may have been displaced through leaving religion.

Ethnography attempts at being holistic by covering as much territory as possible about the culture studied (Fetterman, 1998, p.11). Stringer (1999, p.42) states that ethnographic research clearly has its roots in anthropology, where it has been the principal method of research. Essentially, ethnography draws on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, followed by writing up the encounter in a detailed and observant manner. Stringer (1999, p.43) argues that, for 'the anthropologists there are three assumptions which are considered essential for the "ideal" ethnographic study, all of these find their roots in the work of Malinowski' (1922/2015).

Firstly, Stringer (1999, p.43) maintains that time is essential. Ethnography demands 'field work' and immersing oneself in 'the field' requires time. To gain an insight into a community's culture, practices, norms and values, and how it operates, the researcher will achieve a better understanding of that community the longer he or she is immersed in it. Therefore, I set a minimum of 12 months to conduct research at the Sunday Assembly, which turned into 15 months and included a later trip to its annual conference in 2016. My time consisted of attending the Sunday Assembly London on the first and third Sunday of each month (occasionally once a month), as well as attending social events, activities and interest groups. In total, over that 15-month period, I attended twenty Sunday Assembly 'services'. Each service lasted approximately 75 minutes. I would stay on afterwards to talk to individuals informally and to negotiate interviews. Later, I would often join the congregation in a Holborn pub. A field visit could last between two and five hours. When I was not attending events, I was immersed in the Sunday Assembly online community, following its newsletters and social media interactions.

Secondly, ethnography aims to take account of everything in the social surroundings, for the researcher to become embedded in the setting over a period of time, which allows for a certain degree of chronological unfolding. As long and detailed as most ethnographies are, usually lasting for at least six months and ideally over 12 months, they typically only represent a fraction of what the observer saw and learned (Fetterman, 1998, p.24).

Lastly, Stringer (1999, p.43) argues the third assumption is trying to understand the situation being researched, something that Malinowski defines as the 'native's point of view' (Malinowski, 1922/2015, p.25). This is an important aspect that Grace Davie (2013, p.119) touches on — 'the crucial element to success is the capacity to see the world from the point of view of the actor'. To support this, Bryman (2012, p.494) suggests that if the researcher has prolonged immersion in a social setting, participating in similar activities, it may increase his/her ability to 'see as others see'. Within the constraints of PhD research, I believe I achieved this. I partook in all activities given the opportunity, always accepting an invitation when presented. This level of involvement became apparent when a participant, after an interview,

was curious about how I would talk about the Sunday Assembly while also being a member.

Day (2017, p.20) states:

> The real benefit of ethnography, however, comes with time. By spending time with the same people, in the same place, doing what they do with them, the ethnographer can acquire a number of sensitivities, particularly in relation to who belong (and how insiders filter out those who do not), what and why some things change, what people regularly talk about, and therefore what really matters to them, the relevance of the initial research questions, the role of the body and emotion as equivalent to the mind as data gatherer and interpreter, and finally, the tension between participant observer and non-observing participant.

Here, Day elegantly sums up my rationale for conducting ethnographic research at the Sunday Assembly. My approach was to become familiar with the same faces, to partake in their activities, to join them after the service and to meet with them midweek for various interest groups. It was to become privy to what they held important to them, what they believed in and how their lived nonreligious identities manifested when in a collective. It was through this mode of data collection that I was able to capture rich experiences that I felt at the time, and even more so now, would offer me a better level of analysis than a quantitative approach. For example, the Sunday Assembly developed structures for nonreligious holidays including harvest festivals and a nonreligious Christmas celebration. By conducting observations, I witnessed first-hand these newly formed ritualistic traditions, the impact of which would be difficult to record by relying solely on large data sets and surveys. Formal interviews and informal conversations were a crucial way of understanding the social world being researched and became key tools utilised in the ethnographic research, because they explained the social actions from the perspective of the participants. Both, however, presented problems. During informal conversations, I would have to make the individual aware of my research, which potentially changed the dynamics of the conversation. For formal interviews,

participants' knowledge that were being recorded may have caused them to be careful about what they disclosed.

Stringer (2009, p.19) maintains that ethnography 'has the disadvantage of being very specific, highly subjective and impossible to verify, and focusing on one particular community'. However, Stringer (2009, p.19) contends that ethnography is 'probably the only way in which we could ever understand the reality of religion [and nonreligion] as practised by ordinary individuals'. Conducting ethnographic research allows for capturing informal conversations and recording behaviours to which survey data is not privy. Therefore, in principle, ethnography is the most practicable methodology for exploring cultural phenomena such as godless/secular congregations.

Space, not just place, is just as important when conducting research, and I had to remain mindful that this particular space under scrutiny was socially constructed. This became apparent when analysing the different 'homes' of various Sunday Assembly congregations: an ethical society (London), a community bar hub (Guildford), a church (Brighton), a deconsecrated church (Bristol) and a historic music venue (Utrecht).

Furthermore, ethnography can be viewed as an embodied, sensual and responsive practice. We are situated via our bodies, by that I mean we are symbolically marked as researchers and our presence may affect the data that is produced, but also our interactions. This is what Coffey (1999, p.59) refers to as 'an embodied activity' by which 'we locate our physical being alongside those of others, as we negotiate the spatial context of the field'. As a result, we cannot avoid having an effect on the social phenomenon we are studying (Hammersley and Atkins, 1995, p.17). These ripples extend to boosting the number of people attending a social event or the service.

Fetterman (1998, p.11) argues that 'the ethnographer's task is not only to collect information from the emic or insider's perspective but also to make sense of all the data from the etic or external social scientific perspective'. This (etic) is a further stage of interpretation, where the researcher applies a theoretical framework to

73

analyse the subject being studied (Cameron et al., 2005, p.29). But an emic perspective is also what Cameron et al. (2005, p.29) refers to as 'the local interpretation'. During my observations, I adopted an emic perspective that was constantly under scrutiny and analysis from an etic perspective to build layers of understanding of the Sunday Assembly. In summary, Stringer (2009, p.32) contends ethnography is limited, by being local and specific. However, the intimacy of understanding that is gained is what ethnography truly has to offer. Therefore, even with the limitations of conducting observations and not conforming to collecting large data sets that have been the trend in sociology in recent years, studying the Sunday Assembly through an ethnographic, sociological lens has provided a deeper understanding of the social phenomenon of the emergence of congregational forms of unbelief.

My observation of the Sunday Assembly raised questions and uncovered unexpected topics, which influenced research questions. Consequently, by uncovering topics not previously considered, the observations can have a direct impact on the nature of questions delivered in the semi-structured interviews with participants of the congregation. Conducting observations of the Sunday Assembly at its Conway Hall 'home' was, I felt, more conducive to revealing the Assembly at its most natural.

As part of my ethnographic research and in addition to participant observation, I carried out qualitative semi-structured interviews. 'The interview is the ethnographer's most important data gathering technique. Interviews explain and put into a larger context what the ethnographer sees and experiences' (Fetterman 1998, p.37). Semi-structured interviews have been used as a method to illuminate the complexities and depth of nonreligion by nonreligious scholars; for example, Catto & Eccles (2013), Lee (2014) and Zuckerman (2015). Ethnography has been used to great effect in the sociology of religion (Davie, 2013, p.119). It has been used to study organised atheist and secularist groups in London (Lee, 2015, p.11) and in the study of evangelical congregations in London (Strhan, 2015). Given that the Sunday Assembly has some resemblance to an evangelical congregation, ethnography was chosen as the most appropriate method to capture the way the congregation expresses and experiences nonreligion. It allowed for the recording of cultural phenomenon and terminology, details that survey data was likely to miss. Davie

(2013, p.124-125) deems 'the careful observation of liturgy reveals a great deal'. The Sunday Assembly may be described as 'nonreligious liturgy' in the sense that the structure of the service is prescribed by Sunday Assembly London as a governing committee (of the Assembly).

Ethnographers assume a holistic outlook to attempt to build a broad representation of a social group, which demands a great deal of time. However, 'no study can capture an entire culture or group' (Fetterman 1998, p.19). As a result, I am aware of the limitations of my study, the ethnographic research will not be representative of all Sunday Assembly congregations, and an explanation of why the Sunday Assembly is thriving may vary in different parts of the UK and globally. While acknowledging this limitation, I visited four other Sunday Assemblies in England and the Netherlands to analyse how the Assembly operates in different locations.

The perfect chance to document informal conversations was found towards the end of the service. Donations were made to keep the Sunday Assembly active, during which the main speaker (usually Sanderson) would request that members 'turn around to the people next to you and say hello'. As a result, I was able to document dozens of informal conversations with the purpose of negotiating a possible interview. I usually asked the following three questions during the donations break to gain better profiles of individuals' journeys to the Sunday Assembly:

1. 'How did you hear about the Sunday Assembly?'
2. 'How often do you attend the Sunday Assembly?'
3. 'Did you grow up (or are you) religious?'

By asking these questions to various members, it allowed me to build up a more comprehensive profile of the congregation, even when interviews failed to surface. However, a pitfall in my method was the difficulty to make notes during the assembly without arousing suspicion. To overcome this, I frequently used my phone to note take when given a chance. I also digitally audio recorded the event and made detailed notes directly after my participant observation.

Research Locations

In my research design, I initially planned to research two locations, the Sunday Assembly London and St Mary's Church, Bryanston Square, London. Initially, I set out to conduct a comparative study of a godless congregation (the Assembly) and a Church of England congregation (St Mary's) that self-describes as 'having no religion' and does not insist on a particular faith or belief to distance itself from the notion of empty rituals.

The Sunday Assembly London was specifically chosen as it is the birthplace of the idea; not only does it set the tone, style and format for others in the franchise, it is also the biggest and, thus, the benchmark for research. London is also home to the Humanists UK 'Atheist Bus Campaign'. In 2009, several buses in the city drove around with the message: 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life'. There is a large nonreligious population in London, and to understand the Sunday Assembly, how it operates and why it attracts people, it is best to track the movement back to its origins.

Although comparisons are to be made between the Sunday Assembly and Evangelical churches (for example, St Mary's), I realised within the first year of study that this was too large a project to research both. Therefore, I decided to focus primarily on the Sunday Assembly London. I attended other well-established assemblies, namely Bristol and Brighton, as they were the first to launch based on the London model. I also visited the Sunday Assembly in Guildford, Surrey, to observe how a smaller congregation operates. Entering St Andrews Church in Hove, neighbouring Brighton, was reminiscent of the origins of the Sunday Assembly London when it first held a nonreligious secular service in a deconsecrated church (The Nave) in North London. Unlike the seating arrangement in Conway Hall, the Brighton congregation sat in old pews. Returning to a church setting, I could marvel at the architecture and beautiful stained-glass windows (see the Brighton Congregational Demographics section of **Chapter Five**). However, the original intention of the design — to inspire a Christian vision and wonder of God — had been displaced by a secular worldview of marvelling at the architectural style of the building.

I also streamed services online from the Los Angeles congregation to provide a more global context and to conduct digital ethnographic research, which I discuss later. Fieldwork was conducted between the dates of September 2014 and December 2015 and I attended the Sunday Assembly 2016 annual conference in Utrecht (the Netherlands), to witness how the Assembly operates on a global level. Throughout this research, when I discuss the Sunday Assembly (unless explicitly stated otherwise) I am referring to the London congregation.

Serendipity: Gaining Access to the Sunday Assembly

I had heard through the academic grapevine that the Sunday Assembly was notoriously difficult to gain initial access to, mainly because of the media attention it was receiving. Only once ethical approval had been submitted and approved by Kingston University did I try to approach and contact the founders of the Sunday Assembly London. I chose to gain access through the co-founders, as this would provide legitimacy and an in-road to the congregation. I was insistent on my area of study — the location, the research questions, the aims and objectives — but, worryingly nine months into my research, I still had not obtained access.

As serendipity would have it, a breakthrough emerged when my supervisor attended a party where a chance conversation revealed a friend of the host was the co-founder of the Sunday Assembly, Pippa Evans. Miller & Bell (2002, p.55) recognise that 'much qualitative research relies upon gatekeepers as a route of initial access to participants'. Crowhurst et al. (2013, p.4) distinguishes gatekeepers as generally being 'identified as individuals or institutions who stand at the metaphorical "gate" of a metaphorical enclosed compound, and allow, or not, the researcher in'. Within the Sunday Assembly, Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones stood at this metaphorical gate, and the friend of my supervisor was going to lead me up to it. Reeves (2010, p.316) contends that it is still common for published empirical accounts to deal briefly with the issue of gaining access, and that 'such accounts tend to concentrate on challenges for the researcher'.

In the light of this, popular textbooks on social research including Bryman (2015, p.428) provide tactics on how to gain access for research. For example, calling on

friends, family, colleagues, academics, or being prepared to negotiate access by finding someone senior to champion you and act as a gatekeeper. Although practical, they do not engage in the experience of conducting research. This is sometimes referred to as 'cookbook techniques' (Harding, 1998). Cookbook techniques do not account for the unpredictable nature of doing research, when serendipitous opportunities unfold that can alter the direction of research.

Nevertheless, chance encounters were capitalised on throughout my research and materialised in often the most unexpected of places. Merton (1948, p.506) refers to this as 'the serendipity pattern' of conducting social research.

The Exchange: Gaining, Securing and Maintaining Access

I contacted Pippa Evans via email, and she put me in touch with Sanderson Jones, who was more involved in the day-to-day running of the Sunday Assembly. Sanderson replied, expressing interest in the research. He provided me with his mobile number and asked me to call him the following evening to discuss my research further.

Without knowing at the time, I had entered into an exchange with Sanderson and the Sunday Assembly. My help was required, and it would be reciprocated by me being granted the access I needed for my research. This trade off involved me helping devise a questionnaire and analysing user value stories. This was an exciting prospect, and though it may have taken me in a slightly different direction for a week or so, I felt that it was an impossible offer to refuse; this was my 'foot in the door'. Essentially, Sanderson explained how he was able to see the good directly attributable to the Sunday Assembly: the community building, belonging, new friendships and improved happiness and wellbeing. However, this was something that needed to be measured to support fundraising.

I was careful not to compromise my research. Glazer identifies 'the field worker will often promise things that he [or she] will come to regret' (1972, p.11). To support this, Broadhead & Rist (1976, p.328) recognise that, 'by specifying the conditions of reciprocity to their own benefits, gatekeepers can require an exact specification of

the substantive problem that the researcher will investigate'. I was cautious to avoid a conflict of interest and was careful not to adapt my research to fit the Sunday Assembly's mission at the time — to conduct a longitudinal study to examine if attending the congregation was having a positive impact on wellbeing. Sanderson asked for support in helping to achieve this. I was still without consent but the desire to find out more about how the Sunday Assembly operates day to day meant it was a fantastic opportunity and certainly an 'exchange of services'. I spent the day with Sanderson at the Assembly office and could immediately see the wider plans and upscaling of the congregations that were taking place early on.

Previously, I was asked in a postgraduate study group what my biggest worry about my research was. I responded: 'The Sunday Assembly will cease to exist and my research will have little importance'. This fear was reinforced by Colin Campbell, whose book *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* was rereleased at the NSRN annual event in 2013. Campbell, when asked about his thoughts on the recent development of the Sunday Assembly and its chances of longevity, responded to a despondent me in the audience: 'I see it having no long-term future' (a point I return to in **Chapter Ten**). However, on visiting the Assembly office, any doubts I had been harbouring soon dissolved — a large board nestled in the corner was covered with names of global cities and titled 'Start-Ups'. The sheer number of cities that had expressed an interest in using the Sunday Assembly's godless/secular congregational model in their own area was overwhelming. Many cities had moved across the board from initial interest to almost ready to launch. Often, Sanderson would receive a phone call and would speak French, discussing the latest launch of the Parisian Sunday Assembly. As previously mentioned, during the summer of 2014, a handful of summer interns volunteered to help these start-ups expand the franchise. Upscaling internationally, the Sunday Assembly was set to double in size with their help and commitment to the cause.

This opportunity provided me with a key insight into the running of the Sunday Assembly and how each one operates. I was able to witness the Assembly at a crucial point; 28th September 2014 was marked down to be the biggest growth day the Sunday Assembly had seen. New congregations from Berlin to Singapore were set to launch. Tegan, a woman in her early 20s, was constantly working away in the

Assembly office alongside Sanderson. I believe Tegan was in-between jobs and volunteered her time to help with the growing demand for congregations. Tegan and Sanderson explained that they had been collecting qualitative data from 30 Assembliers in the form of user value stories. I was granted access to these value stories, which were rich in qualitative data on how the Sunday Assembly was providing community, belonging and wonder to its congregation. With this data, I contributed to the building of a survey answered by 350 people who had been to the Sunday Assembly more than five times (Sunday Assembly, 2015g). I will return to the findings in **Chapter Seven**. Not only was I able to analyse the Sunday Assembly's user value surveys, I was also able to spend a week working with Sanderson, which helped me build up a rapport with him. During this time, I was able to ask him questions about the Sunday Assembly regarding its identity and 'radical inclusivity' (see **Chapter Five**).

Consent

To the best of my knowledge, I was the first social researcher to investigate the Sunday Assembly wholly as a phenomenon, thus I have no doubt Sanderson wanted to meet me in person before granting access. The 'research bargain' I struck with him fortunately imposed no requirements on me as a social researcher. No other control or power was exerted in the direction of my research, as experienced by other social researchers (Reeves, 2010, p.319). Having further discussed my research proposal and verified my academic credentials, Sanderson provided written permission and consent for me to study the Sunday Assembly, and to conduct ethnographic research.[9] This provided me with an institutional consent, but I still needed to obtain the personal consent of all interviewees.

Consent was therefore constantly being negotiated and discussed. From time to time, Sanderson would mention during a service how 'we' have a resident researcher studying the Sunday Assembly, but the congregation would remain unaware of the information in my research. By nature, participant observation within a group of 300-500 people can be deceptive due to them being largely unaware that research

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[9] See appendices for letter of consent from Sanderson Jones.

was being conducted. What had I actually gained consent for, beyond the founder's permission to study the organisation? It probably gave me more legitimacy in the eyes of the participants, but it is important to recognise the limitations of informed consent. By having the co-founders consent, did I have consent from every person in the room to conduct ethnographic research? In short, no. However, the space in which the services took place was an open space, not private, and no information recorded in my field notes from the congregational assembly could be linked to any individuals present. Plankey-Videla (2012, p.2) echoes my concerns on informed consent being fluid rather than static, and to whom is a researcher accountable when the formal authority or gatekeeper (in this case, the founders) provides permission to do research? Still, I made it clear with every person I directly spoke to that I was a researcher and consent was continually negotiated with potential interviewees.

Entrance and Recruitment

After attending the Sunday Assembly for two months and having had informal but meaningful conversations with Assembliers, I secured promises for interviews. Worryingly, however, none of these occurred. Despite a drought in interviews, I was able to speak to several first-time and returning members of the congregation. Slowly, I started to collect interviews from the people I met in the congregation. Two vital moments in the research are connected to 'digital snowballing' and serendipity.

I planned to conduct 30 semi-structured interviews with the Sunday Assembly London congregation before evaluating whether I had reached 'saturation point' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), at which point no new data would lead to further information in regard to my research questions. My research plan was to find 15 of the 30 interviewees face to face at services and, because the Assembly operates in the digital world too, to find the other 15 using social media methods (Facebook, Twitter, blogs and email).

A selection prerequisite for interview was that the person had previously attended, or still attends, the Sunday Assembly London. Initially, I found it hard to find my first interviewee and it took me three months to conduct that first interview. During

these months, I did not attend any groups that existed outside of the Sunday 'service', i.e. the choir, article club or theatre group; perhaps this is why I found it difficult to meet people. Having said this, meeting people in the beginning was problematic for other reasons. For one, I was attending alone (as was the case for the vast majority of my participants) and one of the first opportunities I had to speak to others was during the 'speak to your neighbour' section, which occurs during the collection for the venue or just before the service begun. I soon realised that by only attending the Sunday Assembly service and not the various other social activities, a sense of community would be more difficult to achieve.

Strhan (2015. p.12) found in her ethnography of evangelicals in London that various methods of welcoming newcomers were encouraged, which parallel those utilised by the Sunday Assembly:

> In each service there is a five minute break to chat with neighbours, and ministers regularly remind the congregation to invite newcomers to coffee or supper after the service. When I arrived early for a service and sat by myself, someone would inevitably come over to chat within a couple of minutes, and this culture of speaking to new people helped me get to know a range of individuals in the church.

However, the Conway Hall Sunday Assembly service regularly sees attendance of up to 500 people. Thus, those neighbours with whom you do build up a brief rapport (1-2 minutes) are often difficult to find again in future weeks. I was once told: 'The best part about the Sunday Assembly is when it finishes; then the real community begins'. I eventually decided to heed that advice, and after each Sunday Assembly I would talk with others over tea and coffee before heading to the local pub for a drink with the congregation. Towards the end of 2015, the Sunday Assembly (based on feedback) created a 'first time table' to welcome new individuals over a cup of tea. This idea was introduced after I had found my participants. Yet at times I found it could be daunting to approach and sit down at a table already full of existing friendships. It invoked the 'first day of school' feelings, which was evident in some of the interviews. When I began my research, I met at least one person at three separate Sunday Assemblies who agreed to be interviewed. After exchanging email

addresses and sending information about my project, I did not hear back from any of them. It was during a Remembrance-Sunday-themed Assembly (November 2014) that I met Martha, a middle-aged woman attending for the first time. Martha had a religious upbringing but now identified as nonreligious. She agreed to be my first interviewee (refer to *Table 5.1* **Chapter Five**).

Post-Martha and a couple more interviews, I hit a second drought of new participants. Again, serendipity intervened; a close friend was scrolling through Twitter when he recognised a picture of a congregation that resembled the Sunday Assembly, which was taken by his friend onstage at Conway Hall. Social media allowed me to contact the mutual friend, and he agreed to be interviewed. I met Thomas in an East London pub. After the interview, I asked if he knew anyone else who might be interested in an interview and helping with my research. The next day I was copied into an email with the entire band. Thomas had passed on my contact details and information about my research, which subsequently led to an additional two interviews. My research then snowballed to the choir and my interviews involved members of the band and choir, rather than just members of the congregation, adding a new dimension as to why people were attending. While the population at the Sunday Assembly were not necessarily 'hard to reach', I had to be wary of my snowball sample not just being members of a chain of people that shared similar characteristics (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Thus, splitting the recruitment into digital and face to face interviews would ensure a more diverse sample.

The second pivotal moment in my research came after interviewing Mary, who was part of the choir. The following day, she messaged the entire choir about my research, which created new interest. As a result, several people keen on being interviewed contacted me. The interviews were therefore acquired by using a non-probability snowball sampling technique, and although there were elements of serendipity in gaining a contact that knew Pippa Evans, this was a long process that required effort and networking. I believe the reason why initially I found it difficult to find participants for interviews was that I had not accessed these small core group members of the Sunday Assembly.

Strhan (2015, p.15), in her ethnography, conducted a similar amount (31) of formal open-ended interviews with church members. In Strhan's experience, it was easier for her to gain access to women than men, 'as women volunteered other women as potential interviewees'. I noticed this particular bias, as I may have spoken informally to more women than men during my ethnography. However, the overall sample collected was representative of the approximate 60%-40% female to male gender split (based on headcounts within the Sunday Assembly).

Digital Data Collection

Digital research methods are growing within the Sociology of Religion (Hutchings, 2014, 2016, 2017). The Sunday Assembly operates in the digital world, utilising existing social networks as well as creating its own social network (e.g. Sunday Assembly Network or SAN). Events listings are posted via Facebook; news is posted weekly via email and includes an extensive list of activities taking place in London — theatre meetings, social events, etc. Smaller congregations are connected on a macro level using Twitter. Given their status online, I decided early on that I would attempt to recruit half of my interviews (15 being my early estimation) using digital research methods. Like Fox, Morris & Rumsey (2007), the internet was a core element of my research strategy to gain participants.

To spread my research as far as possible, I used five separate platforms to find interviewees: Twitter, Facebook, SAN, blog posts and email newsletters. Firstly, I posted a 'call for interviews' via my research Twitter account. My account has a modest network of around 2,000 nonreligious people, groups and organisations.

Fortunately, the Sunday Assembly and its organisers were extremely helpful in retweeting my research to their followers. Retweeting on Twitter is the quintessential definition of 'digital snowballing' — information about my research was shared to my 2,000 followers, then subsequently retweeted around 30 times, some of whom with up to 50,000 followers. This exposure resulted in one click potentially reaching tens of thousands of people on Twitter. I utilised Facebook as a way of sharing information about my project. I posted to the main Sunday Assembly Facebook group, the London congregation and also the London Social, which meets

weekly at a London pub. As the Sunday Assembly operates a social network and forums, I also posted my research in the London, West London and Sunday Assembly members list. In addition, I created a blog post explaining my research. Fortunately, the Sunday Assembly London featured this on its website, which helped in the finding of interviewees.

After exhausting all online social avenues, I sat back and waited excitedly for an email to arrive. I have learned never to underestimate the power of social networks, and I was not let down. Within a week 22 people (who attended the Sunday Assembly London) had emailed me expressing interest in being part of my research. While this is not a huge proportion of the 400-500 people that attend (or have attended) monthly, at least one interviewee was found from each avenue used to share my research digitally. This resulted in surpassing my original plan to conduct 30 interviews and I discovered the 'saturation point' was reached at 35 interviews. Furthermore, like Catto & Eccles' (2013, p.41) study on investigating young atheist narratives, I received a better response recruiting online than attending face-to-face meet-ups, which is telling of the comfortability of meeting new people online in the 21st century.

The Interviews

My interviews would typically start with a question about how the participant first heard of the Sunday Assembly and their first experiences of attending. During my pilot interview, I began with questions on demographics that covered gender, age, social class, occupation, highest academic qualification, relationship status and ethnicity. However, I found that starting with a question on where a participant first heard about the Assembly initiated a more natural conversation; demographics were thus placed last. Often, the interviewees would get ahead of my questions and begin to tell me about their beliefs when they were younger, at which point I would introduce questions on belief and spirituality. Questions ranged from what they thought of the Sunday Assembly motto, how much they donated, why they attended, along with aspects of community and belonging.[10]

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[10] See appendices for interview questions.

Just because a congregation identifies with a common name, uses the same signs and performs collective rituals — I was curious to find out if they share collective beliefs. (Daniel Lee, 2000, p.140). This is an important issue in regard to the Sunday Assembly. What *does* someone who is nonreligious believe in (if anything)? This is discussed in **Chapter Nine**.

Through conducting semi-structured interviews, small changes were made to the interview questions. For example, when asked the question: 'What is sacred to you?' was often answered: 'Nothing is sacred to me', as it invoked has religious connotations. Partington (2001, p.41) discusses persistence in interviews and contends that a solution to difficult questions could be in wording the question differently, to ensure the interviewee understands what is being asked. Instead, therefore, I asked: 'What do you value?', which encouraged a more profound response. After the first couple of interviews, I was able to memorise each of my questions, and the interviews began to feel more natural, thereby improving the quality of the conversations and data. The conversations became more fluid and moved in different directions, but I was still able to mentally tick off questions without having to turn to a paper list. New questions were introduced as I uncovered more about the Sunday Assembly through my ethnographic research. One advantage of semi-structured interviews is that I was able to take control of the process of acquiring information from the participants, but I was also able to follow new leads as they arose in conversation (Bernard, 1988). For example, when the Sunday Assembly London invested in digital card readers at Conway Hall for donations, I introduced a question as to whether the participant donates and, if so, why they donate.

The data collected online is self-sampled, and members of the Sunday Assembly congregation may not be representative of the entire demographic. Of course, the core group of people who attend the Sunday Assembly are 'invested' in the organisation, and it was difficult to find participants who had only attended once and not returned. During an interview with Deborah (see *Table 5.1* **Chapter Five**), I asked if, since joining the Sunday Assembly, had she improved any skills, such as confidence. She responded:

> I'm not sure about that; I've noticed that, because I like the Sunday Assembly, I want to tell you yes.

Deborah was able to reflect on her bias towards the Sunday Assembly, but ultimately answered honestly that, for her, it had not improved any personal skills.

Of the 35 interviews conducted, I was able to garner a fair representation of the congregation. Some assembliers, including the older generation that physically attend, may not be active on Facebook and Twitter and may have missed the opportunity to participate in this research. However, my participant sample still consisted of 18 women and 17 men with a wide age range, from young adults to people in their 70s, and of various ethnicities, sexualities and social classes.

Of my sample interviewees, one interview was conducted over Facebook messenger with a participant who had emigrated, one via Skype video call with a participant from an American congregation, and another interview conducted over the telephone with someone from another congregation who had visited the London congregation. All of them either used to regularly attend the London congregation, or had attended on occasion. Two participants chose to do the interview together. The remaining 30 were all conducted face to face.

The interviewees tended to be very well-educated, having achieved degrees and post-graduate qualifications. Participants may have been inclined to help with my research because they had experience of conducting research themselves. In general, the overwhelming majority of the people I met at the Sunday Assembly were white and appeared to be middle class.

Each of the in-depth one-to-one interviews was designed to last approximately one hour. However, there were some variations, with some lasting 105 minutes and some lasting for 40 minutes. While visiting Conway Hall as a site of research, I carefully earmarked multiple locations that I felt would be suitable for an interview; places that gave the participant enough privacy and in which the levels of noise were suitably low to facilitate recording. This was convenient for interviews conducted before the Sunday Assembly and afterwards. However, for interviews conducted

during the working week, on evenings and weekends, I would allow the participant to choose somewhere suitable. This meant my research took me all across London to visit private member clubs, historic pubs, Italian and Jamaican restaurants, and dozens of coffee shops. I was also warmly welcomed into people's homes.

I conducted all interviews with the full knowledge and permission of my participants. Before the interviews, participants were sent a project information sheet via email and a consent form that we would sign on the day, or informed consent via a telephone conversation. All the interviews were entirely transcribed and I have provided pseudonyms to protect identities.

Themes to Thesis

Each interview was transcribed fully and inputted into the software NVivo 11.0 to help me organise my research, and to code efficiently. I analysed the interviews using thematic analysis following the approach specified by Braun & Clarke. Braun & Clarke (2006, p.6) understand thematic analysis as a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data'. Thematic analysis was chosen over grounded theory/narrative analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) due to its ability to organise and richly describe the data, and primarily because it is not theoretically bounded. Also, thematic analysis allows for reporting of experiences, meanings and the reality of the participants. It can therefore 'both reflect reality, and to unpick or unravel the surface of "reality"' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.9). At the start of the chapter, I discussed how 'narratives lay silent and unheard' underneath big data, which is why I opted for an ethnographic study of the Sunday Assembly. Having said this, I also recognise the limitations in this approach and agree with Fine's (2002, p.218) scrutiny that 'giving a voice' approach 'involves carving out unacknowledged pieces of narrative evidence that we [the researchers] select, edit, and deploy to border our arguments'.

A thematic analysis as indicated by Braun & Clarke (2006, p.13) typically focuses on one level, is semantic, explicit or at a latent interpretative level. This research was approached semantically, where themes were identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, rather than to look *beyond* what a participant had said.

These themes were firstly organised into codes to assist in the identification of semantic patterns that were later used 'to theorise the significance of patterns and their broader meanings and implications' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.13).

This process initially started during the interview stage, where I made notes immediately after each interview. This was not a neutral process, and these initial notes were likely to be influenced by my own research interests, which had been rooted in existing interviews, conversations and ethnographic research. I began by transcribing the first 12 interviews and 'generating initial codes' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.18). This was a process of becoming familiar with the data. I read and reread the transcripts numerous times, which helped to contribute to the later interpretation of the data. Codes included: 'positive attributes of religion', 'openness to new experiences' and' 'scientific worldview'.

This stage was focused on searching for themes rather than letting themes emerge from the data. Referring to themes as emerging from the data implies a passive account of the process of analysing data, and it refutes the active role that I (as a researcher) employed when identifying patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.7). 'A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.10).

Using analytic software (NVivo) I was able to search for the frequency of key words — for example 'ritual' and 'happiness' — that appeared from initial reflections of the first 12 interviews. Following on from this, I coded the remaining interviews and developed themes such as 'searching for community'. These formed a meta-theme, 'community', which was later to become headings for my chapters (e.g., Chapter Eight: 'Help Often' — Sunday Assembly as a Secular Community). However, unexpected codes, which developed into themes, were discovered (such as searching for the Sunday Assembly) during periods in individuals' lives when they felt lost, lonely or in crisis; this theme develops in **Chapter Seven**.

I typed up my field notes on the train home after every Sunday Assembly. This involved transcribing recorded interactions with Assembliers, what I had observed

during a service, as well as reflecting on my own emotions and positionality. The process of writing up detailed notes allowed me to return to the previous events after my research had finished, which meant I was able to theorise over exchanges that I may have previously skimmed over. For example, while waiting in the queue for tea after one particular service, I overheard a woman who had been thoroughly enjoying the singing say: 'I like all this'. Then, gesturing with her hands and pointing to the hall, she added: 'I just don't like this' and she drew an invisible crucifix in the air. At the time of the observation, I recorded this interaction as I thought it was interesting, but only later when I returned to my field notes did this interaction become important to my understanding of the Sunday Assembly through a post-Christian lens and the rituals surrounding drinking tea.

Conclusion

The process of conducting research was a difficult but rewarding task. I have discussed why ethnography was the chosen methodology for this research and why Sunday Assembly London was selected as the research site. I detailed the steps taken throughout this research project, the sometimes-serendipitous nature of research, and how I gained, secured and maintained access to the Sunday Assembly through an exchange with Sanderson Jones (gatekeeper). I then detailed entering 'the field' and recruiting interviews both face to face and through 'digital snowballing'. I discussed the interviews more broadly before detailing how themes were created. What this chapter has not done is to fully account for the emotions and positionality of the researcher when conducting fieldwork. The following chapter will introduce these concepts and reflect on the impact of (my) emotions in research.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCHING THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY, PART II — EMOTIONS AND
POSITIONALITY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to lead directly on from my methodology to provide a
more personal account of the emotions faced while conducting ethnographic
research. Having gained access to the congregation, I detail the difficulties faced
maintaining informed consent, how rapport was built with members of the
congregation, and 'fitting in'. I then analyse professional dilemmas that occurred in
relation to carrying out ethnographic fieldwork before detailing my own
positionality as a researcher. This chapter is cardinal in detailing personal
experiences when conducting qualitative research that is largely overlooked in
methods' books. This was particularly pertinent when trying to gain access to the
Sunday Assembly; I echo Blackman's (2007, p.12) statement that 'British sociology
needs greater disciplinary understanding and recognition of the real challenges and
opportunities faced by qualitative research, which demands emotion'.

Emotions in Ethnographic Fieldwork

It was during the lead up to the initial phone conversation with Sanderson Jones
(mentioned in the section 'The Exchange' in the previous chapter) when my own
emotions came to the fore. At the very beginning of the study, I noted feelings of
anxiety attending the Sunday Assembly services as a researcher. Wincup (2001,
p.19) discusses the challenges faced when talking about emotion in research, as it is
'constructed in opposition to rationality and professionalism, and the importance of
emotions is denied…This affects the novice researcher by leaving him or her
unprepared for the level of emotional engagement that social research requires'.
Bergman Blix & Wettergren (2015) contend that emotion work is a requirement
when conducting ethnographic research; therefore, we (the researchers) may bring
our own emotions to the forefront of the research. They discuss the 'emotion work
of researchers in the process of gaining, securing, and maintaining access to the
field' and detail 'feelings of uncertainty' (2015, p.701). To illustrate this, my field

notes below illuminate the emotionality of conducting fieldwork, including both the anxiety and pressure of gaining access:

> *I knew this might be the only opportunity I had at gaining access to the Sunday Assembly. It may sound like I am over-dramatising the importance of this awaiting phone call. However, the future of my research and all the work I had prepared prior rested on this particular call in order to continue. The phone rang as I was still pacing the room, going over my research questions – I answered, and an exuberant high-spirited voice bellowed down the line, instantly setting the mood and opening with a joke. Sanderson made me aware of the research the Sunday Assembly was currently exploring. After explaining my research and what I was hoping to achieve, Sanderson mentioned the possibility of collaboration. Questions, which I sought answers for, were also questions the Sunday Assembly were already considering. The conversation came to a natural end after about 20 minutes, and just before thanking Sanderson for the opportunity to discuss my research with him, he suggested 'you could come down to the office tomorrow' and asked if I wanted to help with his existing research.*

Dickson-Swift et al. (2009, p.68) assert that researchers 'undertake a significant amount of emotion work in their daily research activities'. Consequently, this anecdote is important to the research as it refers to a 'human researcher attempting to make sense of, and cope with, the research experience' (Johnson, 2009, p.195). By recognising the anxiety, I felt it was 'an enabling aspect of the field experience rather than something that inhibits research' (Davies & Spencer, 2010, p.205). 'Emotion is not a 'thing' but an embodied stance within the world'(Riis and Woodhead, 2010, p.208) and my emotions opened up a window onto my research.

'Fitting In'

The term 'going native' is used in ethnographic research, both in sociology and anthropology, and refers to the dangers of becoming 'too involved in the community under study, thus losing objectivity and distance' (O'Reilly, 2009, p.9). During a sing-along at the 2015 'Day Called Wonder', I was told by an enthusiastic woman 'you look like you want to dance' as my noticeable lack of dancing (and just

swaying) became apparent. However, by not singing and dancing when prompted I ran the risk of not 'fitting in', and thus presenting myself as a visible outsider. While conducting my ethnographic research, the relationships I have built have generally developed from the people sat either side of me during the services. By not actively participating, it may have appeared that my motives for research were dubious and fostered doubts in the minds of those participating. This was also noticed during the Sunday Assembly conference in Utrecht; I was stood towards the back in what must have appeared to be deep reflection. A woman came past and said in good spirit 'you know when you stand at the back, it kind of looks like you're just watching us!' Therefore, I decided to participate in all of the activities to become 'the complete participant', and to blend into the group. As a result, my own positionality and my relationship to the field were under constant self-analysis.

A problem researchers face when conducting ethnographic research is negotiating identities and becoming too accustomed to the object of research. 'We go into the field and take on roles and identities as a way of *getting on* with the task in hand. These roles and identities are chosen or sometimes imposed can adapt and change, can be singular or multiple. Occasionally we risk "going native" and becoming over familiar' (Coffey 1999, p.24). I was becoming more recognised in the Sunday Assembly community and I was asked if I wanted to host a 'live better' group, which serves as a small peer-to-peer group. Though this would have provided invaluable data, I declined as it overstepped the boundaries. I believed it would have compromised my integrity as a researcher, and I would have played an active power role (Fetterman, 1998, p.134). However, in being asked, I felt a sense of belonging and became trusted by the group. Day (2017, p.158) experienced a similar sense of social belonging when asked to perform a collective duty and 'join the rota' while conducting ethnographic research on older laywomen in an Anglican church. Day (2017, p.158) explains that the significance was not in the act of giving time to the group, 'but in being asked', and because she had become trusted; Day clarifies that she was no longer 'wholly "other", but had shifted into being one of "them"'. Like Day's fieldwork, it was the process of being asked and becoming involved with the group that provided the best insight into the process of social belonging that an Assemblier may feel.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting research on the Sunday Assembly raised complex ethical issues. I was to learn that 'obtaining and maintaining informed consent is… complicated, and especially difficult, when securing permission to do research through an organizational gatekeeper' (Plankey-Videla, 2012, p.4). As previously mentioned in the section on consent, this was not due to difficulties with the gatekeeper but with having to negotiate consent during informal conversations, along with what did and did not constitute informed consent. Furthermore, Miller & Bell (2002, p.55) contend 'the differences between gaining access and consent are not always clear. Access to research participants is both a crucial aspect of the research process and one that is often dealt with as relatively unproblematic in research method textbooks'. Every conversation involved the nature of my visit and my research, hence 'in its basic form, the principle requires that subjects should be informed that research is taking place and be advised of its purpose and of the implications of participation' (Homan, 1992, p.321-322). More often than not, this did lead to an interesting conversation and an interview that sometimes materialised. However, I fully understand Duncombe & Jessop's (2002, p.115) experience of building rapport as they describe the feeling of becoming a salesperson. They elucidate that in order to do their jobs properly as researchers, they must deploy all the charm they can muster to get their selves 'through the door' to ask their questions. Often, I was wary of my feelings, as if I were selling something, selling the interview, selling the importance of the research, selling myself.

However, when I'd pose the usual questions, 'So is this your first time attending? What brings you here today?', very occasionally I was met with a cautioned stare or a (half-jokingly) implied 'I better watch what I say then'. I was conscious of Homan's (1992, p.326) reflection that 'consent is often a transient stage in the conduct of research and in that moment subjects are made aware of the identity of the researcher'. The dynamics of the conversation may alter. Only once, while talking to a woman in her early 20s about a potential interview, was I met with 'Perhaps another time', even though I had made it clear the interview would not be on that same day. I then proceeded to sit next to her for the remaining assembly, which was a very uncomfortable situation. Searching afterwards for reasoning, did I

say something wrong? Was my 'sales pitch' strong enough? Did I employ enough charm? I came to the conclusion that not everyone you meet may want to be interviewed, but I was conscious of my embodiment as a young male researcher. Despite this 'rejection', the general reaction to me conducting research on the Sunday Assembly was incredibly positive and, naturally, people wanted to know more. A limitation of being immersed in fieldwork is the various reactions you receive when you tell people about the true intentions of your visit.

I can relate to Plankey-Videla's (2012, p.19) experience of the problems of researching an organisation. She states: 'while deception is inevitably part of ethnography as researchers ingratiate themselves with subjects to secure access or build rapport, participant observation within organisations requires researchers to navigate power dynamics while simultaneously studying up and down'. At the beginning of the research I would often write down notes, but due to the charismatic dynamic nature of each Sunday Assembly service, I ran the risk of sticking out too much in the crowd.

Day (2017, p.116) found within only three weeks of fieldwork that she was able to identify who was a stranger, as opposed to who was a church-family member. Day's task was easier than attending the Sunday Assembly, primarily because members of the church that Day was observing sat in the same place each time and the core group (30 people) was much less than the average Assembly crowd (400), approximately half of which attended regularly. However, it was around 9-12 months into my ethnography that I was able to recognise the same faces and equally feel that I had become part of the community. What I was able to observe, like Day (2017, p.117), was the anxiety and discomfort of newcomers in comparison to those who attend regularly. In Day's research, strangers would leave, whereas I was able to watch those who were not privy to the 'liturgical orders' (Rappaport, 1999, p.35) of the Sunday Assembly (i.e. yelling back to Sanderson 'two songs' when he asked exuberantly 'what's better than one song') and observe the realisation on newcomers' faces that, during the Assembly, they would have to sing and dance. Day (2017, p.117) discusses a sense of relief as she sat and observed; she remarks that she knew she could rest, the setting was familiar, she was accepted, knew the liturgy, knew the order and 'no thought or planning is required'. I was not afforded

the same luxuries, even though the order had become familiar and I knew the liturgies. The majority of the people changed each time and my presence as a researcher was not made aware until I began conversing with my neighbours. Unlike Day, I did not have the same confidence of acceptance.

Towards the end of my research, when my presence as a researcher became well known, I began to attend several interest groups. During each group (article club, wonder club and theatre and dance club), I would make my intentions as a researcher clear when speaking to my neighbour and often this would materialise in a conversation with the group as a whole. However, I was not always able to stand at the beginning and announce my true intentions. Therefore, I came to the realisation that consent does not end upon being permitted access by gatekeepers; rather, consent is a 'fluid process that must adapt' (Plankey-Videla, 2012, p.3).

Another interesting point was the shift to digital data collection, which raised new ethical considerations. Fox, Morris & Rumsey (2007, p.539) contend that 'researchers who use novel methodological approaches should be prepared to engage in a process of reflection and reflexivity to make transparent the experience and demonstrate the viability of the method'. Hooley, Wellens & Marriott (2012, p.66) maintain that recruiting online will impact the sample, and the researcher needs to be wary of recruitment bias, as this will offer a skewed reality. However, the advantageous nature is the speed of recruitment and not needing to rely on 'traditional gatekeepers' (Hooley et al., 2012, p.66).

It became increasingly obvious that I could garner more interest through the use of Twitter, Facebook, blogs and weekly Sunday Assembly emails than through face-to-face interaction. Participants were more willing to meet for a 'blind date interview', and online exchanges were often signed off with, 'I'll be wearing a red hat' or carrying a 'blue handbag', which was fascinating, not quite knowing who you would be meeting and what had led them to the Sunday Assembly.

As mentioned, rapport was built up online via emails and through text messages rather than face to face meets, but while these 'stranger' encounters now have a sense of normality they still rely upon one's online credibility. Often, participants

would say: 'Oh, I knew what you looked like already, I wanted to check you were a real person'. They explained that they had searched for my academic profile online and this would validate my involvement with the Sunday Assembly and provide legitimacy as a researcher.

During the interviews, participants would share sensitive information about their core worldviews, for this reason it was important they retain anonymity. In the UK, religion is not as vibrant or pervasive as it is in other countries, for example in Bangladesh where blogging about unbelief and secularist views has resulted in 48 targeted killings since 2013. Being an atheist in such countries (including the US) can be considered controversial, deviant and leaving your religious faith can be more intense for the individual (Zuckerman 2012, p.171). Depending on the demographics, atheism is either considered the norm or the deviant alternative. Within the UK, a loss of faith does not carry the same stigma as it does in the US, and future research studying the Sunday Assembly outside of London would require more though into the ethical implications.

Professional Dilemmas

Often in research, professional dilemmas are not accounted for. For example, Blackman's (1998) fieldwork on young homeless families presented a number of difficult circumstances, including when he was attacked. Therefore, Blackman (2007, p.699-700) recognises that 'rarely in sociology is the emotional contact between observer and participants made explicit… This hesitancy stems from the fear of losing legitimacy or being discredited'. Blackman (2007, p.710) refers to this as the 'hidden ethnography' — the crossing of borders that need to be accounted for, which is usually left out from academic research. Nevertheless, I will try to account for this 'hidden ethnography' that transpires in *doing* research that may lead to unforeseen ethical concerns. On multiple occasions, the interview would be conducted in a pub or restaurant conveniently located for the participant. I would offer to buy the first drink and, more often than not, the participant would choose an alcoholic beverage. In response, I felt it would set them at ease and encourage a more comfortable tone if I did likewise. How would they feel about me if I was drinking a coffee and they were ordering a cocktail?

It is important to note that not at any point during an interview was I intoxicated, and neither were my participants. On a few occasions, however, when interviews were completed, participants would ask if I wanted to stay for another drink. In helping me with my research, I felt obliged, but also more often than not I wanted to stay, sensing a closer engagement. Likewise, after the 'Day Called Wonder' in 2015, Sunday Assembly members and myself (still conducting ethnographic research) gathered in a pub situated in an affluent area of inner London, where a prebooked mariachi band played and several drinks were consumed. At this particular event, I felt I had no choice but to become involved in the celebration, as failure to participate may have been seen as an indicator of my 'otherness', undermining my credibility and subsequently isolating me from the group (Bryman, 2012, p.446). To be clear, drinking excessively does not play a big role in the Sunday Assembly, or in my research of the Assembly. The necessary involvement also extends to the Sunday Assembly's multiple 'song, dance or flute break', where sitting at the back with a notepad and not being involved would not work. However, I agree with Palmer's (2016, p.427) statement 'that some fieldwork situations necessitate ethnographers engaging in the behaviours he or she is interested in knowing more about, even if this blurs some of the boundaries and roles of researcher and participant'. Earlier, I mentioned my experience of being told that I looked like I wanted to dance, when in reality, on that particular morning, I really did not because I felt awkward. Thus my own feelings could provide clues as to the feelings of others and enabled me to relate to experiences discussed during the interviews.

During the course of my research, I kept in contact with one interviewee for some time, and on several occasions, we would meet for a coffee and a catch up before the Sunday Assembly services. The inclination for friendship arising as a result of regular contact between the researcher and participant questions the power relations of social research; likewise, rapport building that is insincere or 'faking friendships' has provoked debate in boundaries of research (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). This led me to question the legitimacy of 'research friendship and friendship' (Cotterill, 1992, p.599). I was increasingly aware of my position as a researcher — 'One indicator of friendship is having someone to confide in and knowing that person will listen sympathetically to what you have to say. Another indication is reciprocity, in that confiding and listening are usually shared activities between close friends…

[But] close friends do not usually arrive with a tape-recorder, listen carefully and sympathetically to what you have to say and then disappear (Cotterill, 1992, p.599)'. Therefore, 'all ethnography is, at one level, exploitation' (Stringer, 2011, p.28).

Consequently, the people I met and interviewed at the Sunday Assembly allowed me into their lives, sharing their personal, sensitive and intimate narratives with me. Perhaps 'it is precisely because the interviewer is a "friendly stranger" who the interviewee does not know and will not see again that they are able to open up about difficult or even taboo subjects' (Lyons & Chipperfield, 2000, p.4). Kleinman argues (1991, p.185-191) that 'emotions express values'. In my research, I was conscious of my feelings throughout and how they related to the phenomenon of study. After several months of participation, those with whom I had developed a good rapport started greeting me with a hug, which made me feel even more welcome to the community. At this point, I had been attending for approximately a year and I was beginning to understand the struggles of some interviewees, who told me how they found it difficult to find community and belonging initially (see **Chapters Eight** and **Ten**). This balance was difficult to maintain throughout — having meaningful conversations with people but also having to constantly analyse and declare myself as a researcher. Nevertheless, boundaries have to be negotiated and renegotiated with participants, as is the dilemma with immersive fieldwork; it can be a battle to maintain an 'objective' research position.

There were times when I sympathised with Skinner et al'.s (2005, p.16) experience: 'we suffered emotional pain, fear, anger and being overwhelmed, and at some points find ourselves in tears'. Certainly, I had the feeling of being overwhelmed, angered and taken aback by participants' narratives, when emotionally sensitive topics would arise, including the breakdown of marriages or negative family reactions to being an atheist, or issues with sexuality. I would often leave feeling emotionally drained, whereas the participant sometimes remarked on the therapeutic nature of the interview.

Gallmeier (1991, p.231) argues 'the process of disengaging from field settings is just as important as the process of gaining entry'. Towards the end of my fieldwork I had built up a genuine rapport with several members of the congregation, but I decided

my final field task would consist of attending the annual Sunday Assembly Conference (2016), held in Utrecht. As the Sunday Assembly presents itself as somewhat vicarious, 'dipping in and out' is common practice for many of its congregation. Therefore, I was not presented with the problem of having to disengage from the field. I have fond memories of my fieldwork and the people I met. Yet the relationships I built with participants and members of the congregation have since dissolved, as I have not returned to the congregation in a personal capacity.

Positionality

Orsi (1997, p.18) contends that the study of lived religion (or nonreligion in my case) risks the exposure of the researcher. He goes on to state that because the researcher's 'most deeply held existential orientations and moral values are on display with an obviousness not found in earlier ethnographic work... we can no longer constitute the objects of our study as other'. Stringer (2009, p.26) acknowledges that, as long as we know that the ethnographer 'comes with certain assumptions and presuppositions', then we can accept that the research is a partial interpretation valid on its own terms, 'rather than a fully objective account of "truth"'.

I approached my research on the Sunday Assembly as someone who is nonreligious and reflected upon how this marked my embodiment as a researcher. Lofland & Lofland (1984) maintain that it is fine to choose an area of study that is 'close to home' — something that interests us personally. I once heard that objectivity is a myth but fairness is a must, and lacklustre my research would be if I had no academic interest in the topic. I had no involvement with the Sunday Assembly before starting my research. When conversing with people during the service and interviews, I would try to withhold any information about myself until the interview had taken place to remain neutral. However, if asked, I would respond that I was nonreligious. As a result, I believe this may have encouraged the participants to speak more freely as opposed to if I had identified as religious while conducting the interviews.

Additionally, I was sometimes asked: 'What kind of church did you go to?' during interviews. I would respond: 'I've never been', which, on occasion, would produce a slightly shocked position, as it was assumed I had followed a general Sunday Assembly path of leaving a religious (usually Christian) background and seeking alternative secular forms of community. Although, I am nonreligious and consequently, this positioned me as an 'insider' rather than an 'outsider' when conducting research. My goal, however, was not to become an 'insider' while conducting research, but attempt to see the world from an insider's perspective (Ramsay, 1996, p.134).

Hornsby Smith (2002, p.139-140) recognises that being an outsider studying a social phenomenon allows a critical distance and detachment from the group of study. It provides the ability not to presume or prejudice. However, the insider has a distinct edge when it comes to explaining the social phenomenon under study and what it means.

Crowhurst et al. (2013, p.7) understand positionality as a biography of the researcher, whereby aspects of their social identities and life experiences 'frame social and professional relationships in the field'. They (2013, p.9) acknowledge that positionality informs how the participants decide to tell the story of their lives. Consequently, in my positionality, I adopted what Hamilton (2001, p.5) refers to as a 'methodological agnosticism', originally used by Max Weber, whereby religious, spiritual or secular belief is not empirically examined. Thus my own beliefs and values were laid to one side when examining the beliefs of others.

Due to the nature of my study and ethnographic research, my decidedly sociological position was that of studying secular phenomena 'from the inside'. However, I have attempted to considerably and consciously be as rigorous as possible in my research. This produces a level of reflexivity, where I attempt to make explicit my personal beliefs and biases that I have been careful not to overtly manifest to influence my research, or how the data has been analysed. Bourke (2014, p.1-2) argues, 'reflexivity involves a self-scrutiny on the part of the researcher; a self-conscious awareness of the relationship between the researcher and an "other"'.

I will now detail my own positionality within this research to better understand how participants positioned me.

I am a member of the Humanists UK. I identify as being nonreligious, or more explicitly as an atheist in terms of the definition I am using for this research, detailed in **Chapter One**. I had no contact with the Sunday Assembly before starting my research, though I have positioned myself towards an 'insider' as my own values and beliefs often chime with that of the collective congregation. I am not an 'insider' in the sense that I am researching a group to which I already belong. Regarding my beliefs, I am not Christened and I am a secularist. I attended a Church of England primary school and through my teenage years scrutinised the existence of God. My immediate family have never regularly attended church in their adult lives and I have never had a deconversion from a religious faith to nonreligion. My mother and father are probably best described using a Dutch term — ietsism — that is, an unspecified belief in an undetermined transcendental force of some kind, often summed up with the statement: 'I believe in something'; but they are not spiritual and I was never made to attend church.

During one interview with Benjamin (refer to *Table 5.1*, **Chapter Five**) we were discussing the demographics of the Sunday Assembly and he remarked:

> The way they're dressed, the way they speak… Someone once described Sunday Assembly as a bunch of Waitrose customers. They're people like you; you're middle class, aren't you?

I was amused by this statement, as the position of power had shifted; now, I was the one to start answering questions. I responded:

> No, far from it, very working.

The participant shut down my objection to his statement and replied:

> In origin, you're middle class now.

I'm not sure I would agree with the participant; however, I must accept this is how they viewed me, and perhaps class was implied through education. As a result, I am

sure my own positionality helped secure access and interviews. Bergman Blix & Wettergern (2015) contend that, in order to build trust while doing fieldwork, the researcher is required to integrate and blend in with the field, adapting to dress codes that will help to establish sameness and common reference points. On reflection, I already look like someone who may attend the Sunday Assembly due to my appearance and the way I dress. For the best part of my research I sported a very large beard with twiddled moustache — not an uncommon sight for the 'hipster' Sunday Assembly group (see *Figure 4.1*). My beard also mimicked (not consciously) that of the co-founder Sanderson Jones.

Figure 4.1
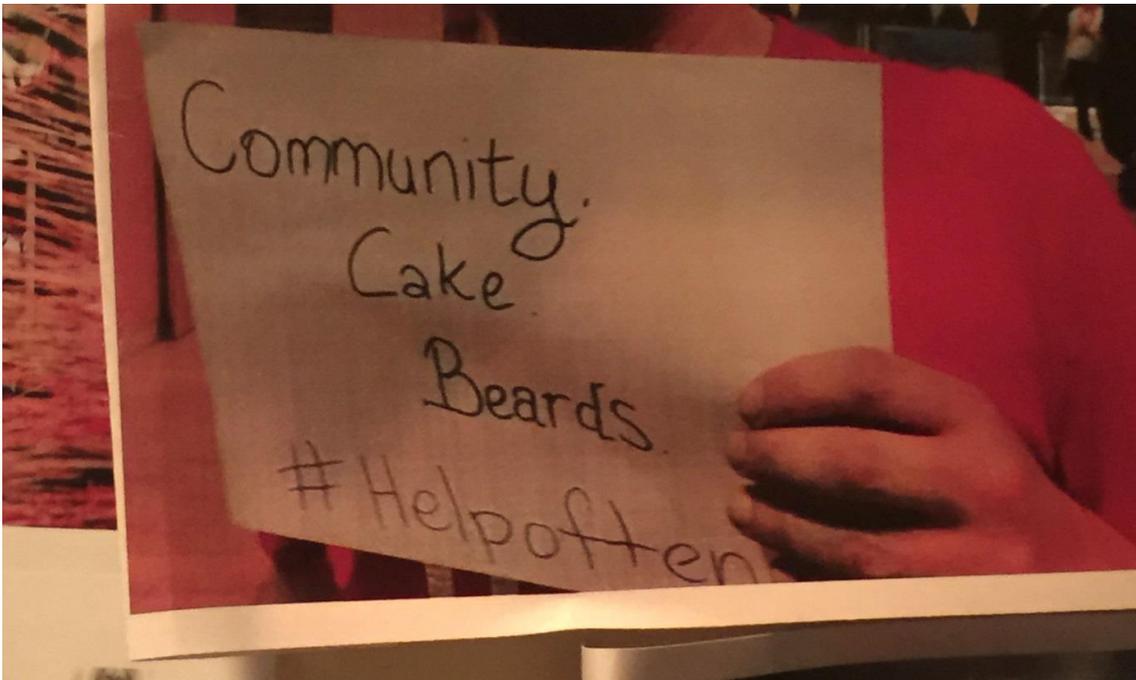
My ethnicity is white British, which tends to be the norm in the current Sunday Assembly. One of my participants, Rachel (refer to *Table 5.1*, **Chapter Five**), who is ethnically South East Asian, noticed:

> So, I went the first time and my first thought was 'Wow. There's a lot of white people here'. I really like the Sunday Assembly, but it's not super diverse.

This is particularly pertinent to Dyer's (1988, p.3) research on the 'invisibility of whiteness' to white subjects (see **Chapter Five** for further discussion on whiteness and lack of diversity). In my research, whiteness appears to be normalised and may go unnoticed at the Sunday Assembly. As a researcher, I am also actively engaged in doing 'race' (Best, 2003, p.896), and I acknowledge how my own whiteness functions as a cultural and social privilege that may have helped in gaining access. McIntosh (1988, p.95) contends that 'white privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank check (sic)'. Thus, just as 'whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege… males are taught not to recognize male privilege' (McIntosh, 1988, p.94). While acknowledging both of these privileges, I would like to think that my whiteness and gender were not defining factors in this research and, like Strhan (2015, p.15), my cultural capital identity (of being an academic researcher) may have been a more significant aspect. It is also important to recognise that my age and education paralleled that of the Sunday Assembly London congregation, where many are in their mid-to-late 20s and hold a degree.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has aimed to bring in the emotion and positionality of the researcher when conducting ethnographic fieldwork. It has demonstrated that emotions are to be understood reflexively as part of doing research and advocates the inclusion of emotion in future sociological work. It indicates the problems faced as a researcher when dealing with informed consent on multiple layers (institutional, congregational and individual). Furthermore, it details my own positionality as a researcher and how this unavoidably impacts upon this thesis. The following chapter discusses the demographics of the Sunday Assembly London and introduces the participants of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY AND THE
PARTICIPANTS

'The Sunday Assembly suits who it suits' – Joanna

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the demographics of the Sunday Assembly London. Thirty-five participants were interviewed to understand their rationale for attending and to answer the research questions of this study. I offer a Weberian 'ideal type' attendee of the Sunday Assembly in the imagined form of 'Jane', who represents typical characteristics and demographics of a Sunday Assembly London participant. I discuss the rationale underpinning Jane's profile, including her ethnicity ('whiteness'), gender (why 'Jane' and not 'James'), her religious beliefs (previous and current, if any) and social class. Additionally, I address the Sunday Assembly's notion of 'radical inclusivity', offering explanations for its lack of diversity despite being non-discriminating, open and free to all. Consequently, I show that the Sunday Assembly London participants share more collective similarities than differences, reinforced by an ethnographic visit to the Sunday Assembly Brighton. This chapter should also be used as a reference point to view the participants (*Table 5.1*), all of whom are referred to throughout the rest of this research.

Who are the Participants?

Table 5.1 details the 35 participants who took part in the study as interviewees. Their names have been changed for anonymity. It includes their basic demographics such as age, gender, previous religious belief (if any) and their current religious belief (if any). The table shows if the participants identify with the term 'spirituality' (discussed in **Chapter Seven**), their self-identified ethnicity and occupation. *Table 5.2* then summarises their highest academic qualification and relationship status, as well as condensing basic demographic information. Further details regarding the interview process, interview questions and how the participants were sampled can be found in **Chapter Three** and the appendices.

Table 5.1 Summary of Participants Including Previous Beliefs, Current Beliefs and Spirituality

Participants	Age	Gender	Previous Religious Belief	Current (non)religious belief	Spiritual	Ethnicity	Occupation
Adam	39	Male	Atheist, mother was an English Catholic	Weak atheist/humanist	No	White British	Civil servant
Martha	64	Female	Methodist Christian	Nonreligious	No	White British	Retired
Benjamin	72	Male	Catholic	Militant atheist/secularist/humanist	No	White British	Retired
Gabriel	26	Male	Protestant	Atheist	No	White	Researcher
Abigail	26	Female	Sunday school, religious grandparents, parents are nonreligious	Nonreligious/weak atheist	No	White British	Public relations
Zachary	31	Male	Evangelical low Anglican	Atheist/humanist	No	White British	Capacity planner
Elisabeth	40	Female	Nonreligious	Atheist	No	White European	Media manager
Miriam	27	Female	Nonreligious	Weak atheist	No	British/Australian White	Charity worker
Eve	34	Female	Nonreligious	Atheist	Yes	White British	Musician

Ty	22	Male	Anglican	Humanist	No	White British	Student
Jonah	42	Male	Christian	Nonreligious/agnostic	No	White British	Musician
Jacob	40	Male	Judaism	Humanist	No	White British	Editor
Phoebe	58	Female	Methodist Christian	Nonreligious	Yes	White Australian	Teacher
Nathanael	33	Male	Christian	Nonreligious	Yes	White American	Librarian
Andrew	28	Male	Christian	Humanist	No	White British	Consultant
Jude	58	Male	Roman Catholic	Nonreligious	No	White British	Oil industry
Susan	28	Female	Christian	Agnostic/ietsism	No	White British	Teacher
Ruth	39	Female	Nonreligious	Militant atheist	No	White other	Civil servant
Ava	27	Female	Christian, Sunday school	Nonreligious	Yes/self-reflection	White British	Community manager
Leah	50	Female	Nonreligious	Nonreligious	No	White British	Teacher

Name	Age	Gender	Religious background	Current belief		Ethnicity	Occupation
Sarah	59	Female	Secular Jewish, brief exposure to Unitarianism	Nonreligious/ietsism	No	White American	Scientist
Deborah	26	Female	Christian church as a teenager; immediate family nonreligious but extended family are Christians/Jewish	Atheist	No	White British	PhD candidate
Kevin	41	Male	Evangelical Christian	Atheist/rationalist	No	White other	Software product manager
Abel	26	Male	Anglican	Atheist/humanist	No	White British	Entrepreneur
Rachel	27	Female	Jainism	Nonreligious agnostic	Yes	South East Asian	Technical product manager
Peter	56	Male	Catholic/evangelical Christian	Atheist/rationalist	Yes	White British	Management consultant
Philip	52	Male	Christian/new religious movement (NRM)	Humanist	No	White British	Web developer
Hannah	31	Female	Nonreligious but religious parents and grandparents	Agnostic	No	Egyptian/Russian, born in Canada	Student

Grace	34	Female	Catholic	Agnostic	Yes	Black African	NHS
Simon	61	Male	Sunday school but nonreligious; became a Muslim for a year while living in an Islamic country	Atheist	No	White British	Retired
Samuel	27	Male	Nonreligious, attended church for a short period	Nonreligious, atheist	Yes	White British	Policy
Esther	24	Female	Protestant	Atheist	No	White European	Research executive
Mary	33	Female	Religious schooling but nonreligious background	Nonreligious	No	White	Producer
Thomas	31	Male	Catholic	Agnostic (in a 'Dawkins' sense)	No	White British	Public health adviser
Joanna	73	Female	Baptist	Nonreligious	No	White British	Retired

Table 5.2 Summary of Demographics of Participants

Demographic	Range
Age	Range: 22-72 Median: 34 Average: 39
Gender	Female: 18 Male: 17
Ethnicity	White British: 24 White Other: 8 Black African: 1 SE Asian: 1 Russian/Egyptian: 1
Education	Postgraduate: 17 Degree level: 14 Other: 4
Relationship	Single: 21 Partnership: 7 Married: 6 Widowed: 1
Social class	Middle: 19 Upper middle: 5 Lower middle: 5 Working: 4 Working middle: 1

Often, tables of participants and datasets are created to illustrate the diversity of individuals. However, *Tables 5.1* and *5.2* demonstrate the similarities found within the participants. Although each participant has their own unique story, the tables highlight that the sample is more homogeneous than different. While the sample was acquired by 'snowballing' and may not be representative of the whole Sunday Assembly London, my observation of the main meetings revealed a lack of diversity.

Briefly detailing participants' current and previous religious beliefs (or lack of) highlights how many of them followed a similar trajectory and transition into post-Christianity by leaving a religious Christian faith and now identify as primarily nonreligious and/or atheist/humanist/agnostic. Some participants identified with more than one term, others with all of the above; they could be nonreligious, atheistic regarding God(s), agnostic about the universe or humanistic in their values. The majority of interviewees (75%) had grown up with varying degrees of Christianity in their background, whether it was just attending Sunday school as a child, or being a member of an evangelical new religious movement when older. The remaining 25% who grew up nonreligious were seeking a secular community and saw the value of community in religion. This was evident in Eve's interview. Eve grew up nonreligious but is now an atheist. She remarked that she could see the benefits and functionality of a church and religion when raising children, as it 'gives them a sense of something bigger than themselves', but now she associates that feeling as being 'connected to society or community'.

The majority of my participants are ethnically white and do not reflect the diversity of Greater London, for which I will offer an explanation in this chapter. When asked what social class they were, participants were not given a list of options to choose from; I was interested in how they would self-identify without prompts. From the table, the majority self-selected a middle-class orientation (with some variants on upper/lower). Again, the majority of the participants were single. There may be an element of attending the Sunday Assembly to find like-minded partners. This was evident in Nathanael's interview when he expressed the difficulty of finding a partner when you are over 30. He felt that people who attend church have an easier time meeting (like-minded) people and falling into permanent relationships. Regarding education, the sample of the Sunday Assembly participants interviewed mainly hold undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications.

Generation Y

In this research, the age range represents predominantly Generation Y. Generation Y (otherwise known as Millennials) are those born roughly between 1980 and the mid-1990s aged 20 to 35 years old at the time of this study. From my interviews, the

median age of participants was 34 and the average age was 39. This illustrates that the Sunday Assembly is not a student movement; it attracts mainly people in their 30s as opposed to teenagers. Collins-Mayo et al. (2010, p.ix) sums up some of the key social, political and economic events experienced by Generation Y, several of which outlined below 'come to shape its [Generation Y] collective approach to public and private life in adulthood':

- 1989 — The collapse of communism with the destruction of the Berlin Wall
- 2001 — New York terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on 11th September
- 2004 — Indian Ocean tsunami
- 2005 — London bombings
- 2007-2009 — UK recession
- 2009 — The inauguration of President Barack Obama

Other key experiences of this particular generation include:

- Mid-90s — The impact of the internet and new technologies
- 1998 — Google
- 2003 onwards — The rise of social media
- 2001-2014 — Afghanistan War
- 2003-2011 — Iraq War
- 2016 — 'Brexit'
- 2017 — The inauguration of President Donald Trump

Living in the 'digital age' of constant (and instant) connections, with knowledge at the click of a mouse, Premuzic (2014) describes Generation Y as hyper-connected, 'more individualistic, rebellious and more independent than past generations, except for their desire to fit in'. Also, 'one thing is clear: Generation Y growing up in Britain has had less contact with the Church than any previous generation in living memory' (Collins-Mayo et al. 2010, p.x). Given the experiences of Generation Y, what does the typical Sunday Assemblier look like?

'Jane'— the Ideal Type

In this section, I paint a picture of the typical London Sunday Assemblier by applying the demographics collected in my research to an imagined character named Jane. The information about this character has been collated through ethnographic visits to the Sunday Assembly, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews and, lastly, asking participants about how they viewed the demographics of the congregation. It is important to emphasise that Jane is fictional and does not represent the entire congregation. The purpose of this is to view Jane as an 'ideal type'. Shils & Finch (1949, p.90) translate the works of Max Weber, who defined an ideal type as formed:

> by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged to those one sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct.

Weber (1949, p.90) summarised an ideal type as 'no "hypothesis", but it offers guidance to the construction of the hypothesis. It is not a description of reality, but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description'.

Jane is white and comes from a middle-class background. She grew up attending church, in particular, an evangelical Christian church. Jane's family were involved to some degree in the church community. She had a family member who was a vicar, and her immediate family volunteered to varying degrees within the church. Jane grew up in a small town where everyone knew each other. The church Jane attended was upbeat, friendly and she enjoyed the social aspects that it offered. Jane fondly remembers Sunday school and the friends she had from her congregation. In her teenage years, she decided that she no longer believed in God. She increasingly found it difficult to believe; there was no definitive moment of 'apostasy'. Jane's doubts were confirmed when she moved away to study at university. She now identifies as being nonreligious. If she had to tick a box on a survey, she would choose 'atheist'. Jane has humanistic values and is agnostic about the universe. These values include: equality, kindness, family, friendship and treating others as you wish to be treated. Jane now works as a freelancer in the creative industries.

Also, she is more extroverted than introverted. Jane would describe herself as being rational, liberal and sceptical regarding religious ideologies. Jane does not like the term 'spiritual'; this is a term that she does not fully understand. However, she is reflective and likes to practice mindfulness. If she were to read a newspaper, she would always choose *The Guardian*. Jane moved to a gentrified area of North London after university and found the city to be quite lonely. She could not attend her local church, as this would be hypocritical to her own beliefs. Instead, Jane attended talks by the Humanists UK and, although she enjoyed them, she was searching for a sense of community that these meetings did not offer. Jane recently celebrated her 34th birthday. She is single. One day, on the way back from shopping at Waitrose[11], Jane saw an article in *Time Out*. The article detailed a new 'atheist church' in London that replicates a church community but without God or any religion. 'A secular community', Jane contemplated, having previously thought how this would be a good idea. Jane searched for this community on Facebook and Twitter; open to new experiences, she decided to attend.

Who is Jane?

Before detailing the demographics of the participants, I will discuss the demographics of the Sunday Assembly more broadly and allude to how Jane's 'ideal type' profile was created. Firstly, the ideal type gender selected was female, because the congregation in London is approximately 60% female, 40% male — based on estimations and headcounts while conducting research at Conway Hall.

Sociological research (Beit-Hallahmi 2007, Trzebiatowska & Bruce 2012, Mahlamäki, 2012) consistently shows women to be more religious than men, more likely to pray, more likely to worship, and more likely to claim that their faith is more important to them. Mahlamäki (2012, p.61) argues that men are less likely to participate in religious events, although they do 'wish, almost as often as women to maintain religious practices in moments of life transitions, such as birth, marriage and death'. Ultimately, rituals also 'occupy an important place in the lives of men'. More men are nonreligious, but more women attend organised nonreligious groups (Sunday Assembly) than men. This has been consistent throughout all my

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[11] Waitrose is a high-end British supermarket.

ethnographic research visits to five congregations. Perhaps it is the case that women are more inclined to become collective in their expression of (un)-belief. Furthermore, Madge and Hemming (2017, p.883) found in their survey of young people, 'the majority were quite or very similar to their mothers in religious views, whether they identified themselves as religious or nonreligious'. Whereas, for the participants in this study, the majority spoke of how their mother was to some degree still religious but their father was not and thus 'Jane' is more likely to follow her father's nonreligious beliefs.

Jane is part of Generation Y, those who are rapidly leaving the Church of England. Jane's age (34 years old) was specifically chosen. Although my sample of interviewees cannot claim to be representative of the whole congregation, this was the median age. During one interview, Peter (one of the participants) refers to Generation Y when he discusses a particular generation of people attending the Sunday Assembly:

> There are aspects of it that I don't like. I think partly it's an age thing, if I'm honest. I'm in my mid-50s. There's hardly anybody there of that age or older. It's dominated by mid-20s to mid-30s, and that's fine, you know. It's great. I love seeing young people there who are interested in thinking about life deeply. I think that's fantastic, but it does bring with it a certain style, and it does sometimes remind me, I'm afraid, of a charismatic church meeting. The sort of clapping together to begin with, this often happens. The dance breaks.

In the following section, I discuss and analyse Jane's social class and then subsequently her ethnicity. I present an explanation for why the Sunday Assembly is 'radically inclusive,' yet why it attracts a homogeneous population.

'A Middle-Class Thing to Do'

Social class was a common theme that arose during the interviews. The Sunday Assembly has an image of being a middle-class congregation/community. This image is socially constructed through the types of newspaper that members joke about reading (*The Guardian*) and the types of festivals they visit collectively — for example, Wilderness. Wilderness was described by Ava as 'the most middle-class

festival, it's so nice. I had, like, poached eggs for breakfast with avocado and toast one morning. It's so lovely; cappuccino and that kind of shit'.

Additionally, middle-class connotations arise from members' levels of education, jobs and the types of small groups they create, i.e. creativity club, yoga and mindfulness, theatre, dance club, knitting and sewing. Sunday Assembly members have only created these clubs because there is demand for them.

Research into social class and religion is explored in depth in an edited volume by McCloud & Mirola (2009). They examine class in American society, ultimately arguing for its importance in academic research. They contend that, within congregations, class asserts itself: 'congregations like neighbourhoods tend to attract and hold economically similar members' (McCloud & Mirola, 2009, p.1). I believe this point to have equal standing when discussing secular/nonreligious congregations.

During interviews, it was discussed that, even though the Sunday Assembly acts apolitically, the congregation is politically liberal. Abigail told me that you wouldn't see any 'raging Tory's there'. She explained that she views the demographic profile of the Sunday Assembly as educated, 'like your *Guardian* readers'. The Sunday Assembly individuals (not the organisation that refrains from mentioning politics) lean towards the left side of politics. This is reinforced through anti-Trident[12] marches in the UK, anti-Trump marches and LGBT marches that are organised by the individuals. Woodhead (2016, p.251) finds that, in Britain, 'nones' 'spread out across the political spectrum from moderate left wing to moderate right wing in much the same way as the British population as a whole'. Yet, from informal conversations during my fieldwork, the Sunday Assembly is definitely left leaning.

There's a running joke at the Sunday Assembly London that its members are depicted as *Guardian*-reading, Waitrose-shopping hipsters. However, beneath this joke lies a particular truth. *The Guardian* (2010) recognises its demographic to be affluent, young, urban consumers who are open to new experiences. This

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[12] Trident is Britain's nuclear weapons deterrent.

demographic generally has a relatively high disposable income and can shop at more expensive supermarkets, representing an educated middle class. Rachel told me that the Sunday Assembly demographic is 'people who shop at Waitrose'. This profile was reinforced when Rachel revealed she had seen people after a Sunday Assembly shop in the Waitrose nearby.

'Radical inclusivity' was a recurring theme in the Sunday Assembly's rhetoric and was raised as a key point in Rachel's interview. This is a term the Sunday Assembly uses to describe itself, and she expressed that:

> Maybe they think they are radically inclusive. I mean, they don't turn anyone away, right? But I think there is a difference in being inclusive and actively seeking other people to join the community. I know they have been written about in Time Out, but that is still targeting a certain demographic. Like on the website, all the people are like white middle class, generally hipster-looking and I think that must deter people. I was a little bit apprehensive.

Many participants referred to the Sunday Assembly as 'we', but for Rachel it was 'they', which indicated she did not feel a sense of belonging. When I discussed if the Assembly could work in the town where Rachel grew up (a mid-sized town in North-Eastern America), she told me she did not think it could. However, (within Greater London itself):

> I think it would be where there's a Waitrose, there could be a Sunday Assembly. I could picture Sunday Assembly in Clapham; I can't picture it in Brixton.

Despite the part-gentrification of Brixton, for Rachel, the Sunday Assembly could be imagined in more affluent areas. Therefore, we talked about the nature of where an Assembly could be set up. For Rachel, she thought the area had to be predominantly white, middle to upper class, full of residents with a high disposable income and who could afford childcare. As another participant, Grace, said in her interview, middle-class people 'do stuff'. When we discussed this further, Grace inferred that middle-class people are active, they join clubs — rowing, hockey,

bridge — they all do something. The Sunday Assembly could be seen in this regard, as another club and part of the 'stuff' that the middle classes do.

The Sunday Assembly does offer places for children to play during a service. However, those who attend are mainly people without children. A point raised by British academic Linda Woodhead during a BBC Radio 4 interview, 'Swapping Psalms for Pop Songs', was that the Sunday Assembly would face problems in attracting the next generation as they do not want to go to something Mum and Dad think is cool (Vernon, 2016). This point is reinforced by Leah, who said that her daughter does not attend the Sunday Assembly despite her wanting her to come: 'I think she would enjoy it. But she's a teenager; she doesn't want to do anything I do'.

During an interview with Miriam, I asked why she thought the Sunday Assembly was predominantly white and middle class. She answered:

> I think because they [the middle classes] have the time. I think it is kind of tapping into that very top strata of unhappiness. Like the kind of 5% that people have time to worry about. If you genuinely have complex social needs or complex disadvantages, then it's not for you. I think because it is quite airy-fairy and nice and bubbly and it's an hour once a fortnight. I have never seen it advertised anywhere; from what I know it's always word of mouth. I haven't seen it on any kind of public forums or on community noticeboards. I go out quite a lot as part of my job, to quite a lot of estates and grass-root groups across London. I think all the things they are engaged in are worlds apart from the Sunday Assembly and they are a little bit indulgent.

Miriam implied a therapeutic culture and alluded to the normalcy of a middle-class existence (Lawler, 2005, p.443). Although part of the Sunday Assembly motto is to 'help often', I believe Miriam was suggesting that people attend to help themselves. Miriam went on to say:

> I guess it's the natural thing, when I think about it. People are white and middle class. I honestly can't imagine it doing much for someone who is really having it tough, like in a really disadvantaged area of London, looking

118

for something really tangible. I think it's not reporting to be that either. I think it's quite comfortable with what it's doing. Which I still think is really great. I don't think it is exclusive.

'Radically Inclusive' — a Homogeneous Congregation

Regarding ethnicity, Jane is white. Despite claiming to be 'radically inclusive', the Sunday Assembly is a predominantly white congregation. I believe this is down to four key reasons:

1. The congregation reflects the 'preacher'.
2. How and (where) people hear about the Sunday Assembly.
3. People bringing along friends of the same demographics.
4. Generation Y church-leavers are, typically, white.

1. The Congregation Reflects the 'Preacher'

McPherson et al. (2001, p.416) define homophily as the principle that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people. Since 'people generally only have significant contact with others like themselves… [the contact] tends to become localized in socio-demographic space' (McPherson et al., 2001, p.415). Consequently, by interacting only with people who are like us, our experiences as a result of our social position become reinforced. This tendency comes to typify 'people like us' (op cit) and, to put it succinctly, birds of a feather flock together (Lazarsfeld & Merton, p.1954). Ultimately, at the Sunday Assembly the congregation reflects the 'preacher'. The committee, Sanderson Jones, Pippa Evans and volunteers are predominantly ethnically white and middle class.

Zachary, one of my interviewees, spoke of the Sunday Assembly as a group having similar worldviews to his own and indirectly discussed an ideal type:

> There's definitely a type to Sunday Assembly and I don't know that it's definitely extroverts. I think it's strongly correlated with openness to new experiences and being late-20s to mid-30s white and British, if I'm honest with you. The culture bit gets hooked into what we do. One of the reasons I

love it and it's easy for me is because we play a lot of pop music from the '90s, which is when I was being influenced by pop music the most. It's just, like, this is a bunch of people who have got a lot of the same experiences and ways of looking at the world.

These characteristics are quintessentially describing the experiences of cohort Generation Y — for example, liking similar music from a particular decade. Zachary's observations reinforce my sense that Sunday Assembly participants have shared similar life experiences, such as being subjected to varying degrees of religion in their upbringing, but now identifying as nonreligious.

These dynamics and an 'ideal type' homogeneous grouping was also noticed by Esther. During one interview, Esther told me:

Everyone looks so much the same, even from their clothes, what ideas they have, what they talk about. Maybe even if you would ask their taste in music, it would be indie/alternative… It's a specific kind of value framework of the western world, to be liberal and open. But, as I told you, even when I came along for the first time, it was very specific people and it could exclude some people. I think its openness can be scary to a lot of people, like introverts; I think you have to be courageous to go. It's not something that is easy, at least it wasn't for me, to go somewhere on your own to something a little bit new and weird… but I am experimental and like to try new things.

Here, Esther raises a number of key points. Firstly, she recognises homogeneity present at the Sunday Assembly, manifested in how people dress and what they discuss. Esther also assumes a level of education and a questioning of the world we live in. Additionally, she discusses the difficulties of finding instant community and belonging.

Regarding social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, p.1979), there are 'in' and 'out' group dynamics. People are attracted to communities made up of individuals like them and of similar life experiences. Hogg & Reid (2006, p.10) contend that 'individuals cognitively represent social categories as prototypes'. Group prototypes are specifically context dependent rather than fixed. These prototypes represent

fuzzy sets or attributes and behaviours that distinguish one group from another (ibid). Returning to Tajfel & Turner, these categories represent similarities among people within the same group. Among the Sunday Assembly, this could be their social class, religious background, current beliefs, social class, and ethnicity. The issue lies in when we 'categorise people, we reconfigure our representation of them to conform to the context-dependent prototype of the category — once categorized, people are viewed through the lens of the relevant group prototype and are represented in terms of how well they embody the prototype' (ibid). The prototypes of classification cause our perception of people to become depersonalised. We do not see unique individuals; rather, as Hogg & Reid (2006, p.10) phrase it, we see 'embodiments of the attributes of their group'.

In another interview, Ava picked up on the social identity of 'in' and 'out' groups mentioned earlier in Tajfel & Turner's (1979) work when she told me her experiences of bringing a non-white friend (her excerpt also relates to point 3):

> You know, you can say you're inclusive but (pause)… I guess there are a few factors, depending on what ethnicity you are. You might already be in a family or a culture that is religious, you might have no need for Sunday Assembly. And then, I think if it as super white. It is kind of like Henley Regatta, you know, good old jolly. I have taken some friends with me before; [one was] Asian and he was just, like, I am the only brown guy here. I was, like, yup, oh shit, you're right and I imagine that doesn't feel very nice. Even people who come now, they must come and look around and you feel different, you stand out. You wouldn't want that.

Just like their religious counterparts, nonreligious congregations can be both inclusive and exclusive; there are ways that one fits in while, simultaneously, there are ways that one does not. Emerson & Kim's work on investigating (and explaining) congregational segregation is useful here. They argue that congregations in which 80% or more of the individuals are of the same race can be considered homogeneous, hence we can talk of the Sunday Assembly in these terms. In 2003, Emerson & Kim (2003, p.217) found that nine out of ten American congregations had 90% of their congregation reflecting one ethnicity, and four out of five

American congregations had 95% of their membership from one single ethnicity. Sharma & Guest (2012, p.72-73), in their research on navigating religion between university and home, found that 'lived religion can be radically structured by nonreligious indicators of social identity' and students faced difficulties with inclusion and exclusion due to perceived social class and ethnicity.

2. How and (Where) People Hear About the Sunday Assembly

The second reason for ethnic homogeneity relates to the media outlets in which the Sunday Assembly London is featured. Any publicity the Assembly gets will often appear in newspapers like *The Guardian* and the cultural listings publication, *Time Out*, as well as featuring on BBC Radio 4 and 5. I asked participants when or how they first heard about the Sunday Assembly and these media channels came up as frequent gateways. *The Guardian*, *Time Out*, BBC Radio 4 and 5 all indicate a particular readership/listenership. Leah told me that she felt the Sunday Assembly comprised a white middle-class group and she went on to say 'I think we are all *Guardian* readers. I'm a *Guardian* reader'. When I asked her what this meant, Leah explained:

> Because, if it's white middle class, in Islington you know, the hipster brigade and you're doing it by word of mouth. It's word-of-mouth people, reading The Guardian, Time Out or the Independent. It's those people who say "Have you tried this?" Then their mates tend to be white middle class, and part of the hipster coffee-drinking brigade. Ironically, both my neighbour and I have kids that are mixed race.

The term 'hipster' is often associated with the Sunday Assembly. McRobbie (2016, p.50) defines an urban hipster as a 'composite of various historical and mostly male subcultural figures each associated with an "ineffable" sense of style, a degree of aloofness and "cool" disdain, a dandyism and a self-conscious sense of being a flâneur'. McRobbie (2016, p.52) acknowledges a new 'subcultural capital' that has led to high value being attributed to 'street knowledge', with hipsters usually living in poorer decaying neighbourhoods, ripe for gentrification. In popular culture, gentrified East London would be considered the home of the urban hipster — true to style, Sunday Assembly East London launched in 2016. The Sunday Assembly

reflects McRobbie's hipster definition, as it would be deemed to be outside of mainstream culture, often being discovered by word of mouth; it fits with 'subcultural capital'.

3. People Bring Along Friends of the Same Demographics

Following on from the previous explanations for the lack of diversity at the Sunday Assembly, an additional argument to explain this is how the Assembly's impact is spread through word of mouth. During my interviews, I asked if people go along by themselves or take friends. In the interviews, they would discuss bringing partners, family members and friends from work who fed into the same demographic. However, not everyone who was brought along would attend again, hence the Sunday Assembly's problems with retention. The Assembly acts as a net, catching those who have left their faith but who still seek to belong to a group or community. This net, however, is only catching a small number of church-leavers.

4. Generation Y Church-Leavers Are White

We know that church-leavers are typically white and that there has been a large decline in the Church of England's congregational numbers. Bullivant (2017, p.11) has found that British adults who are nonreligious are predominantly white (95%) compared to non-Christian religions (19%). A church census in London covering 2005-2012 showed that the growth in religious attendance is driven by ethnic diversity and migration. The 2011 Census detailed that approximately 82% of the UK population was white, but much lower (45%) in Greater London. The demographic of the Assembly is approximately 90% white (based on headcount), which in no way reflects the diversity of Greater London. I discussed this point with Kevin, who indicated that the lack of diversity is something discussed within the core of the Sunday Assembly. He told me during one interview:

> Ethnic diversity is something that we're really having a struggle with. But again, what we're offering is a white type of experience, because it is a bit like a Church of England Christian church. The music choices, that kind of British and American pop music.

Kevin's statement, 'a white type of experience', links to 'white spaces' and a more nuanced description of what this type of experience entails. Anderson (2015, p.10)

discusses 'white spaces' in which other ethnicities perceive as being white. Segregation still persists long after the decline of the British Empire and the Civil Rights Movement in America. There remain overwhelmingly white spaces: restaurants, universities, workplaces and churches that 'reinforce a normative sensibility in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected or marginalized when present' (op cit). Anderson (2015, p.10) goes on to contend that 'when present in the white space, blacks reflexively note the proportion of whites to black, or may look around for other blacks (or ethnic minorities) … when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally "off limits"'. Whereas, for people who are white, these spaces would be unremarkable. This was picked up on in an interview with Grace, an African woman who noted there are times and situations (including at the Sunday Assembly) where she is the only black person in the room, even though she knows that not all black people are religious.

The Sunday Assembly, despite being 'radically inclusive', still attracts a homogeneous group. Jackson (1999, p.48) refers to whiteness as a metaphor for the 'universal insider', by which whiteness is transportable, it permits whites to 'transcend social boundaries and still gain a semblance of acceptance as an insider'. Furthermore, what whites see as diversity, other ethnicities (Jackson discusses 'blacks') may perceive as homogeneously white. In contrast, segregated communities are also solidified by what can be described as 'black spaces' and institutions like the 'black church' (Anderson 2015, p.11). With its current structure and homogeneity, I argue that the Sunday Assembly's lack of diversity is due to the construction of it as a 'white space'.

To reinforce this, from the ethnographic research, members of the London Black Atheists — who have links to the Humanists UK and (more localised) Central London Humanists — do not attend Sunday Assembly London. London Black Atheists encourage people to 'come out' as atheist and their discussions and meet-ups (sometimes at the same location as the Sunday Assembly, Conway Hall) are focused on topics connected to atheism, religion, evolution and science. The Sunday Assembly, as previously stated, is careful to avoid topics situated around atheism and religion. The depiction of the congregation and service as a 'white space' as

expressed by participants from the interviewees suggests exclusivity, rather than inclusivity.

Therefore, I offer the argument that it is a combination of the four key reasons laid out above as to why the Sunday Assembly congregation lacks diversity in terms of ethnicity and social class.

Jane's Nostalgia and 'New New Atheism'

After discussing Jane's gender, age, social class and ethnicity, I return to the reasoning for other aspects of her profile. On average, most of the people I had spoken to had not grown up in London; rather, they had moved to London from a smaller town, city or village. They would often describe having close communal links before moving, and this was an aspect of life that they missed. From my interviews and informal conversations, approximately three out of four people grew up with some level of religious tradition, almost always Christian and noticeably evangelical. This ex-evangelical profile was attracted to the Sunday Assembly due to its 'services' resembling an evangelical Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB)-style church. Furthermore, from the data, it became apparent that family members were often still involved in the church, or had previously been involved to some capacity, some of whom were even worship leaders or vicars. This indicated that the individual would have had close links to a church. Of those growing up in nonreligious households, they were still exposed to religious traditions and many attended religious primary schools, i.e. Church of England. Only a small handful of people I spoke to expressed Richard Dawkins' 'militant' atheist views, which align with the 'New Atheists' of the mid- to late 2000s. Instead, participants often spoke about attending Sunday school and having fond memories (even if their justification for attending was for the social aspects/free food) and enjoyed church while they still attended. Similar to Davies and Northam-Jones'(2012, p.230) analysis of the Sea of Faith network, 'the passion and enthusiasm with which their early religious experiences are recounted are vivid. This may seem odd, for one might expect people who have ceased to believe in their former and "religious" ways to stop acting in concordant religious "ways"'. For the majority of my participants, their religious upbringing was discussed nostalgically.

Jane, like many I spoke to, felt intellectually compelled to change her religious stance from belief to non-belief, agnosticism or atheism during her teenage years, especially when going to university. This is consistent with existing research (Zuckerman, 2012, p.11; Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1997, p.212; Smith 2010, p.222; Baker & Smith 2009, p.1257), which has shown atheists are likely to have higher levels of education, be younger and from the West.

Furthermore, attending university provides the opportunity to explore different worldviews, but can also undermine an individual's religious upbringing. Guest, Aune & Sharma (2013) in their mixed methods research, analysed over 4000 responses and 100 interviews to better understand Christianity and the university experience. They found that only 2.5% of their student participants said 'they had an experience during their university career when they had made a decision to follow or abandon religion' and change is thus 'for the most part, gradual rather than dramatic' (Guest, Aune & Sharma, 2013, p.88-90). This is concurrent with Jane not having a 'eureka moment' transition from religion to nonreligion.

Regarding Jane's beliefs, these were derived and analysed from the interview data collected, plus the dozens of small exchanges recorded in my ethnographic research, which will be discussed further in **Chapter Nine**. Mainly everyone I spoke to identified as being nonreligious, atheist, humanist, agnostic, or all of the above.

During the ethnographic research, I was made aware that Christians do attend the Sunday Assembly (I did not hear of any other world religions attending), but I did not get the chance to meet anyone of religious faith.

The Sunday Assembly's ideological position differs from new atheism. Despite the original marketing ploy of an 'atheist church', it is certainly more aligned with humanism than new atheism and is better described as a secular community, contextualised within a post-Christian UK transition. This position is exemplified by Gabriel, who, in his interview, described how religious people were ridiculed in the atheist meetings he had attended — attendees 'would just say how stupid those people are'. Gabriel understood their point and what they were getting out of deriding religion, but it was just not the right community for him. Thus, the

criticisms often associated with new atheism (which was introduced in **Chapter Two**) are largely unappealing to the Sunday Assembly demographic.

Within its UK sites, religion is never mentioned during an Assembly, nor is it ever criticised. Jonah summarised that if you attend the Sunday Assembly, you are not attending to listen to Richard Dawkins — the 'two things that you could almost guarantee you won't hear about in Sunday Assembly are religion and the absence of religion… I'm not anti-religious; it's just not for me'. Likewise, humanism is never mentioned, even though similar beliefs and values are shared; for example, living this one life that we know we have as fully as possible. Based on many participants, Jane (our ideal Assemblier) would not describe herself as 'spiritual'. This was a term that generally was misunderstood (or rather, evoked ambiguous responses), participants often asking for clarification during interviews. However, I was always careful not to provide concise definitions as I was interested in how they viewed the term. Parallels can be found in Ammerman (2013, p.265), whose sample of 95 American interviewees also struggled with the definition of spirituality, recognising the term as both emergent and contested. Participants of this study would often associate spirituality with the supernatural; this was a belief that was rejected. Holmes (2005, p.24) questioned if a definition of spirituality can be achieved and if we need one at all, as 'seeking a definition that is all encompassing would obscure the diversity of disciplinary approaches that make the topic so interesting'. Holmes (2005, p.24-25) understands spirituality as the 'human search for meaning, particularly relationally, and that for many today this incorporates a supernatural/corporeal dimension that suggest many of us have discovered we are more than our physical biology'. The next section will detail an ethnographic research trip to Brighton Sunday Assembly to analyse if similar demographics are found in different franchised congregations.

Brighton Congregational Demographics

Brighton Sunday Assembly is used to illustrate the demographics of another city other than London, and to evidence similar profiles of people. During one particular visit, the Brighton Assembly highlighted certain basic demographics and attitudes using a simple but clever game of asking people to stand up if they were either 'a' or

'b'. Examples of 'a', the Assembly leaders believed, would reflect the congregation; examples of 'b' most likely would not. To illustrate this, the first comparative question was:

'Stand up if you are -

a) A vegetarian
b) A UKIP supporter'

About 20% of the audience members stood up, as Brighton has a large vegan/vegetarian population. And although recent surveys conducted by the British Social Attitudes Survey (2015) have found no real correlation between nonreligion and political preference (similar to Woodhead, 2016), clearly in Brighton, UKIP is unlikely to ever be a popular choice (BBC, 2015). One can safely assume that the vast majority of those standing were doing so in answer to what they chose to eat rather than what they vote for.

Another question asked was:

'Stand up if you -

a) Have ever volunteered at the Sunday Assembly
b) Never, ever want to volunteer'

Around 20 people stood up. Assuming that only a small minority were those who did not want to volunteer, this left the rest of the congregation open to the idea of helping within the community or with the congregation.

The questions followed with 'Stand up if you are here for the first time, or if you have a gun in your pocket'. Of course, I would like to think no one had a gun in their pocket, but this question allowed for a quick headcount of around 60 people visiting for the first time (approximately 1 in 4). The next question was 'Stand up if you are an undercover vicar or if this is your second time at the Sunday Assembly Brighton' (around 20 people stood up). Again, assuming there were no undercover clergy committing espionage, it demonstrates a much lower return rate than those attending for the first time.

The demographics of the Brighton Sunday Assembly were similar to the London congregation. On headcount, the gender split is 60-70% female, which is slightly higher than London. Similar to London, the ethnicity of the group was prominently and noticeably white, as was the average age, if not slightly higher than London's. There appeared to be a larger group of people between the ages of 30 and 40 than between 20 and 30, which again indicates that the Sunday Assembly is not a student movement and reinforces the generational transition to post-Christian. There were several families, young children and even a dog. The atmosphere was very friendly; some friends who I was visiting in Brighton even came along with me for the first time. The level of positivity and their being approached initially left them feeling slightly uncomfortable — Brighton is not London, but it is rare in big cities that people greet you with a 'It's nice to see you'. Like the London congregation, Brighton Assembly had a hipster atmosphere. There were 32 pews with approximately seven people sat on each, and I would estimate around 200-250 were present. The theme for the first Brighton Sunday Assembly of the year was 'compassion'. This section has demonstrated that other Sunday Assembly congregations hold similar worldviews and demographics.

Modern Expressions of Nonreligion

During my time researching the Sunday Assembly, I went to several events. I now return to Morning Gloryville (referenced in **Chapter Two**), a sober morning rave that mirrors similar demographic patterns and dynamics to the Sunday Assembly. During my interviews, I would ask: 'What other events/community groups do you belong to?', and a noticeable group of interviewees would express how much they enjoy Morning Gloryville. Both are clearly modern expressions of lived nonreligion. But while the Sunday Assembly is an expression of lived nonreligion through a post-Christian framework, Morning Gloryville offers new forms of community and belonging outside of organised religion that do not rely on any religious framework. I felt that, by visiting the latter and carrying out ethnographic research of a Gloryville event, it would help me better understand the demographics of Sunday Assembly London.

Therefore, on Thursday 25th February 2016, I visited The Mothership, HQ of Morning Gloryville London East. On walking into the venue, nestled in the heart of Bethnal Green, I was greeted by a welcoming hug from a woman who directed me into the rave. I was initially taken aback by the amount of energy in the room at this time of the day (7am), when most people are just waking up. The naturally lit room was full of approximately 300 people, some of them barefooted, most of them with painted faces full of glitter and a handful dressed as unicorns (reflecting their logo consisting of half a cockerel and half a unicorn). Hand-painted posters surrounded the room with colourful peace signs, love hearts and proclamations of 'Be a care bear' and 'I am a unicorn'. The food that was available came in the form of hand-made superfoods — raw, vegan, sugar free and gluten free. Balloons and bubbles blew in the air as I walked past the 'love stop', where you could receive a free massage.

The numbers began to dwindle approaching 9am as people set off for work. A woman flitted through the crowds with a Cupid-style bow, shooting invisible arrows that consisted of blowing kisses as people enthusiastically, and with no inhibitions, cut loose on the dance floor. Similar to the dance breaks that take place during the instrumentals of songs at the Sunday Assembly London service, if you were not dancing you were more likely to be the odd one out.

As the DJ played a version of Fatboy Slim's 'Renegade Master', I noticed a couple of pushchairs on the periphery, by which some parents had sunk into snug spaces. Small children with noise-reduction headphones were also dancing with their parents. I overheard someone next to me laugh and noticed they were raving with a cup of tea in one hand. Esther (an interviewee from the Sunday Assembly) observed an apparent 'type' that attends the Assembly. She told me:

> Being completely honest now, they're just not my type of people. I would really like to go along to more socials, but I think there's not too many people like it. There's a lot of people in their late 20s, early 30s, they are kind of creative, like wearing bright clothes, being very anti-establishment and all that, and that's good, you know. I enjoy talking to them, but that's not usually the people I hang out with or the people I meet for a pint after work.

This description was playing on my mind as I looked around at who was attending the morning rave. Dancers of all ages were ultra-happy, uber-positive, wearing bright clothes, sequinned lycra and covered in shimmering glitter or dressed in fancy dress. In contrast to the Sunday Assembly, Morning Gloryville does not suffer from a lack of diversity; people from all ethnicities were present when I attended, reflecting the multicultural make-up of London. Regarding gender, it was roughly the same as the Sunday Assembly, with slightly more females than males (approximately 60/40) and the age group was mid-20s to mid-30s.

They are launching 'Morning Rituals: 6-part series' in October 2017. They state 'we found joy, love and connection on the sober dancefloor and now we're ready to dive deeper into expanding our minds and hearts'. They have created this series 'to create a space to explore the power of ritual in deepening connection and community'. In a post-Christian transition, Morning Gloryville is exploring novel, nonreligious practices to foster belonging, find community and create new rituals.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce the participants in my research, to anchor the demographics of the Sunday Assembly and to provide context for future analysis in the following data chapters. **Chapter Six** explores the Sunday Assembly ethnographically by analysing rituals, liturgies and the imitation of existing Christian structure. **Chapter Seven** explores the first of the tri-part Sunday Assembly motto 'Live Better' by analysing the lives of the individuals. Subsequently, **Chapter Eight** analyses 'Help Often' and considers communal secularity through the Sunday Assembly's attempt to build nonreligious communities. **Chapter Nine** discusses 'Wonder More' and examines the beliefs (collective and individual), spirituality, and awe and wonder found within the Assembly. **Chapter Ten** synthesises these research findings to a post-Christian reimagining of the secular through 'belonging without believing'.

CHAPTER SIX

RITUALS AND LITURGIES

> *'Anywhere that you've got an evangelical Christian church... You could*
> *definitely run a Sunday Assembly'* – Zachary

On entering Conway Hall, I'm greeted by smiles and pleasantries from volunteers who all sport bold Sunday Assembly 'Help' badges pinned to their dresses and jackets. I notice Sanderson. He's engrossed in talks with members of the congregation, saying 'hello' to as many as people as possible, wrapping arms around their shoulders, shaking hands and playing the host.

My first impressions are of warmth, the room 'lit up' by dozens of people loudly embracing one another. Conway Hall's central chamber is mostly wooden, and the high ceiling means the acoustics travel throughout. It's hard to ignore the hugs, waves, handshakes and greetings that are being exchanged by many. Initially, this indicates to me that the number of people in the congregation must have attended before. However, the room is also filled by lone members, taking their seats towards the back. The atmosphere feels incredibly positive with lots of smiles and a buzzing anticipation for the start of the service. This is a feeling I have normally experienced while waiting for a performance or a show, i.e. a football match or concert. Conway Hall has a stage at the front where a band is assembling. Saxophone, guitar, keyboard and drums. The room is large and completely full by 10:55am — five minutes before the beginning of the service. The room consists of two levels. The ground floor is a large open space, full of movable chairs in rows similar to pews with an opening down the middle, an aisle. Seats also fill the sides and above them runs a large curved second floor that spans the back and sides of the building with fixed seating offering an aerial view.

Towards the back of the hall are a few tables where you can sign up to different events depending on the area of London you live in. Running down the side of the hall is a table with (covered) biscuits and tea. Sanderson Jones takes to the front of the congregation and, in true rock-style fashion, yells a charismatic introduction to

the Sunday Assembly: 'For those who don't know, we are a godless congregation that celebrates life'. Cheers, claps and a few 'whoops' erupt. He continues: 'We have an awesome motto — "live better, help often and wonder more"', finally adding, 'Our dream is to have an assembly in every town/city/place that wants one'. Above Sanderson's head, at the top of the building, is the wording 'To Thine Own Self Be True'. The Sunday Assembly band begins to clap; Sanderson joins in, as does the congregation. The music begins, and the clapping gets louder and faster… Everyone is up on their feet singing… 'I want to break free… [God]Bob knows, [God] Bob knows I want to break free.

The above is an excerpt from my first ethnographic visit to the Sunday Assembly as part of my fieldwork in September 2014. The song being sung that day was Queen's 'I Want to Break Free'. Rather than singing 'God knows…', the words projected on the screen were a secularised 'Bob knows…'

'Lived Nonreligion'

In this chapter, I offer a detailed account of a typical Sunday Assembly gathering and explore 'lived nonreligion' through analysing the Assembly's engagement with secular rituals, liturgies and practices, which relates to Glock and Stark's (1968, p.15) "practice" dimension of religiosity. Before doing so, I first analyse how rituals have been explored in prior scholarship in the sociology of religion and look to new forms of research into nonreligious rituals. I detail particular rituals and liturgies that take place at each Sunday Assembly and analyse what functions these rituals perform. I then argue that the Assembly is an 'imitator' and explore what structures, practices, rituals and liturgies it has adopted from Christian (and other religious) congregations to build its 'secular service'. I also analyse an important element of the Sunday Assembly's DNA — the communal singing — which leads into the following chapter on 'living better'. In summary, this theoretical analysis on the nature of ritual and liturgy links with the transitioning to post-Christian culture and how this relates to religion as a form of cultural memory (Hervieu- Léger, 2000).

Background Into (Non)Religious Rituals

McGuire (2008, p.17) defines ritual as consisting of:

Symbolic actions that represent religious meanings. Whereas beliefs represent the cognitive aspect of religion, ritual is the enactment of religious meaning. The two are closely intertwined. Beliefs of the religious group give meaning and shape to ritual performances. Ritual enactments strengthen and reaffirm the group's beliefs. They are ways of symbolizing unity of the group and, at the same time, of contributing to it.

Rituals have been widely discussed in the sociology of religion and from an anthropological perspective. Rappaport (1999, p.24) understands the term '"ritual" to denote the *performance of more of less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encored by the performers*', importantly his definition 'encompasses much more than religious behaviour'. Unlike McGuire's (2008) definition, Rappaport (2009, p.26) 'obviously does not stipulate what ritual is "about" or what it is "for"' and certain aspects like symbolic actions are missing from his definition. He goes on to describe it as neither substantive nor functional, it is formal (it is a form of action) and argues 'ritual is a unique structure although none of its elements – performance, invariance, formality and so on – belongs to it alone' (Rappaport, 1999, p.26).

Before discussing particular rituals found at the Sunday Assembly, I wish to offer a brief review of how the term has developed and is now used by scholars such as Zuckerman and Lee to study the secular.

Stringer (1999, p.27) recounts the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) as having an impact on the linguistics of ritual from a structuralist or semiotics framework. Through his work, 'a more direct link between ritual, symbol and meaning was established'. Stringer (1999, p.27) notes how 'ritual began to be understood as something that was communicated through symbolic languages'. Therefore, the meaning was not something that was absent from ritual but was to be understood as the core of what ritual was. Stringer (1999, p.72) tells of how all discussions on worship, liturgy and ritual attempt to understand the discourse from within, and raises the assumption that what is meaningful is so from the individual experience (or collective) of the practice. For Stringer, it became almost impossible to interview

people about their own experiences, as this self-reflective questioning was difficult for persons involved in the practice of worship. This was apparent during my own interviews, when the question on ritual was almost always shut down by participants, who would only answer that 'the Sunday Assembly has no rituals'. Where Stringer's participants were too wrapped up in their worship, the participants of this study did not want to talk about ritual per se, as the word had negative religious connotations for them. Sometimes, it was acknowledged that the whole thing was ritualistic, and more commonly it was accepted that the Sunday Assembly follows a structure, but would not be classed as ritual.

I encountered similar problems when asking questions about why at the Sunday Assembly people stand up to sing, shout back ritualistic liturgical phrases and 'high five' newcomers. From a secular viewpoint, Lee (2015, p.5) asks, 'To what extent are rituals and practices used by secular people?' Lee questions if these rituals are developed in contradistinction to religious cultures; so are they substantially, meaningfully nonreligious or are they insubstantially areligious, post-religious or secular? This is a question I return to after detailing the structure of the Sunday Assembly 'service' and the imitation of existing practices.

Prominent secular studies scholar Zuckerman (2014) discusses rituals for the nonreligious in his book *Living the Secular Life.* Zuckerman identifies secular rituals and traditions, including concerts, sport and family rituals, as well as secularising religious holidays or ceremonies (p.102-103). Zuckerman identifies that the 'beauty' of being secular is that rituals do not bind you; it is ultimately a choice if you participate and you can contemplate which rituals to pick and choose or create new ones (p.104). However, Zuckerman (2014, p.104) recognises the downside to all of this freedom. He states:

> First, all this active picking and choosing and contemplating and creating can be a bit of a burden. It is a lot of work. For religious families, rituals and traditions come much easier. Everything is already established, conveniently pre-packaged. There is already a familiar framework. When a person dies, the religious funeral service is already set. When a baby is born, the baptism

ceremony is already set… additionally, secular approaches to ritual and tradition, by their very nature, lack intergenerational consistency.

Also, Zuckerman (2014, p.186) discusses rites of passages, births, deaths, weddings and argues that 'even the most ardently secular still want, need and enjoy structured moments of reflection, recognition and consecration… they still yearn for a meaningful, authentic ceremony that allows them to come together and be a part of a ritualized gathering that marks the occasion as special, set apart, sincere, heartfelt'. Likewise, Cimino & Smith (2014, p.87) found in their survey results that various secular rituals and other symbolic practices may generate solidarity between atheists, as well as potentially legitimising secularity in wider society. Therefore, they argue 'that secularist gatherings and events also function as rituals because they serve to symbolize unity and strength to both secularists themselves and wider society' (2014, p.92).

Cimino & Smith (2014, p.97) contend:

> Where religion has historically understood ritual as a means for becoming part of a larger community and transcending 'the worldly,' secularist understand ritual as a means for celebrating oneself as human and dwelling in a contingent world. For secularists rituals are less about group integration and more about creative meaning-making grounded in an emphasis on the individual. Any community-oriented rituals seem to be largely of secondary importance for secularists. In fact, when we asked about the community generated nature of rituals, the respondents (when not outright dismissing the need for community) often stressed that their local meetings fulfilled their need for community.

Therefore, Smith & Cimino demonstrate that secularists are interested in more than reason and science, and display a need for rituals. As previously stated, the Sunday Assembly borrows from existing Christian church structures and practices, although it does seek to create its own new rituals. At the Sunday Assembly conference, I took a picture of a display (*Figure 6.1*) created by the East London congregation, which reads:

136

'Sunday Assembly East End started with "beginnings" [the theme of the assembly]
in May… we created a ritual to bless our mutual new beginnings with flower bulbs'.
Their use of religious ecclesiastical language ("bless") to explain nonreligious rituals
evidences the blurring of secular and the religious.

Figure 6.1
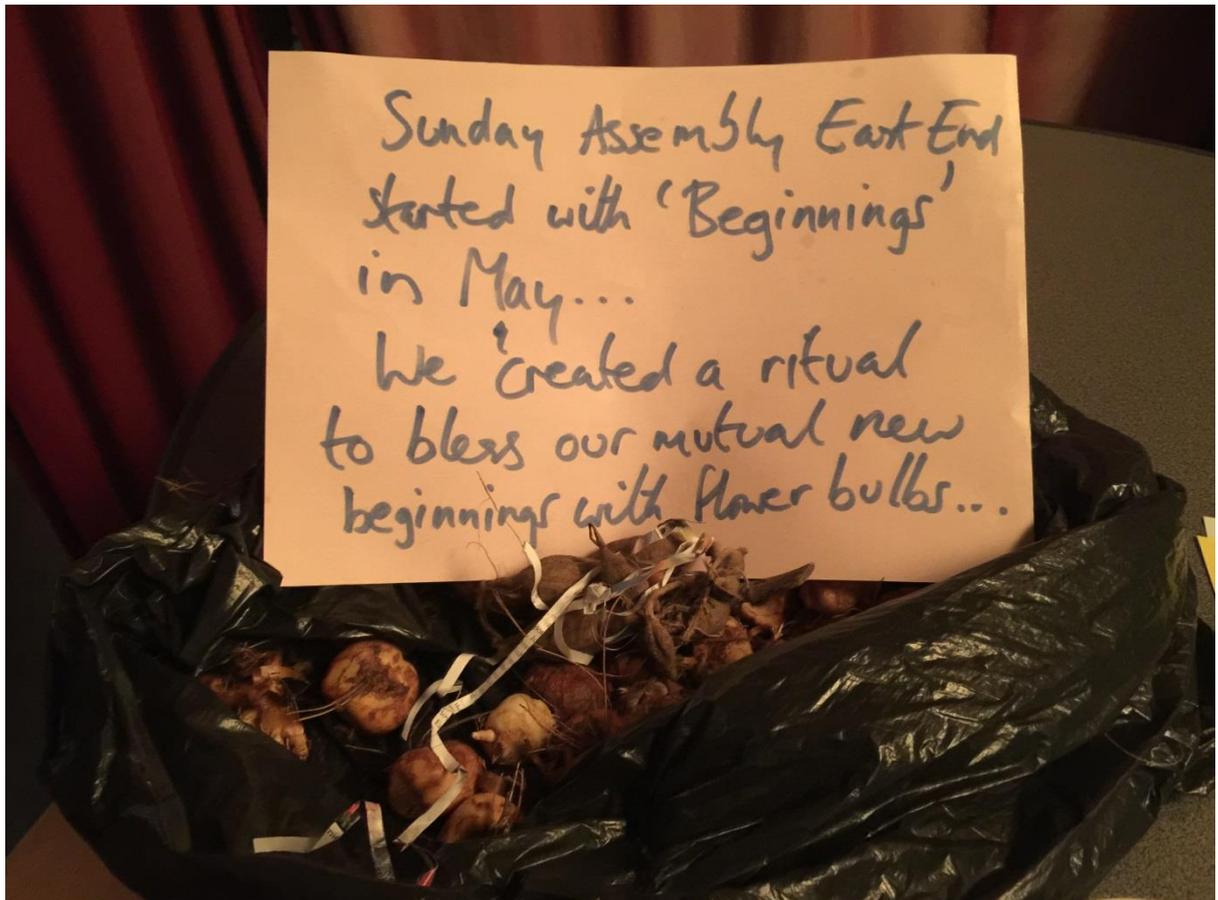
Davis (2014, p.181) identifies that 'atheists and agnostics around the globe are
forming congregations. They're forming nonreligious rituals for life's big events.
Organised atheism is catching on'.

From the interviews, some nonreligious participants had or still attend Christmas
Mass with their family, and one participant in particular (Ruth) remarked on the
hypocritical nature of celebrating Christmas as someone who was not Christian.
Furthermore, Leah discussed how bringing up children in a nonreligious secular
household presented problems for Christian holidays. She said:

> Since I had a child, I figured if she was going to celebrate Christmas (it's not all about presents) then she could go to church to understand a little bit more about it. But I found it pretty unwelcoming. One church on Christmas Day didn't have any mince pies or cups of tea. Stuff that!, I thought. If I was to come out on a Christmas morning, I'd rather go down the pub for a swift half. So, I figured, that's not for me. Plus, I thought I was going to be struck by lightning for being a non-believer.

Bengston et al. (2013, p.192) reviewed 35 years of data from over 3,500 family members in the US and discovered persistent patterns of religion and nonreligion across generations. Bengston et al. (2013, p.152) found that 'nearly 6 out of 10 unaffiliated young adults come from families where their parents were also unaffiliated, indicating that nonreligion is indeed transmitted from one generation to the next'. Therefore, Leah's child is more likely to remain unaffiliated and nonreligion is becoming generational in the same way religion is. Bengtson et al. (2013, 192) proposed that religion seems to 'stick around' in families over generations more so than any other characteristic (for example, social attitudes); hence their theory of 'intergenerational religious momentum' can be applied to nonreligious families.

Ritual From the Sunday Assembly's Perspective

In its branding guide, the Sunday Assembly specifies how secular rituals are important to the success of the congregation. It details:
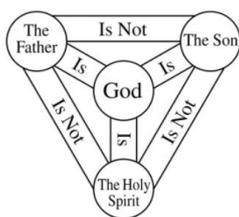
A big part of the SA task is to reclaim the rituals, language, and symbolism long dominated by religious and political forces. We simply want to say that doesn't have to be defined a certain way. Thus establishing a church service for non-believers. Previous meanings of the triangle are simply that, additional meanings. We are attempting to reclaim it as our own trinity (see figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2

Endeavouring to reclaim religious practices, the Sunday Assembly creates rituals to build community. However, the use of a word like 'ritual' can have negative undertones for the nonreligious as it sounds too closely aligned with religion. To support this, Ty, when discussing rituals, did not like the term and always imagined it as something:

> that is nonsensical, or something that is very spiritual, that is hard to grasp, like the turning of wine to blood or bread to the body of Christ, that strikes me as a ritual that is something almost supernatural.

Marshall (2002, p.360) builds on the work of Durkheim and contends that 'the role of rituals in the creation of belonging is suggested by the fact that social integration and a sense of unity are among the most noted outcomes and functions of ritual'. A ritual like drinking wine at mass has an inherently sacred significance, for it is considered to be the blood of Christ. The Sunday Assembly does not perform any rituals of this nature, but if it continues to take the form of a secular Christian liturgy and practice without its content, the meaning becomes hollowed out. Rituals and liturgies are embedded with prayer throughout Christian practice and serve to collectively bind the congregation; they are simply not the performance of actions. Rappaport (1999, p.37-38) contends that 'unless there is a performance there is no ritual', however it is not 'useful to consider all formal performances, even those composed entirely of highly invariable sequences of formal acts and utterances, to be ritual. The rituals and structure I describe in the following section may be called what Rappaport (1999, p.35) describes as 'liturgical orders' which are 'more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances of some duration repeated in specified contexts.

The Structure of the Sunday Assembly 'Service'

> In a word, the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born. This is what rendered vain the attempt of Comte with the old historic souvenirs artificially revived: it is life itself, and not a dead past which can produce a living cult… But this state of incertitude and confused agitation cannot last forever. A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence, in the course of which new ideas

arise and new formulae are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity (Durkheim, 1912/1954, p.427-428).

Often, the Sunday Assembly self-describes as having 'the best bits of church, awesome pop songs, but no religion'. In this section, I unpack the 'best bits' to which the Assembly is referring by displaying its formal structure. Meeting on a Sunday has clear theological Christian roots as a day consecrated to worshiping God. Friday was not chosen, as it is the respected day for Muslims to congregate at mosques, nor Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath beginning at sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. Choosing Sunday is a visible display by the Assembly of functioning and providing for a need in post-Christian culture. It is targeting secular people with a Christian heritage and thus offers a prominent visible example of post-Christian transition.

The connotations of meeting on a Sunday arose in a conversation I had with one particular interviewee, Miriam. She commented:

> I think it means a huge amount. It is exactly the same as a church time and also, it's quite a wholesome time. You can't really have gone out and smashed it too hard the night before. If it was on a Thursday evening at, like, 6 o'clock it would be different. It is at church time. I think there is that emotional baggage that it's church time, even though I've never been to church in my life. It's one of the biggest hurdles when describing it — it's 11am on a Sunday and they are, like, "oh its church"— the ritual element along with the community feel is really attractive, especially living in the city. It's quite stabilising.

This 'hurdle' can also be present for churchgoers who may prefer the Sunday Assembly style of a 'fun service' with interesting talks and a greater sense of community than they might find at their own religious church. The central activity of the Sunday Assembly is the service; this is a secular interpretation of Christian liturgy that offers structure through the act of worship. The service offers shared collective experience and is discussed most often afterwards. As such, it acts as the anchoring center of the secular community, the nucleus. Surrounding the nucleus is the various social activities and small groups that meet throughout the week. These

cement deeper expressions of belonging, identity and community through social capital and civic engagement. Putman (2000, p.19) describes social capital as 'connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them'.

Following on from the excerpt that opened this chapter, the structure of a normal Sunday Assembly service is as follows:

- o The service begins with two songs that are sung standing up. The London Assembly has a band and is sometimes joined by a Sunday Assembly choir. Instrumental dance breaks are included (approximately 8 minutes).
- o The host, often Sanderson Jones, will then provide an introduction and explain what the Sunday Assembly is, and lay out the format of the service (3 minutes).
- o Poetry follows. This resembles a reading given at a Christian church service. (5 minutes).
- o Next is the main talk. This loosely relates to the theme of the Assembly and is the equivalent of a sermon (approximately 10-15 minutes).
- o Afterwards, one song is sometimes sung (4 minutes).
- o 'This much I know' (formerly '"X" is trying their best') — a short speech given by a member of the congregation. Previous 'This much I know' speeches have included the struggles of preparing for the London marathon and writing a book. This section would be the equivalent of a testimony in a Christian church (5 minutes).
- o There follows a silent moment of reflection, which bears resemblance to silent prayer in a Christian church structure (2 minutes).
- o Bags are passed around for collection, providing an opportunity for members of the congregation to chat to their neighbours (5 minutes).
- o Forthcoming notices and social activities are relayed (3 minutes).
- o Final address from the host (Sanderson Jones) (5-10 minutes).
- o Final song (4 minutes).
- o Tea and cake are then available and the main hall is transformed from rowed seats facing the stage into communal tables and chairs, some labelled for people attending for the first time.

The service lasts approximately 60-75 minutes. Once the hall has been cleared, some members of the congregation meet at the same pub for food and drinks.

Sunday Assembly: The Imitator

Jenkins (2014, p.40) reported on his attendance to the Sunday Assembly that he could:

> easily have been witnessing a church plant, with a couple of hundred keen evangelicals from Holy Trinity Brompton. The service came complete with a secular sermon. I found the dissonance between failed church building and vibrant atheist gathering both striking and challenging. The Sunday Assembly is perhaps the most churchlike of several recent ventures where atheism has got itself up in the borrowed clothes of religion…it has embraced the format of the church sincerely.

The Sunday Assembly thus imitates and closely resembles a particular style of Christian service. This is evidence of a new experience of lived nonreligion that closely resembles existing religious practices, that feeds into a religious chain of memory. At the beginning of the service, before the band plays, the congregation begins to clap (which speeds up before the songs start). This was noticed by one participant as a practice taken from another church, a practice that has become familiar in a post-Christian culture:

> I don't have a problem with that. Obviously, with my background I can completely relate to it as well. I don't think you have to have that background to be able to relate to it. It just gets people up on their feet and ready to sing. It's better than someone standing over you and saying, "We're going to sing a song now".

Rituals are an important aspect of creating belonging; however, most nonreligious people would instantly reject rituals that echo those found in organised religion. Nevertheless, Zuckerman (2014, p.134), after attending a Unitarian church to deliver a talk and quite enjoying the experience, introduces the phrase 'religious in my secularity'. Zuckerman references the community groups, singing songs and the collective vibe found at congregations. I feel Zuckerman is not alone in this

sentiment and many of those who attend the Sunday Assembly are also, paradoxically, religious in *their* secularity. This again links to the particular timing of the creation of a secular community such as the Sunday Assembly, as the UK transitions deeper within post-Christian culture.

Given this, it is actually no surprise that the majority of the people I have spoken to at the Sunday Assembly grew up with varying degrees of religious background. Conversations with people about participating in church communities when they were younger were common, thus reinforcing the generational shift towards nonreligion. Zuckerman (2014, p.127) notes that some groups can be ostensibly antireligious in content but still be too 'religious' in form, structure and style to attract most secular/nonreligious people. This would seem to be the case for the Sunday Assembly, that aping certain aspects of Christian worship has both positive and negative impacts. When the Sunday Assembly declares that it takes 'the best bits' from church, it borrows established successful Christian terminology, mannerisms, practices, liturgies and models of building community.

Sanderson Jones makes no secret of the fact that he found inspiration in local churches like St Luke's West Holloway, where Dave Tomlinson, author of *How to Be a Bad Christian… And a Better Human Being* (2015), is the vicar. Tomlinson has also been the main speaker at the Sunday Assembly, notable for his 2013 'Easter for Atheists' speech on interpreting the Bible.

Jones also picked up new ideas from visiting Hillsong church in central London and St Mary's, Bryanston Square, as well as attending the latter's 'Life Course' (similar to Holy Trinity Brompton's Alpha Course) on how to find meaning in life. The hotly contested 'We are radically inclusive', which features on the Sunday Assembly's public charter, was actually appropriated from Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, which Jones visited in June 2013. Further, when asking for donations to pay for Conway Hall (home to the flagship London congregation), Jones trialled adopting terminology observed at a Buddhist temple, suggesting donations be made depending on the spectrum of 'how good your job is'. When attending the 'Day Called Wonder' conference in London, before beginning, we were asked to 'high

five' as many people as possible, which bore direct comparison with the Catholic 'sign of peace', a hand-shaking ritual used to express community.

This phenomenon has been observed by David Voas (2009, p.161), who argues that people retain a degree of loyalty to religious tradition. Even if this loyalty is rather noncommittal, what occurs is 'fuzzy fidelity' (Voas, 2009). In fact, this casual loyalty to tradition has helped the Sunday Assembly's growth in its replication of the familiar, mimicking a particular Christian style of structured service.

However, because the Sunday Assembly uses Christianity as its reference point, if you are not a cultural Christian there is less to latch on to and it can feel exclusionary rather than radically inclusive. As previously mentioned, from my interviews and ethnographic research, it was noticeable that a pocket of ex-evangelicals attend the Sunday Assembly and the 'familiarity' provides them with a safe space. But for those who have not attended church or for those who have left organised religion and dislike the Western Judeo-Christian model, the familiarity can be overwhelming. Martha remarked on how the Sunday Assembly resembled the evangelical movement and charismatic Christians. She comments, 'waving your hand in the air – maybe it's natural for them, but it's certainly not natural for me to behave like that' and suggests a sense of agency in her participation with the Assembly. This also manifested in an interview with Jacob, who was dealing with leaving his Jewish heritage, and also alludes to the Sunday Assembly as post-Christian. Jacob states:

> It is very interesting actually, like today ... every time I notice that everyone closes their eyes and bows their heads [during the moment of reflection]. I get the impression that a lot of people go to Sunday Assembly from religious upbringing like me, and have had that experience of prayer, so their natural instinct is, like, "We're going to have a moment of silence," so they bow their heads, close their eyes as if they were praying. I don't do that.

Similarly, Eve discussed during her interview that her dad would not even consider going to the Sunday Assembly as he had been 'damaged by the Catholic Church that anything that even vaguely resembles that kind of group of people doing something

together, he's just not into'. Thus, the Sunday Assembly attracts a limited pool of nones, those who are typically from Generation Y, who tend not to be anti-theistic but are open to the functional aspects of organised unbelief. So why has the Sunday Assembly borrowed from existing religious practices, rituals and liturgies instead of creating its own? My answer is twofold:

- The transitioning post-Christian culture has created a suitable landscape for it to do so.
- The Assembly has tapped into *fuzzy fidelity familiarity* and capitalised on a chain of memory (Hervieu- Léger's 2000).

Theme of the Day

The structure of the Sunday Assembly, as outlined above, is culturally recognisable from a post-Christian perspective — standing up to sing, bowing your head for a moment of reflection and passing round a collection bag are familiar practices that are often unquestioned.

Thematic services are common in the majority of Christian churches. The Church of England details that an overall direction and sense of cohesion in the congregation's relationship with God should be reflected in the structure.

The theme may be determined by occasion, reading or season — the Sunday Assembly reflects the Christian Calendar (Easter, Christmas, harvest festival). It has adopted theming each Sunday service and past themes have included secular spirituality, purpose, death, justice, how not to join a cult, and even 'Lessons from the film "Up"'. The main talk, which the service is centred around, resembles a Christian sermon. These themed talks have the ability to elevate the mood of the congregation and can inspire wonder.

'This Much I Know'

Martin Stringer (1999, p.191), in his ethnographic research into four Baptist churches, observes how on Creation Sunday the congregation was able to contribute to the service. In Stringer's example, people danced and brought examples of their 'creativity to the alter'. A similar expression of inclusivity can be found in the

Sunday Assembly's 'This Much I Know' testimonies which will be discussed further in the following chapter. I have observed people dance, play a musical instrument, discuss compassion when overcoming a brain tumour, and speak about their introverted nature in front of a large audience. These moments are often remembered and recounted during the interviews.

A Moment of Reflection as 'Secular 'Prayer'

As the Sunday Assembly has no deity or dogma, the act of prayer to communicate with God(s) has been replaced with a silent moment of reflection. An overt collective silence in many social contexts is the most sacred ritual saved for unexpected major tragedies (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p.1108-1109). On occasion, the moment of reflection has been directed with a specific theme; for example, the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris or Remembrance Day. The act of collective silence unifies the group. Habitually, Sanderson Jones will describe this as a quiet reflection or 'minutes of mindfulness'. The notion of prayer has been replaced with a 'secular spirituality' and meditation in a broader sense.

Gabriel told me during his interview how the moment of reflection closely resembles the church format, but how this was not necessarily a bad thing. He went on to describe a conversation he had with two priests, who proposed the argument that if the Sunday Assembly is doing everything the same, imitating the church structure, it must mean there is a God. Rather, Gabriel felt:

> The design of a church service has evolved and developed and it brings people [together]. There is no point doing it differently if it is not broken. I see it in a different way; it has evolved. It's a socially positive thing; let's tweak it rather than rebuilding it from scratch. I don't think we have to apologise for that. I don't see why people think we do, or why there is a God.

Returning back to Lee's question: to what extent are rituals used by the secular and are they meaningfully nonreligious or post-religious? After detailing the structure of the Sunday Assembly and how it mimics existing religious practices, I would contend that the 'liturgical orders' (Rappaport, 1999, p.35) developed by the Sunday

Assembly are specifically post-Christian, rather than post-religious. Through secular versioning they imitate existing Christian practices, and their emphasis on communal singing is another aspect that is central in creating ritual cohesion.

Communal Singing

Davis (2011) discusses how the Sunday Assembly appears to be replacing traditional notions of spirituality, but is doing it through the DNA of the traditional church model. Similar to a Christian church service, communal singing is an integral part of the DNA that forms the Sunday Assembly secular service format. Rather than singing hymns or Christian rock, it opts for pop songs, which may loosely relate to the theme. The organisers choose the songs and there is usually rationale behind the song lyrics chosen. However, certain songs are selected as they are easy for the congregation to sing along to.

In its effort to secularise the service when songs include the word God, God is then changed to Bob on the projected lyrics at the front of the hall. Thus, religious songs are not sung in an effort to be 'radically inclusive' and popular songs like Queens' 'Don't Stop Me Now', Bon Jovi 'It's My Life' and 'Livin' On a Prayer' and Journey's 'Don't Stop Believin'[sic]' become firm Sunday Assembly classics. These songs also relate to Generation Y (being released between 1980 and 2000), attract a particular age group and their lyrics can blur the lines between the secular and the religious. The singing is usually led by the London choir or the choir leader, if present, while Sanderson Jones energetically dances and sings at the front, which creates a social license for the congregation to do the same.

Rituals can 'consolidate the community through singing, recitation, and gestures in unison' (Rambo 1993, p. 115). Rambo (1993, p.118) contends that, when a person enacts a ritual, it acts to transcend the self and the individual becomes part of the larger community. This can function to create a connection with others. Thus, nonreligious rituals can build solidarity and reaffirm group identity. The ritual of communal singing develops as an important reason why people attend the Sunday Assembly. Singing at the Assembly is a crucial aspect to the make-up of the secular community. During my ethnographic research, members of the congregation often

described the Sunday Assembly as 'TED Talks with pop songs'.[13] The communal singing creates unification as a common shared experience. Furthermore, choirs in the UK are booming and the psychological benefits of singing feature on the NHS website (Heart Research, 2017). This is reflected in the Sunday Assembly's most popular small group — the mixed gender choir.

Singing together as part of a choir, or congregationally, is linked to several social benefits. Stewart & Lonsdale (2016) sampled 375 participants with the aim of psychologically comparing well-being in individuals who sing in a choir (similar to the Sunday Assembly) with those who sing solo or play a team sport. The study may have benefited from also including a fourth variable — those who partake in none of the above. Despite this, Stewart & Lonsdale (2016, p.10) found that activities 'pursued as part of a group yielded higher well-being scores'. Their findings give credence to the opinion that engaging in activities as a group rather than individually produces greater happiness.

In comparison, Livesey et al. (2012, p.11) qualitatively researched the effects of singing. They conducted a well-being study with a sub-sample population of 1,124 choral singers. These choral singers were identified as previously testing particularly high or low on a psychological survey measuring well-being.
In their analysis, they found a number of benefits attributed to communal singing:

- Singing in a choir enables people to make social contacts of similar interests and also provides the opportunity to socialise with people who are different to them, while also increasing a sense of belonging and social inclusion.
- For the participants studied, singing was seen to counteract or reverse negative feelings; for those in the low well-being group, it was seen have a positive effect on mood.
- Communal singing was seen to have cognitive benefits; participants discussed how it improved confidence and self-esteem.
- Structure, the feeling of providing direction and focus to people's lives
- Communal singing was reported as therapeutic.

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[13] TED Talks are influential videos devoted to spreading ideas.

- Lastly, respondents mentioned physiological benefits including breathing control.

The only negative effect recorded was feeling a sense of pressure (Livesey et al. 2012, p.15-19).

During the interviews I conducted, participants discussed similar benefits of singing at the Sunday Assembly. These included the physiological benefits of having to stand up straight, being well balanced and controlling breathing. Singing helped one participant maintain the correct posture and was listed as a health benefit. Many of the participants I spoke to articulated how the singing was one of the main reasons why they attend and expressed how much they 'love it'. Livesey et al. (2012) attribute communal singing to increased feelings of well-being, positivity and feeling more energised. This is exemplified by Phoebe, who explains:

> I don't normally get to sing, so I love to sing. I like it all. I think it is really jolly. I come out feeling absolutely euphoric.

The feeling of being uplifted after a Sunday Assembly service was common among participants. It is what Durkheim (1912) would refer to as collective effervescence, a heightened connectivity. Durkheim (1912, p.217) argues that the 'very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation'.

From a secular perspective, for participants who had grown up largely without any religious upbringing, there was a hint of wanting to participate in the singing, and other elements with church connotations. Ultimately, they were unable to do so as they felt it would be hypocritical. Ruth, who despite having 'militant atheist' views, told me of a time she visited a church with a friend:

> It was a feeling of connectedness to everything and transcendence; they had a gospel choir and really good music and everyone was singing. That's the one reason; I really wanted to try to get that. I've never had that before in my life. It made me wish I was religious.

Davie (2015, p.8) notes that, in '"cathedral-type" churches the appeal is often associated with the beauty of the building' and the quality of the music. Hannah told me how she would please her grandmother, who was an Orthodox Christian, by attending Christmas midnight mass. Hannah particularly liked the communal singing and the beautiful building, but would not attend more than once year. However, of particular interest was the number of people who had church backgrounds who expressed that they particularly missed the group singing. This became an interesting sub-theme as reasoning for why people attend. This first materialised when Ty commented:

> Something I really value is the singing, actually. Just going there and singing songs and feeling really great, because that was something I really valued when I went to church. Singing all the hymns, but I didn't really believe in them.

Zachary conveyed similar notions of the importance of congregational singing when he said:

> I was sad that church was over for me, but church was over for me because I couldn't do the thing that I enjoyed doing at church, which was leading the worship and singing. I couldn't sing songs with words that said "I really love you, Lord", when I didn't really love you, Lord.

Therefore, the chance to sing communally as part of a congregation, but importantly not in the form of worship, was a route into the Sunday Assembly for some. This was exemplified by Peter, who discussed how he was a Christian for 20-25 years and told me how he did not miss the theology, doctrine or the religion but there were certain aspects he did miss. He explained:

> I think it was the singing, particularly. Sometimes, I suppose, the depths of reflection that you get in a very good church service, that opportunity to think about life, and all of that, which churches at their best do well, or at least for me. The singing particularly, I think I missed. I saw the Sunday Assembly as an opportunity to get some of that back really.

When I queried what he was trying to 'get back', Peter explained that he missed the singing as he felt it was symptomatic of the community. For Ty and Zachary, they found the singing initially difficult, because they associated it with the spirituality of worship. It took them a while to come to terms with the fact that they could just sing the words, as they were only words. The transition to a post-Christian society in the UK has allowed the structure of the Sunday Assembly format to continue to function, and communal singing is one visible display of this transition. This was something alluded to by Kevin when he stated:

> Maybe the people who get up on Sunday mornings like to sing songs. Maybe it's something in our background that we all grew up watching Songs of Praise; I really don't know the reason why. It's certainly not representative of London.

Kevin's referencing of "Songs of Praise" harks back to Generation Y's consumption of religion through childhood experiences. Furthermore, as previously discussed in **Chapter One** on post-Christianity, I offer the hypothesis that the Sunday Assembly structure works better in societies that are either post-Christian or in that transition.

Esther discussed communal singing and how some cultures may be less inclined to sing publically. She said:

> I really like the parts but I found it really strange at the beginning to just get up and sing. That is something I would not do in public and I'm not sure just coming straight from [a European country], maybe it's a bit more reserved.

The negative effects of communal singing only manifested a couple of times during my interviews, notably in regard to the service resembling an evangelical Christian church. Whereas most participants missed the singing and sense of community found within church, some participants connected the communal singing to negative emotions of being a member of a religious congregation. Jacob's reaction to the communal singing reminded him of trying to 'escape a religious upbringing'. Jacob told me his initial thoughts were very negative and anti-authoritarian:

So if it's, like, 'everyone get up, we are going to sing a song,' my immediate emotional connection is, lets sing some hymns; I don't want to do that. Why do I have to get up? I don't want to get up. Oh no, I'm doing what everyone else is doing. I'm not a robot... my individualism and my kind of autonomy is being taken away, which is how it felt when I was a kid.

In the everyday lives of the nonreligious congregation, participants were able to reflect upon their agency and the choices they made while attending the Assembly which is evident in Jacob's extract.

Lastly, one participant discussed how she wished she had the freedom to sing in public, however, she felt that the Sunday Assembly did not offer the space to do this as it generated feelings of being self-conscious. As a result, this participant just mouthed the words to songs, which indicates feelings of uneasiness.

In summary, research (Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016; Livesey et al. 2012) has shown evidence of communal singing as a) increasing psychological well-being, and b) is linked to a number of measures on cognition, physiology, providing structure and having social benefits. The data analysis found that those who had left their church background generally missed the singing aspect the most. They described it often as synonymous with community and belonging, thus confirming how the Sunday Assembly is filling a niche in the transition to a post-Christian Britain. However, the 'religious baggage' that some participants discussed made it hard for them to connect with the Sunday Assembly's format of singing songs during a service.

On occasion, some participants found it hard to connect with particular songs. Older generations may not have been familiar with the music, while younger generations may not have known some of the songs. One participant who had attended twice (and was unlikely to attend again) told me she did not like the song choice. As a woman, singing the lyrics 'I need a hero' made her feel uncomfortable. This emphasises the subjectivity of the participants. So, nonreligious consumerism is precarious in terms of consolidating a congregation, and in some respects, is exclusionary (depending on the song). Lastly, I found that some people only attended the Sunday Assembly choir group rather than the main service. This shows

that the main service is sometimes used as a platform to find much smaller, intimate forms of community within the groups.

Nonreligious Liturgy and a 'Cup of Tea'

The Sunday Assembly has created ritualistic liturgical phrases that evoke traditional church liturgy. Once these phrases are said by the main speaker, members of the congregation answer back in unison. We see this call and response format used widely. For example, in Catholicism, when the Catholic priest says the words 'The Lord be with you', the congregation replies 'And also with you'. Similarly, within the Sunday Assembly, as previously mentioned, at the beginning of the service, after the first song has been sung, the speaker shouts 'What's better than one song?', to which the congregation eagerly replies, 'Two songs!' Stringer (1999, p.212) argues that a phrase can have significance without ever embodying meaning. This particular liturgy might not embody any meaning, other than an enjoyment of singing. However, it serves as a shared experience that becomes an expected part of a Sunday Assembly service. Thus, it marks out membership of 'those in the know'.

After every Sunday Assembly, a large percentage of people stay for tea, coffee and cake. This has become a ritualised aspect of attending. Maguire says, 'the content of an act is not what makes it a ritual act; rather it is the symbolic meaning attached to the act by participants' (McGuire, 2008, p.18). The act of drinking tea is very much embedded in British culture, implying a certain togetherness and comfort. Its ubiquity has given rise to popular phrases ('More tea, vicar?'), while a cup of tea is often suggested during times of crisis ('Sit down; I'll make you a cup of tea'.) For Maguire, 'rituals often remind the individual of this belonging, creating an intense sense of togetherness' (McGuire, 2008, p.21).

Day (2017, p.126) conducted an ethnography of the religious lives of Generation A laywomen[14]. She suggests that, not only is the drinking of tea and coffee after the main service an integral element of attending, but also serves as part of a 'larger ritual of religious belonging'. During her research, Day participated in all phases of the coffee rota. She observed how different coloured cups were used at different

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[14] Non-ordained female member of a Church.

events, thus marked and confirmed as sacred and set apart. She found that, with 'the passing of the cup and saucer to a stranger comes an offer of hospitality and possibly friendship. Sitting down and drinking together from identical cups equalizes part of the relationship' (Day, 2017, p.130-131). Day (2017, p.130) discovered that the act of tea drinking, or rather the performance and ritual, was central to the role of a female Christian and is the 'embodiment of what they do in the church and the extra-church activities'. At the Sunday Assembly, the ritualised activity of drinking tea and eating cake after a service is regarded as an important time to allow the community activity to begin. It is during this period that friends can meet up, newcomers can discuss their initial experiences of the Assembly, and Sanderson Jones can cement belonging as he attempts to meet everyone who has come.

During my interviews, it became apparent that a sense of community was important to some participants and that the Sunday Assembly was reminiscent of a community they had come to know through their religious upbringing. This secular service for the nonreligious, developed first as an 'atheist church', then a 'godless congregation', now in its most recent form a 'secular community', appears to be one contemporary answer to Alain De Botton's (2012, p.25) question: How do we recover and reclaim a sense of community left wanting in a secular society? Alain de Botton (2012, p.23) believes the privatisation of religious belief that occurred in Europe and the United States during the 19th century has eroded our sense of community, thus we have lost a sense of belonging.

The Sunday Assembly, particularly through its host Sanderson Jones, is particularly effective at forging a sense of belonging and community from the outset. At the beginning of a service, Jones sets the tone:

> Who is ready to celebrate being alive?

This liturgical order said at the beginning of each Assembly attempts to bond the group's 'core values with its preferred emotions in response to life's reciprocal obligations and opportunities' which 'fosters identity by giving meaning and hope to life' (Davies, 2011). Immediately, Jones commands the emotions change from anticipation to celebration. He goes on to say:

154

Give me a cheer if you have been to the Sunday Assembly before?

Put your hand up if this is your first time — keep your hand in the air if you have been before. Give them [the first timers] a "high five".

Stand up if you have returned and this is your second time at the Sunday Assembly.

Let's give these people a round of applause.

A welcoming 'high five' from a neighbour dissolves the awkwardness of strangers. In some instances, I have seen people get out of their chair and run down the aisle to give someone's lingering hand a high five. The ethnographic research recorded consistently that approximately one in four raised their hands to indicate that this was their first time attending and thus indicates the Assembly suffers with retention.

Day (2017, p.154) found that the informal social networks of church members are seen to be essential; people rarely walk into the Church without knowing someone. In contrast, many people attend the Sunday Assembly alone and without knowing anyone who attends. They attend alone to find a community, thus the informal social networks do not play the same role as they did for Day's Generation A laywomen.

Retaining 'the Flock'

Of central importance to the Sunday Assembly is how it can retain its congregation within the confines of an updated 21st-century church model. The host often remarks: 'What we love at the Sunday Assembly more than people coming the first time are those returning for the second time. So, who's here for the second time? Stand up'. A large round of applause is generated, showing their return as valued.

An interesting strategy that the Sunday Assembly trialled for a period in 2015 was the 'signing in' to Conway Hall. Volunteers would greet people, ask if they had been before; if so, tick their name off a list of email contacts; if not, ask first timers to provide their details. Sanderson Jones explained this system as purely a community-

driven idea. If somebody from the congregation had not attended in a couple of months, records would show this and allow the Sunday Assembly to follow up with an 'everything ok?' email. This system was never formerly introduced. It may have had good intentions, but it somewhat ties into the moral weight of religious congregations. I recall an atheist living in Bible Belt America, who told me that when you miss a service at his local Christian church, you are questioned on why you missed it the following week.

Having said this, the feeling of belonging through attendance materialised in my interviews. One participant, when asked if they felt a sense of belonging at the Sunday Assembly, responded: 'Yeah, for sure. Especially when they ask, "Have you been here before?". You're like, "Yeah, yeah, I have. I'm on the list"'. This indicates that belonging is confirmed by attendance, too.

The purpose of this chapter has been to show how lived nonreligion is expressed through organised structures, rituals and practices. These practices, which resemble existing religious practices, are effective in a post-Christian chain of memory.

Conclusion

In summary, I have provided an ethnographic glimpse into attending a Sunday Assembly 'secular service' in London. I have reflected on the structure of the service — how this closely relates to a Christian-style format but with 'TED talks' rather than a sermon, a moment of reflection rather than prayer, and poetry rather than Bible readings. Furthermore, I have considered how rituals have previously been studied in the sociology of religion, nonreligion and how the Sunday Assembly imitates existing Church structures and uses liturgies. Finally, the chapter discussed religion as a chain of memory and how this fits within a post-Christian context. The Sunday Assembly constructs a particular type of lived nonreligion and offers a structure mimicking organised religion. Community and belonging are key dimensions of this, further discussed in **Chapters Eight** and **Ten**.

In the following chapter, I summarise how this new lived nonreligion differs from public discourse on atheism in the mid-noughties. Lee (2015, p.129) questions if the

replication of some rituals and structures are enough to create a long-lasting bind. She recognises that the:

> Sunday Assembly attempt to replicate at least some aspects of religious communal life. Yet none of these has rivalled religious traditions in terms of their scope. Their focus is on existential philosophical questions, day-to-day well-being, and community for community's sake; but they do not give detailed direction in terms of, say, how to dress, what to eat, how to wash the body and so on. This may indicate a limitation in terms of the area of life that nonreligious cultures address and how comprehensive and how bounded a community they are capable of generating or supporting.

Lee raises an important point: the Sunday Assembly has a core group who attend regularly, but the numbers at the London congregation stay consistent. While their scope may be small, as is the case that with religious affiliation, being affiliated with a nonreligious group is associated with greater wellbeing and thus can provide a sense of belonging and community (Galen, 2015, p.59). It is yet to build and incorporate rituals for death, funeral, weddings and births, or mark other nonreligious rites of passage. However, Sanderson Jones has orchestrated both funerals and weddings in a personal capacity.

It is through ritual and ceremonies that social bonds and social cohesion are built and strengthened. *Figure 6.1* showed how the Sunday Assembly is attempting to create new rituals by planting bulbs, and how it has proven easier to draw on existing Christian tradition and memory — the Christian church has 2000 years of them to draw on. It is through the comfort of ritual that communities are formed, which will be the focus of forthcoming chapters.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'LIVE BETTER' — SUNDAY ASSEMBLY IN THE LIVES OF INDIVIDUALS

'You don't go to the Sunday Assembly because you're happy. You go because you're unhappy and you need to scratch that itch'. – Late night conversation with a member of a UK Assembly and PhD researcher Katie Cross roaming the streets of Utrecht after the 2016 Conference Called Wonder.

'Like doctors prescribe Weight Watchers for fat people, they should prescribe Sunday Assembly for depressed people' – A remark made to me in the pub after one Sunday Assembly.

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to focus on the lives of the individuals researched and the participants interviewed. It builds on **Chapter Five** and addresses one of the key research questions: '*In what ways have secular congregations contributed to the formation of a new nonreligious identity*?' I unpack what the Sunday Assembly means when it refers to 'living better', and how the meaning of living better translates to the participants in terms of the organisation of the Sunday Assembly (macro level), individual lives (micro) and the community groups (meso).

Importantly, this chapter further considers participants' initial reasoning for attending the secular community. This is achieved through thematic data analysis on how the Sunday Assembly functions as a secular support network for those in crises, or for those who feel isolated/lonely and crave a platform to pursue happiness. I detail the 'Live Better' groups that function as peer-to-peer support, which was introduced in **Chapter Two**, and the significance that spirituality (or a lack of) plays in the participants' lives. This chapter also builds on **Chapter Five** by offering a new discourse of collective unbelief, much different to the nonreligion exhibited by the 'New Atheists' of the mid- to late noughties.

What Does 'Live Better' Mean to the Sunday Assembly?

It is essential to develop an understanding of what the Sunday Assembly means when it speaks of living better. Its website (2013a) states:

> We aim to provide inspiring, thought-provoking and practical ideas that help people to live the lives they want to lead and be the people they want to be.

Additionally:

> We're not here to tell you how to live your life — we're here to help you be the best version of you you can be.

As previously mentioned, its mission is 'To help everyone live life as fully as possible'.

The Sunday Assembly has no dogma and from its public charter (see **Chapter Two**) states that it help you live your life as well as you can. How the Sunday Assembly tries to 'help you' to 'live better' is explained in this chapter.

What Does 'Live Better' Mean to the Participants?

During interviews, I asked participants if the Sunday Assembly motto ('Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More') resonated with them. I then asked them to unpack what each aspect meant to them. Esther expressed what the first part of the motto meant to her:

> What is "live better"? I'm not sure how that comes through the Sunday Assembly. Does live better mean be more social? I get the sense it is about being more kind. I think live better is that whole lefty idea, like "stay in Europe". I don't know about it, it's like a value judgement Sunday Assembly telling people what it is.

It was important for Esther's autonomy and perception of her own agency that the Sunday Assembly did not impose on her what she should specifically do to live better, but at the same time she found this part of the motto to be quite ambiguous.

What Esther does allude to is how the Sunday Assembly represents being more social, being more kind, which Esther associates with being liberal and politically left wing. Autonomy was an important issue for other participants, too, who raised concerns over aspects of the Sunday Assembly resembling the Christian church in terms of format and structure.

Still, Esther felt the Assembly has had a positive impact on her life. It was instrumental in fostering openness to new experiences, and she'd recovered part of her social character through attending. Had the Sunday Assembly helped her 'live better'? She expressed during the interview that she:

> Might have become more confident, because at the beginning it was very scary and now I went along and now I help out. So I feel like… I've overcome my fears and do more and more extroverted things, like going out and talking to people, even if they're not like me at all, and volunteering…I'm not dead, I'm still alive. I can talk to people who are very different to me, so in a social sense, yes.

For Samuel, 'living better' was invoked through the talks and themes, when sometimes 'you'll hear something interesting to help you try to live better'. Mary felt that living better was orientated around the self, rather than helping others. She indicated that she did not think anyone went to the Sunday Assembly 'to help the wider community', that the Assembly had a disproportionate focus on helping the individual. This would suggest that the Assembly works as a form of therapeutic culture and that the focus on living better through it is internal. During the field work, I heard people refer to the Sunday Assembly as a therapy group. In 2016, the Sunday Assembly London used the theme 'the happiness of being you', at which the speaker aimed to motivate people to be the best version of themselves and thus to live better.

Therapy Culture

'This much I know' was previously introduced in **Chapter Six**. It is the moment during a service when a member of the congregation takes to the stage in testimonial style to discuss an aspect of their life. It is often trumpeted as a major step towards

overcoming a problem. Interviewees fondly remember 'this much I know' moments as some of the best from the Assembly. Examples include: a person discussing their introversion in front of a large audience; a young boy playing a musical instrument; a member overcoming illness; broken-down family relationships; dealing with loneliness before finding the Sunday Assembly community; dealing with death. This small but important part of the service creates social cohesion. By sharing stories of overcoming problems, it relates to a therapeutic shift that takes emotions seriously in contemporary society (Furedi, 2013, p.1). Riis and Woodhead (2010, p.5) argue there is widespread and scientific tendency 'to reduce emotions to something private, personal and subjective' inner states. Rather, emotions including those found within religion are 'constructed in the interplay between social agents *and* structures' (Riis and Woodhead, 2010, p.5). Therefore, they propose to consider emotion as 'generated in the interactions between self and society, self and symbol, and symbol and society' (Riis and Woodhead, 2010, p.6). Through emotions and a testimonial 'this much I know' the congregation is able to learn about the group's values and social norms.

'This much I know' also shares parallels with conversion narratives and testimonies, which are a common form of evangelism — 'conversion is wrapped in emotional experience to such a degree the two seem nearly inseparable (Smith, 2017, p.89). During a Los Angeles Sunday Assembly (available on YouTube), a woman emotionally discussed finding the Assembly after leaving the Mormon Church. She told the congregation that she had given up on finding the same sense of community that she had when she was religious, and how she was thankful she had found a community like the Sunday Assembly (Sunday Assembly, 2015i). In this respect, the Assembly is adhering to a particular type of therapeutic culture – closely resembling cognitive behavioural therapy, with added karaoke.

Bruce (2002, p.180) argues that a major theme of the Charismatic Movement that 'chimes well with the secular climate is its attitude towards the individual self', thus towards a therapeutic culture. Rieff (1987, p.62) maintains that self-improvement 'is the ultimate concern of modern culture'. Wright (2008, p.322) contends that, in Rieffian sociology, communal purpose is the function of culture, but therapeutic culture is one of interiority. Wright (2008, p.323) argues that 'in contrast to the

clergy who enforced moral order, the therapeutic professional… bolster[s] self-sufficiency through the eradication of dread, guilt and anxiety that become manifest in the individual when traditional authority has been supplanted by a preoccupation with the self'.

Smith (2017, p,88) argues for the Sunday Assembly, 'Emotions are central to congregational experience. Emotions function as a source of truth-confirmation for religious beliefs'. They are equally as relevant to the secular. Also, the 'celebratory singing and dancing, the solemn moments during readings and testimonials, and other aspects of Assemblies suggest an affective community based on patterned emotional ritual and affective performance' (Smith, 2017, p,98) which help the congregation to live better.

Structure, Ritual and Vicarious Unbelief

A recurring theme among the participants of my research was how the ritual of Sunday Assembly attendance gave structure to their lives. People would plan their weeks around attending. Several people described it as having a positive effect on their lives as they were not partying as hard on a Saturday night; one participant said how she even took her bags to the Sunday Assembly before going on holiday, indicating a high level of dedication. Not all participants regularly attend, however. Jacob summarized this by stating that people can 'dial into the Sunday Assembly when needed', presenting it as somewhat vicarious. Vicarious religion is 'the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but appear to approve of what the minority is doing' (Davie, 2014, p.6). If people 'dial in' to the Sunday Assembly it is usually during times of crisis, to find community, to find belonging, to feel more positive and uplifted for the rest of the day, but by dialing in they can also leave, after which the Assembly is maintained by an active core representing the larger population.

Participants also commented on the standardized structure and predictability of the Sunday Assembly format. One in particular said:

I do like the fact that it is a format which is kind of similar and replicated everywhere. It does feel like if I went to the one in New York I would already feel comfortable. Because it would be similar kinds of people and similar structure, and you would get it. It's kind of similar to if you're an alcoholic, there's AA meetings all around the world.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is an interesting point of comparison, indicating the participant's perception of the therapeutic culture and nature of the Sunday Assembly. He could have used 'Starbucks' or 'McDonalds' as brands that are predictable and standardised (Ritzer, 1993). He could have referenced the Catholic Church, yet instead referred to a self-help group. What became increasingly apparent through analysis of the interviews was that many of the participants had sought the Sunday Assembly as a vehicle to 'live better' during difficult times in their lives (break-ups, loneliness, moving away from friends, or vice versa). They could not find comfort in prayer, religion or church as these were all contradictory to their nonreligious beliefs.

Living Better — Attending the Sunday Assembly in Times of Crisis

I conducted an ethnographic field trip to St Mary's, Bryanston Square, a church that believes 'Christianity is not a religion but a relationship'.[15] St Mary's states that it is adventurous, religion-free, human, messy and informal (*see Figure 7.1*):

Figure 7.1

| Adventurous | Religion-Free | Human | Messy | Informal |
| We would rather go for it than play it safe. | It's about connecting with God, not being religious. | We don't always get it right. | It's not always pretty. | We're not a club. |

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[15] I attended St Mary's Christmas service to draw comparison to the Sunday Assembly's 'Yule Rock', 2014 and 2015.

A man in his early twenties introduced himself to me, then introduced me to all of his friends. This man, Luke, told me that he had moved to London to study and did not like the first church he found. He even questioned whether he still wanted to attend church.

However, after a friend introduced him to St Mary's, he expressed how he quickly fell in love with it and now feels part of a community, stating that 'everyone knows each other' and that he's found social cohesion within the church through various groups. We discussed the groups he was part of, like the student group that sang worship songs. This particular encounter resonated with my experience of Sunday Assembly members. It was as if Luke was solely seeking a like-minded community.

Organised religion can provide a ready-made community, which can offer social support, both emotionally and sometimes financially. It also provides rituals, rites of passage for life's big events, and emotional support during times of crisis. If you are nonreligious, attending church to find community may be viewed as hypocritical to your own (un)beliefs. For example, Deborah listed the benefits of attending church (community, happiness, salvation) but expressed how she was unable to 'believe in something I don't believe in order to get those benefits'.

Collins-Mayo et al. (2010, p.7) recognise the generational shift towards nonreligion but argue that this may be due to young people not having to overcome difficult life situations, which 'make great demands on faith or test their capacity to "go on"'. In other words, if the nonreligious do not turn to faith, where do they turn to for their support network, especially during times of crisis?

During her ethnographic research on everyday nonreligion, Lee (2015, p.123) discovered how people:

> recalled feeling isolated at times in their non-religiosity, especially while going through the processes of leaving a religious community, but at other times too when negotiating difficult life events with a sense that religious traditions might have provided support, if only they did not feel so unable to connect with those traditions.

Lee (2014, p.126) found that a hidden solidarity exists, whereby nonreligious persons interviewed in her study 'expressed a desire to socialize more with like-minded nonreligious people'. Her research also uncovered similar narratives of isolation in nonreligiosity and the lack of support networks outside of organised religion (which the Sunday Assembly aims to tackle). The familiarity of the Sunday Assembly's format, rituals and practices allows individuals from Generation Y, who have left their religious upbringing, to connect (usually with ease) to a secular version of these traditions.

During one interview with Thomas, who had grown up as Catholic but now would identify as being agnostic/weak atheist (in the style of Dawkins' spectrum of theistic probability (2006), being 99.99% sure there is no God), we discussed the impact the Sunday Assembly had on his life. He responded:

> Yeah, it does [have a positive impact]. I've come out of an almost decade-long relationship… And then just for a couple of months… I got on really well with someone, and that broke up… and I was left. I was asking myself a lot of questions. I felt very under-stimulated in my job... If I'm honest, laying myself right open here, I was feeling pretty vulnerable and needing something, like Sunday Assembly.

I then asked Thomas did he search for the Sunday Assembly as a support network when he was feeling vulnerable. He replied:

> That was exactly it... If I'm 100% honest, I think I might have gone because I was hoping she (his ex-) might be there … That might have been a bit of an issue, but I needed something else. I was feeling pretty low, and I suspect there's quite a lot of people like that who were looking for something else who came to Sunday Assembly, probably some who suffered from depression or a crazy proportion who are vulnerable.

Here, Thomas indicated a low moment in his life and spoke of the Sunday Assembly as a platform that could provide the social support he needed at that point. Additionally, isolation was expressed when he said, 'I think what probably happened [when I first attended] was that I was terrified of spending time alone in

my flat'. Many of the participants indicated that after attending the Sunday Assembly they felt more positive. Samuel referred to attending as a 'happiness boost… if you're feeling a bit down you always feel better afterwards; how long that lasts is indefinite, but it's a good "pick me up"'.

The Sunday Assembly states:

> Just by being with us you should be energised, vitalised, restored, repaired, refreshed, and recharged. No matter what the subject of the Assembly, it will solace worries, provoke kindness and inject a touch of transcendence into the everyday. But life can be tough… It is. Sometimes bad things happen to good people, we have moments of weakness, or life just isn't fair. We want the Sunday Assembly to be a place of compassion, where, no matter what your situation, you are welcomed, accepted, and loved.

During Rachel's interview, she discussed feeling lonely and isolated more explicitly since moving to London. She told me that she found it hard to make friends at work — 'we don't go for drinks every week, it's not really a thing with us'. Thus, Rachel said that she felt attending the Sunday Assembly would be a way for her to make friends. Although Rachel felt she was yet to achieve this after a few months of attending, she believed a community did exist at the London congregation and she felt happier when present. However, both happiness and community were things Rachel was still struggling to find while living in London.

For Rachel, the Sunday Assembly was viewed as a gateway to 'living better'. She said that she 'wasn't in the best place life-wise', that she was 'kind of just sad, lonely; it's hard moving to this country when you don't know any other British people. [Londoners] aren't the most welcoming bunch!'

Relate (2014) conducted a survey (5778 participants aged over 16) that looked at relationships in the UK. It found that 42% of people have no friends at work (Topping, 2014). So, Rachel's experience of not having close work friends is not uncommon. The survey also found that one in five have never or rarely felt loved and nine percent do not have a single close friend (expanded to national level, that's

approximately 4.7 million people in the UK). A 2013 study by ComRes named London the loneliest city in the UK, with 52% stating they felt lonely. Furthermore, the Office for National Statistics (2014) found that Britain is the loneliest country in the EU, with Britons saying they are least likely to have strong friendships or know their neighbours. It also situates London as being the most isolating European city. With such statistics in mind, it is clear why London was the birthplace for the Sunday Assembly, filling a niche within a post-Christian and sometimes isolating society.

As previously mentioned, I discovered that many participants had brought friends along to the Sunday Assembly. Jude mentioned bringing a friend who had gone through severe depression. The feedback he received from his friend was that being around positive, happy people was an amazing experience for him. Equally, the sometimes overwhelming 'happiness' could be perceived as a negative which I will discuss shortly.

Peter discussed attending the Sunday Assembly while he was in a period of turmoil, when he did not feel part of a community. He moved to London after his 'wife left home' (they subsequently got divorced), and he described this period in his life as 'too much disruption', leaving plenty of friends behind. On London, he remarked: 'I don't know my way around here. I quite often have to get the sat-nav out… I feel disjointed. Not unhappy, I should add'.

Later in the interview, Peter said of the Sunday Assembly:

> If what you need is a little bit of cheering up, fantastic, but actually if you've discovered that week that your partner's got cancer, or some other equally devastating thing, what are you going to fall back on? Well, friends probably. The Sunday Assembly does create friendships, but in the same way that a tennis club does. Some of those friendships work and some of them don't. Whereas I think a church… they've been doing it for a long time.

Thus, for Peter, the Sunday Assembly was a temporary boost of happiness and connectedness but not something that could be seen to seriously provide support for life's big crises. Peter found the Sunday Assembly London to be a 'very friendly

place'. But this, he determined may have been because of his emotional state at the time (during the interview, he told me he was 'just so happy to find' a place like the Sunday Assembly). As Peter's life became more stable, he attended less frequently and now rarely goes. Riis and Woodhead (2010, p.93) argue 'public rituals that find no reinforcement in other spheres of society may provide nostalgia or entertainment or fleeting intense emotion, but are unlikely to be able to feed 'powerful and long-lasting' moods and motivations'. It is for reasons like this that the Sunday Assembly London does and will continue to suffer retention problems; it provides a fleeting happiness for many, but may not bind them to a strong core community.

The importance of suffering as a binding factor should not be discounted in the creation of community, but it would appear once people are no longer suffering and find happiness, for the majority the importance of the communities like the Sunday Assembly weaken.

As mentioned above, loneliness and isolation were factors often found with participants who had moved to London. Esther came to London to study a postgraduate degree and had subsequently stayed on to work. She expressed how sometimes she had times:

> when I've felt quite depressed, feeling not really up for going [to the Sunday Assembly], especially while doing my Masters. It was stressful, hard work, I didn't have my family or my friends network at home. It was really tough sometimes and it was pretty tough to get yourself up and go to the Sunday Assembly, but every time I went I felt so much more positive afterwards. Sometimes, Sunday is a bit of a scary day when you're a student. So, I would say definitely, and what I'm hating myself at the moment for, because I know when I go there it gives me so much and I feel better. I feel I can't get myself to go because I'm so stressed and in such a bad mood. I can't go there and be happy and smiley.

Here, Esther reinforces the notion that sometimes being nonreligious can be isolating without a network of friends, family and organised religion to turn to. Furthermore, Sunday for Generation Y has very different connotations to other

generations, for example Andrew stated that once he lost his faith, what was he doing to do with Sunday mornings? Day (2017, p.114) found that, for the women of Generation A, Sundays are a sacred time, 'a special time, to dress up, greet friends, make a Sunday lunch, and be with family'.

An opinion shared among interviewees was that the Sunday Assembly was very happy/smiley, almost to its detriment. As Rachel frames it: 'There's a lot of uplifting stories [during the Assembly], but the world outside isn't always positive, happy go lucky'. Mary stated that the Sunday Assembly is geared towards the:

> very pro, the sort of people who are like Sanderson, very positive, full of wonder, that kind of thing. It didn't really cater towards people who don't feel like that all the time, like people who genuinely suffer from depression sometimes and they can't feel this happiness, positivity all the time. I felt like it was kind of excluding those people…It is like, "Well, I don't feel happy 100% of the time. I don't feel like that's a problem. I think that's okay." Listening to Sanderson at Sunday Assembly all the time, he's there saying, "It's not okay. You need to feel happy all the time. What's wrong with you?" and so I'm not going to feel ashamed of myself just because I'm not feeling happy all the time.

By 'living better' the Sunday Assembly presents a positive lifestyle to the congregation. Savage et al. (2006, p.48) argue for Generation Y, 'sadness is not easily acknowledged in the face of "achievable" happiness', and since life is considered to be 'basically OK' for many at the Assembly, 'to fail is to be culpable'.

Are Assembliers Living Better?

In **Chapter Three** and **Four** I discussed 'the exchange', where I helped the Sunday Assembly create a survey. The survey reported that the following:

- On average, people had made three to four new friends through attending the Sunday Assembly.

- Of those who regularly attend the Assembly (been more than five times), 88% said it gave them a greater sense of community, 87% said it made them happier, and 80% said it gave them greater life satisfaction.
- Over 20% of people who attend have some form of mental health issue. Of these, 85% said the Sunday Assembly made them happier, while 77% reported greater life satisfaction through attendance.
- 80% reported a more positive outlook on life and 76.3% felt a greater sense of community.

The Sunday Assembly is attempting to help people in the UK with loneliness and who do not have a support network. It states:

> Helping them would be transformative personally but in our increasingly atomised, individualistic, isolated culture it would be transformative at a societal level (Sunday Assembly, 2016f).

Overall, these statistics illustrate that the Sunday Assembly is having a positive impact on people's lives and helping them to live better.

For Eve, an active Sunday Assemblier, 'living better' related directly to the secular community. She felt more open now to try new experiences and stated that she has made 'much richer friendships in my life now because of the people I've met through Sunday Assembly, which again helps you live better. I think I've had lots of surface friendships over the years, but very, very few rich, deep, true friendships, which I feel I have a lot more of now'.

Sharma (2012, p.816) has shown that, for individuals, congregations can be an important extension of their families. This view is supported by the experience of participants like Andrew, who used the Sunday Assembly to find like-minded friends when moving to London as he could no longer find instant networks by attending a church due to his lack of belief. How deep reaching the Sunday Assembly's influence is to its congregation outside of the service and social events is difficult to gauge, yet this research has found that the Assembly increases feelings of openness to new experiences for participants and, for the core community, they exhibit increased social capital and connections.

Live Better Groups and Life Course

In **Chapter Two**, I introduced the Sunday Assembly Live Better groups. These groups are described on the Assembly website as:

> Peer support groups, where people come together to help each other achieve their goals, fulfill their ambitions and, well, live better!

I spoke to Ava, who had joined a Live Better group. She expressed how she did not actually have an issue that needed resolving; rather, she discussed specific things that were bothering her each week. Ava discovered during the group meetings that people attending (especially new people) wanted to stay on at the end for tea and coffee (during the main service), but as they did not know anybody, they would leave and go home. However, if there was a small group branching off from the main congregation, people were able to find familiar faces, which led to new introductions. In discussing their problems and intimate life details, group members were able to build up a relationship with other members (groups consisted of the same eight people over eight weeks). These smaller groups that function outside of the normal Sunday service are like short-term versions of Christian 'cell groups'. Andrew recognised that the Live Better groups (and other small groups) are much more accessible than the large 400-strong Sunday congregation. Andrew stated that attending the groups allowed him to 'get to know people and then feel more comfortable to come on a Sunday morning'.

The Sunday Assembly survey (mentioned above) revealed that people wanted more from the Assembly. So, in October 2015, it was announced that the Assembly would be piloting an 8-week Life Course, which would become a secular alternative to Holy Trinity Brompton's Alpha Course. The aim was to combine Martin Seligman's PERMA model of positive psychology with replicating the structure of the Alpha Course. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend this during my research and the Sunday Assembly created a course retreat in March 2017 after my research had finished.

Such events were created to help people live better based on the following hypotheses:

- 'When people come together to better themselves while building a community, it will change how they look at themselves and the world'.
- 'When people come together in community, these communities can change their neighbourhoods, towns or villages'.
- 'When there is a movement of communities, full of individuals who are developing themselves and transforming their surroundings, then we can tackle the big issues facing society, culture and our poor old planet'.

These new retreats (costing in the region of £200 per person) would be focused on personal development, with creative, uplifting activities including singing and an emphasis on mindfulness (Sunday Assembly, 2016j).

Mindfulness and Spirituality From Assembliers' Perspectives

Harris (2014, p.35) states that many atheists have a problem with the term spirituality; in contrast, 'there is nothing spooky about mindfulness'. He defines mindfulness as a 'state of clear, non-judgemental, and undistracted attention to the contents of consciousness, whether pleasant or unpleasant'. Harris explains from a neurophysiological perspective how cultivating mindfulness can reduce anxiety, pain and depression, as well as improve cognitive functions (Harris, 2014, p.35). The majority of my participants regarded mindfulness as a secular practice but associated spirituality with the supernatural. However, mindfulness can carry the connotation of a spiritual practice and Sharma et al. (2012, p.295) refer to these nonreligious spiritualties as relating to the 'sacralization of nature, the self, and everyday life'. Many of the participants practised mindfulness and some discussed attending spiritual retreats to help them to live better. Therefore, where does spirituality fit into the Sunday Assembly and the lives of the individuals?

Flory & Miller (2007), in their qualitative study of 100 millennials in five American cities, concluded that 'young people are not the spiritual consumers of their parent's generation, rather they are seeking both a deep spiritual experience and a community experience, each of which provides them with meaning in their lives, and each is meaningless without the other'. Participants from the London congregation evidently do not want to be involved in a religious community — they are no longer

religious. They also do not solely seek to belong to a sports team or choirs in London. They are seeking something in between, which the Sunday Assembly is tapping into, a secular spirituality of connectedness. Thus, the Sunday Assembly has become focused on 'secular spirituality', which has been mentioned and discussed at conferences and themed Assemblies.

Ammerman (2013, p.259) argues 'both scholarly and popular perceptions seem to tell a story of declining "religion" and growing "spirituality" — a zero-sum movement from one to the other. What is declining in this picture is "religion," usually assumed to be organized, traditional and communal, while "spirituality" is often described as improvised and individual'. Chaves (2011, p.141) highlights the difficulties in understanding what it is meant when people identify as being spiritual but nonreligious (SBNR). We know Americans are becoming less religious (Pew Research Center 2015) by measures on how important they say religion is to their lives, how often they attend a religious service and how often they pray. At the same time, the numbers of religious individuals who say they often feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being and a deep sense of wonder about the universe has risen (Pew Research Center 2016).

A 2012 Pew Research Center survey in 2012 detailed that roughly 3 in 10 religiously unaffiliated adults believe in the spiritual energy of physical objects and do yoga as a spiritual practice. Nearly 6 in 10 say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth. Could it be that spirituality is a trend of individualisation whereby the nonreligious and the religious (unaffiliated) choose spirituality as a self-described category to provide ease from the estrangement from collective belief systems to avoid stigma, especially where nonreligion is perceived as deviant.

Spirituality is a term that can have countless discourses, meanings and perceptions. Similarly, SBNR or secular spirituality should be treated with just as much caution. Sam Harris' (2014) *Waking Up, A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* is evident of the rise in popularity of the nonreligious exploring spirituality from a secular (and nonreligious or supernatural) worldview. Cimino & Smith (2014, p.6), in their work *Atheist Awakening*, believe that capturing the affective quality of nonreligion is a challenge, because atheists by definition reject religion and its building blocks of

rituals and spirituality. However, what does exist is a fast-emerging spiritual but nonreligious category. At one particular Sunday Assembly in December 2015 — themed 'secular spirituality' — the congregation was asked, through a show of hands, 'Who identifies as being spiritual?'. Around half the audience raised their hand. When asked, 'Who believes we have a soul?', around one third raised their hand. This would suggest that 'nones' can be 'fuzzy' (Woodhead, 2014). As an individual example, Abigail was adamant that there is no God, critical/curious of her friends' religion(s), probing as to why they believed at all, but at the same time open to other belief systems like Buddhism. The 'fuzzy nones' applies when discussing life after death in this particular interview. Abigail said:

> I believe we're here and then we die and that's that. I don't know, it's a weird one. Because it's quite a strange thought to think you die and then you're gone and that's it, and then you're just sort of extinguished. I don't know — I think I'm being a bit too clear cut to say you die and that's that. I don't know if I do necessarily completely believe that. I don't know whether we carry on living after we die. Because your being is such a powerful thing, it seems weird it could just disappear, like your soul or whatever you want to call it.

The concept of a soul is incredibly interesting as it does not conform to preconceptions of nonreligious identity. Abigail would not describe herself as spiritual, yet when I asked her if she believed we have a soul, she answered:

> I don't really know — I guess I think we do have a soul, because you can say they are not there anymore, and what isn't there? Their soul? Is it a spiritual thing that floats out of your body, or is it just you? What makes you function, your personality? I guess that's how I would look at it.

Gabriel viewed spirituality as feelings of connectedness (similar to how the Sunday Assembly views wonder as a connective). He reflected on spirituality and religion:

> So, I was thinking how people get so involved in churches when I came to the conclusion there was no God. People are going crazy in churches, doing crazy dances, and people get possessed. I've seen people do this in church in

real life, in spiritual events. What is causing that? I think it is the connectedness, there's so much about the world we don't know from a scientific point of view. The feeling created by connectedness and also by music. I feel those together — feeling focussed, a communal focus and music on top of this — can cause the healings you see, if they are actually real healings, because the mind is such a powerful tool. I think we don't really understand the environmental factors of music and connectedness on the body. So, I think whenever people speak about spirituality and feeling connected, we don't really understand, we can narrow down the neurones and say these are the ones that are causing it. I think that is definitely what it is.

In this sense Gabriel sees spirituality as something that can be explained through science and reason. The ambiguity surrounding spirituality was frustrating for Gabriel, who told me:

Usually when I hear the word spiritual I get angry and stop thinking about the conversation and start going through a thing in my head. People use that word way too much.

Returning to Jacob's interview, the supernatural was perceived as a force beyond nature:

[Spirituality] is a supernatural term, a supernatural element, and I don't believe in the supernatural. If you are using spirit in the definition of "I am spirited, I am a spirited person, or I have spirit", that is something different, that is more to do with your personality or the way you carry yourself. *Your mental state. I believe in that, but that is very different to spiritual.*

During an interview with Peter, he discussed spirituality by differentiating nature and the supernatural:

Well, what I would say about myself is that I am fairly self-reflective. I'm not sure if contemplative is quite the right word, because that's not the mechanism I use, but I think quite a lot about life, and purpose, and meaning. I suppose I sort of think that I know that you have to create your own

meaning. If you include literature, beauty and art, and reflecting on all of that and the nature of the universe, yes, I'm spiritual. If you want to include anything metaphysical or supernatural, then absolutely not. I don't think those things are impossible, but they are without evidence... I think you should believe things for which there is evidence, and there is insufficient evidence to believe in a spiritual world or a spiritual reality.

As previously discussed, questions on the definition of spirituality would often be answered with 'I don't know what it means'. Thomas contemplated its meaning during our interview and stated that spirituality for him:

Comes as all sorts of slightly silly stuff... I associate it with people talking shit, but that's maybe just my association with that word, not as a major criticism of them. I suppose I don't know what it means. If it means a belief in things that you can't see, if it's a belief in fairies and hugging trees, then obviously it's probably pretty silly. If it's a belief that human beings can be more than just water, bone, flesh, then sign me up. I suppose I don't really know what it means.

When I asked Grace if she was spiritual, she replied:

Oh God, yeah, I believe that I'm soulful. I think a lot about things, I do a lot of reflection, I like to say sorry quite often. I like to think whether I did something right in a situation. I like to think of myself as having a good moral compass inside of me. I like to think that I try my best to do the right thing in situations. Also, I do like peace time and down time and a little meditation. I like things to relax. I like to sometimes feel the silliness of stuff.

The use of religious language and expressions like 'God' was common in the interviews and Grace uses 'soulful' as a secular distinction from having a soul. In summary, Ammerman's (2013, p.273) study found that for about half of her participants 'spirituality is understood to be about believing in God and doctrines about God, and for more than three-quarters it is about being part of a religious tradition; and those two discursive uses are tightly clustered together'. This research

has also shown that spirituality for Sunday Assembly London participants is often dismissed as it has connotations of religiosity. However, individuals at the Sunday Assembly, in their lived nonreligion, are open to new experiences and thus differ from the rigid anti-religious perception popularised in the previous decade by the New Atheists.

Collective Identity and 'New New Atheism'

In **Chapter Two**, I introduced the 'New Atheist' movement, which in recent years has helped to shape a collective atheist identity (LeDrew, 2014, 445). Polletta & Jasper (2001, p.285) define collective identity as an:

> individual's cognitive, oral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity.

Guenther et al. (2013, p.459-463) analysed the New Atheist social movement and its collective identity. They found collective identity was created by using a divisive 'us versus them' mentality, which polarized atheists from people of religious faith. However, it is important to note that their research was situated in America, where atheists are stigmatised (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, p.107). Zuckerman (2012, p.171) argues 'the United States is arguably the most religious democracy within the Western World' and the rejection of religious beliefs and a loss of faith may personally, emotionally and socially be a big occurrence.

Smith & Cimino (2007, 2012) found that a secularist identity is an achieved identity, leading to atheist and secular groups internalizing a minority status in society. They cite the work of Christian Smith's (1998) subcultural identity theory, which maintains 'a tension with society can strengthen the particular beliefs and practices of a group, regardless of its size'. Almost every secular humanist and atheist meeting that Smith & Cimino (2007, p.420) attended began with a session devoted to belittling and satirizing religious groups, people and themes. This was stated by many participants in this research as a reason why they no longer attended these

atheist and humanist meetings, and instead attend the Sunday Assembly. Hence, by creating a division and 'otherness' against theism, it builds an ideology defining the atheist movement that unites its members against religion. The call for atheists and secular humanists to engage in activism and to protect their rights is often compared to the LGBT movement and women's rights (Cimino & Smith, 2007, p.421).

LeDrew (2013b, 465) argues that, to understand an atheist identity, 'it must be understood in relation to the ideologies and political divisions that define the atheist movement'. But with the Sunday Assembly being 'open to all' — to both theists and atheists, with guest lectures from religious leaders and nonbelievers — the 'us' versus 'them' mentality that atheist groups create to build collective solidarity and social cohesion isn't present. Rather, a collective is built upon shared societal and individual values (see **Chapter Nine**), instead of a 'resistance identity' that is in opposition (or the result of stigmatisation) to dominant religion or religious persons (Castells, 1997, p.8).

In the US, this may be a different story. A collective identity is negotiated without the apparent 'othering' of (religious) groups. Jacqui Frost (2017) interviewed active Midwest Sunday Assembly members and found similar results. Frost identified that, for some, 'the constant rejection of religion and affirmation of nonbelief is simply not something they are interested in'. She found that the Sunday Assembly was a space in which new identities could be formed and her participants spoke of being 'post-atheist'. Thus, the Assembly is 'a space not built on the rejection of religion, but on becoming something else'. Frost argues for the Sunday Assembly as a space 'where nonreligious individuals come to move beyond an identity built on rejection, but who are nonetheless unsure of what that might look like in practice'. She refers to this as 'rejecting rejection identities'. This bares similarities with the Sea of Faith network which closely resembles the Sunday Assembly, which was discussed in **Chapter Two**. Davies and Northam-Jones (2012, p.230) found that the networks concern with 'post-theistic belief also develops moods and emotions that help members to negotiate their changing beliefs with the assistance of others and within a shared ethos of support' in a safe environment. However, when forming one's identity, those surveyed from the Sea of Faith discussed 'the rejection of a previously held position, and thus defining identity in the negative assertion of what one is *not,* rather than what one *is*, may also indicate the importance sense of

isolation felt by members in their formed lives' (Davies and Northam-Jones, 2012, p.237). And thus, while both groups share the sense of isolation and loneliness in the case of the Assembly, the Sunday Assembly are moving beyond an identity built on rejection of beliefs.

The Sunday Assembly London congregation does not reflect the popular discourse surrounding atheism and the dominance (and rise) of the New Atheists since 2004. It differs on a number of principles: it seeks rituals; it seeks organised community through unbelief; its members seek to belong without believing, and some identify as being spiritual but nonreligious. They are also not predominantly male. The Assembly is not anti-theist, it attempts to attract a religious population, stating:

> Basically, we prefer to talk about the things that we do believe in, rather than the things we don't, and by being anti-theist you exclude a lot of potential attendees who don't identify as atheists. Lots of explicitly atheist events exist. This is the event that your religious grandma should come to and see that atheism isn't just about not believing in God (Sunday Assembly, 2017k).

As an organised nonreligious community, the Sunday Assembly London illustrates that there has been a shift in popular nonreligion/atheist discourse. If there ever was a 'New Atheism' that worked to raise the consciousness of atheism; perhaps, in 2017, we can speak of a 'new-new atheism', where a small but growing population of the nonreligious seek to congregate and create secular communities. However, is this representative of atheism as a whole? Not entirely. For the majority of atheists, the thought of congregating on a Sunday, specifically in a church-like format that includes rituals, liturgies and meeting, is a bewildering concept. I would argue that the Sunday Assembly, in its attitude to religion, is representative of contemporary atheism. Rather than ridiculing or attacking religion, it has positive relationships with other London churches and takes a less anti-theistic stance than its 'New Atheist' predecessors; thus it differs from other modern expressions of nonreligion (refer to **Chapter Two**).

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that 'living better' for Sunday Assembly participants manifests in seeking out the Assembly in times of crisis. Onstage 'reveals', post-service socials and 'far from the congregation' retreats serve to cement belonging through testimony and shared experience. Spirituality for the Sunday Assembly participants is an ambiguous, 'spooky' term; yet, many participants are open towards a secular spirituality. In the introduction to this chapter I set out to answer the research question: '*In what ways have secular congregations contributed to the formation of a new nonreligious identity*?' Ultimately, the Sunday Assembly is acting as a space for this 'new-new atheism' I discussed to develop. The Assembly does not explicitly tell the congregation how they should be living their life or what they should believe and in this respect they're not constructing a ready-made Assembly identity. But as Esther discussed earlier in the chapter, implicitly being part of the Assembly suggests being social, valuing community and wanting to help often. The Assembly is a facilitative space that attracts this new discourse of nonreligion estranged from 'new atheism'. In this respect, and in answer to my research question, it is not producing a new nonreligious identity, but rather enabling it. The majority of the participants did not see the Assembly or being nonreligious as being crucial to their identity. Once they may have deemed being nonreligious as important when they left their religious faith, but this was no longer seen as significant.

'HELP OFTEN' — SUNDAY ASSEMBLY AS A SECULAR COMMUNITY

'We live in community. It's in our DNA. We need one another, plain and simple. Community shapes our identity and quenches our thirst for belonging' (Born, 2014, p.xviii).

'We all need community, especially in places like London'. — Sunday Assemblier.

The donation box (in the form of a Quality Streets tin) was passed around for everyone to contribute. Emphasis was placed on the ability to donate online. During these moments, a small group of women approached a couple holding their newborn baby. They presented the parents with a beautiful hand-knitted blanket consisting of individual squares that had been created by individual members of the Sunday Assembly. - Excerpt taken from field notes from an ethnographic research visit to the Brighton Sunday Assembly.

Introduction

The motto 'help often' suggests an outward looking perspective for community building. On first glance, this is similar to the Church of England (2017) who report on their community involvement stating they have over 80,000 volunteers and approximately 2,700 members of Church Staff who help to provide support and organise activities for children, young people and families. Of course, the scope of the Sunday Assembly is much smaller, but the focus of the Assembly is currently more inward looking. They help each other to belong first. The previous chapter on 'living better' discussed the motivations for attendance and revealed that many seek out the Sunday Assembly during times of crisis. This chapter, on the second part of the Sunday Assembly motto — 'help often' — contributes to an understanding of community and congregation within a post-Christian transition by analysing the Sunday Assembly as a secular community. Therefore, rather than focusing on what the Sunday Assembly is currently doing to 'help often'; I argue that many of the interviewees were either actively or subconsciously searching for a community, and while some did find what they were looking for at the Sunday Assembly, others did not instantly feel or find community.

This chapter is split into three sections. The first explores what the Sunday Assembly mean when it uses the motto 'help often', who they 'help often' and how the participants comprehend this. The second, I draw theory from Putman's (2000) 'social capital', the resources that amass within the secular community group and how this is found, for example in their smaller groups. It is through social capital and community involvement that members of the Sunday Assembly are eventually able to help often. The third section, I discuss what community is and argue that post-Christian congregations offer a distinctive alternative to a community, otherwise found in, for example, sports teams and choir groups.

What Does 'Help Often' Mean to the Sunday Assembly?

Sunday Assembly communities are 'communities of action, building lives of purpose, encouraging us all to help anyone who needs it to support each other'. As previously mentioned in **Chapter Two**, this closely resembles altruism, a pillar of Comte's Religion of Humanity. 'Help often' is something that the Sunday Assembly believes so many people want to do, but do not always know where to start. Therefore, it encourages 'organised community action' that involves 'community action heroes' who give something back to the wider London community (usually once per month); for example, nature conservation in London. 'Help often' can therefore manifest into something tangible, unlike, for instance, 'wonder more'.

The Sunday Assembly's mission is 'to help people find and fulfil their potential' and 'if you want to be part of that mission, there are loads of ways you can help out', including volunteering to help the Assembly with social media, being on the 'tea team' or welcoming people into the community at the beginning of a service. 'Help often' is also poignant on an individual level, with the Assembly stating that its secular community can unite and help 'thousands of lives' to 'keep getting better and better'. Volunteering has consisted of donating food to Camden Foodbank and raising money for breast cancer by entering a walking marathon. Assembly members have volunteered with the London Orchard Project, which works with communities to plant, manage, restore and harvest from their own orchards. Assembly volunteers have worked with Open Age, an organisation championing an active lifestyle for anyone over 50. They have also worked to clear up local cemeteries.

The Sunday Assembly maintains an apolitical stance and its efforts to 'help often' are generally initiated by someone from the congregation proposing a volunteering opportunity, rather than coming directly from the Assembly itself. Thus, social cohesion is not formed through campaigning by the Assembly itself, and it does not take a stance against faith schools, unlike the Humanists UK, for example.

What Does 'Help Often' Mean to the Participants?

For Andrew, the motto is about deflecting and turning your attention away from your present self, so to help often is to focus your attention on the people around you. For Ty, the focus is more on self-improvement and self-reflection. These two samples show how the strapline can be interpreted differently. Selflessness was important for Leah, who discussed in the interview how she believed in doing good turns even if she did not personally benefit from them. Elizabeth discussed how the Sunday Assembly is a platform for people who want to help more in their lives but 'did not quite know where to start', thus the Assembly is a springboard for finding local projects that need volunteers; for example, the aid work the Sunday Assembly did in 2015/2016 for the refugees in Calais. Volunteers worked in warehouses arranging care packages for Calais Action, a grass roots charity to help refugees in Europe. Choosing to help refugees is indicative of the liberal, social and political values that generally make up the congregation, despite, as previously mentioned, the Assembly itself espousing an apolitical stance.

Throughout the interviews, I was told that helping often was something many of the participants already did in their everyday lives, whether it was working for (or with) charitable organisations or volunteering with Girlguiding, for example. Individuals did not need the Sunday Assembly to create opportunities for them. The focus was sometimes more on helping the Assembly grow internally, shifting voluntary time and expertise directly to the organisation. But the importance of helping the wider community was never downplayed, and in the wake of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire, the Assembly let the various community organisers know that 'we have amazing volunteers, for when people, power and donations are required', then congratulated

its congregation by stating 'it is so great to know that you are all such great people that want to do anything you can in these situations'.[16]

Social Capital

Collins (2005, p.153) argues that one way to explore patterns of interaction that could link to social cohesion, belonging and community is to consider the various social networks that exist within the congregation. For the Sunday Assembly, these networks also exist online via Twitter, Facebook and its own website. Collins (2005, p.153) argues that the quality of relationship outweighs the quantity of social connections, and the quality of these connections determines the relationships between identity, community and the belonging found at a congregation. The quality of networks at the Sunday Assembly will decide if it is a loose group of people who dip in and out of the congregation and, in that sense, is somewhat vicarious, or if the Sunday Assembly is, in fact, a collective community both micro and macro. In reality, it is both. It exists on a macro level, which is evident in its global conferences, where members from different congregations come together. It is evident on a micro level with the small community groups, such as the choir, that operate outside of the main congregation. It is also vicarious in the sense that a small number of core members keep the Assembly going and perform duties and community help on behalf of the congregation.

Furthermore, Collins (2005, p.155-156) argues that, in studying religious congregations, it is important to recognise social capital, which refers to the trustworthiness and networks of reciprocity. I introduced social capital in **Chapter Six** and it has been discussed in terms of a religious congregation that upholds a high degree of social capital and are prepared to help one another, without the need of reward, apart from the knowledge that they are doing God's will. The Sunday Assembly performs similar roles to a local church to create a binding secular community. It is the social capital and community found within the congregation which constitute an ethos of helping often.

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[16] This was sourced from a Sunday Assembly London email sent to the congregation in June 2017.

Putman (2000, p.188) states that if we are to 'believe that social capital benefits individuals and communities, we must first understand how social capital works its magic'. Putman (2000, p.188) contends there are key components and functions of social capital: it allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily, and it provides the advancement of communities as they perform high levels of trust. Furthermore, social capital 'operates through psychological and biological processes to improve individuals' lives… people whose lives are rich in social capital cope better with trauma' (Putman, 2000, p.189). Through social capital and connecting with others, people become more tolerant and empathetic as it allows for the widening of awareness and the development of character traits that are beneficial for society (Putman, 2000, p.188). In other words, not only does social capital equip individual(s) with the ability to overcome crises more easily, but it also provides openness to new people and experiences.

Social capital operates at the Sunday Assembly on different levels, and the best example can be found within the London 'Got It/Need It' Facebook group, with over 300 members. Day (2017, p.176) argues that one 'measure of social capital is how many occupations are represented in a person's social network: the higher number, the greater social capital', while Putman (2000, p.66) argues that religious communities offer the most significant social capital in America.

Within this private Facebook group, members of the Sunday Assembly exercise social capital by advertising job vacancies with other Assembliers. Jobs are often situated within the charity sector, many of which are social impact jobs; adverts have used the hashtag #helpoften. Volunteering opportunities are also advertised along the same theme of helping often, and past examples include tackling educational inequality in London. Additional posts have included funded academic studies, which assume a certain level of education that exists within the congregation. The majority of the posts are about seeking flatmates in London, or moving in with other members of the congregation and also seeking babysitters. This implies a level of trust found within the Assembly. Notably, individuals in the group also offer free tickets, sofa-surfing and unwanted items for free. The 'magic' works at the Sunday Assembly by creating offline and online social networks that seek to help the lives of other (Assembly) community members. Social capital and

community is more profound in the smaller groups that exist outside of the main Assembly.

Article Club

I joined the Article Club, a small interest group, for its sixth meeting on 23rd February 2016 to experience how interest groups operate independently of the Sunday Assembly service. This club would meet once a month at the National Theatre in London and functioned in the same way as a book club. Rather than reading a book, you read just an article, not an academic journal, but news that had been voted for or suggested via Facebook. The Sunday Assembly utilises Facebook as a platform to create these interest groups. Article Club has a Facebook membership of around 100 people and attracts approximately 10-15 people per meeting. After reading that month's short articles on modern grief and the crisis in Libya, I decided to attend. The demographics were reflective of the wider congregation — 10 (11 including myself) people attended, 6 were females and 4 males, mainly in their late 20s/early 30s.

Someone I had previously interviewed was attending without his partner, who unfortunately was unwell and could not make it. I was surprised to see him attend alone, as it was initially his partner who got involved in the Sunday Assembly and was the 'joiner'. Previously in the interview, he had told me that the Sunday Assembly 'is not desperately significant to my life, it's something I enjoy, something I get good pleasure from, but it's not overpowering'. When I later questioned what role the Sunday Assembly played in his life, he responded: 'I can't imagine it would play a huge part in most of the young people's lives there. They have jobs, they are lawyers, they are teachers, social workers. It is something they find pleasant on a weekend; maybe they join the *groups*'. However, I disagree with the importance and not just for the fact he was attending an event by himself, but because of what another person told me that night that reaffirmed my findings — how the Sunday Assembly provided a ritual to her life, and a structure (refer to **Chapter Six**). While it may neither have been 'overpowering' nor playing a huge part in this person's life, it was at least providing structure and ritual. The group discussion lasted for an hour, after which attendees moved on to a local pub, which provided the opportunity

(similar to after the Sunday Assembly service) to socialise with people in a less formalised environment. It is here that social connections and community could be forged.

The group discussion was intellectual and everyone was given the opportunity to share their reflections. We did not disclose professions, although one female mentioned she was a doctor, but it was apparent that the group shared a high level of cultural capital. For Bourdieu (1986, p.46), cultural capital 'represents the immanent structure of the social world'. Cultural capital at the Sunday Assembly is the product of the values that the congregation holds, but it also infers a particular taste and education. This was evident in attending the 'Wonder Club', hosted by two academics, and the small theatre/dance group. While the gender balance at Article Club and Wonder Club was representative of the 60/40 female to male ratio found at wider Sunday Assembly, in the theatre/dance private Facebook group, approximately only 30 of the 160 group members were male.

Searching for Community

> 'One of the losses modern society feels more keenly is that of a sense of community. (De Botton, 2012, p.23)

Guest, Tusting & Woodhead (2004, p.2) state that many of the first congregational studies shared the same assumption that community was disintegrating under the pressures of a rapidly changing society. Urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation were breaking down social cohesion in society. 'Attention therefore turned to congregations being exemplars of community'. These congregations acted as suitable testing grounds for the claims about the survival of community in the postmodern world (Guest, Tusting and Woodhead, 2004, p.2). Guest (2000, p.9) suggests that studying congregations at present is of great importance. Exploring congregations can offer sociological insights into how the local church may be a focus for collective community and belonging. There has been a resurgence in community, as individuals form new communal relationships to account for the dislocation that occurred between the individual and society in the postmodern experience (Guest, 2005, p.10). Thurston & Kuile (2015) report that 'Millennials are flocking to a host of new organizations that deepen community in ways that are

powerful, surprising, and perhaps even religious'. They provide examples of community in 10 case studies (for example, 'the dinner party' and fitness regimen, CrossFit). One option that individuals have is their local congregation, which may provide an already formed community, social networks and systems of support and act as a potential haven for a community and social cohesion. However, the nonreligious are the fastest growing group both in the UK and American religious landscape; the local theist church may soon not be an option to build up these strong social networks and sense of belonging.

Pew Research Center (2012) found that, in America, the religiously unaffiliated attach much less importance to belonging to a community of people with shared beliefs and values than those of a religious persuasion. Furthermore, 88% of the United States' religiously unaffiliated are not looking for a religion that is right for them, which illustrates that the majority of the unaffiliated are not on a journey to find any belief system at all. In a post-Christian British transition, interview data has shown that, for the majority of Assembliers, of utmost importance is finding and being part of a (secular) community with collective values and beliefs.

Cohen (1985, p.12) defines community as members of a group who have similar interests and something in common with each other, which (in turn) distinguishes them in a significant way from other groups. Therefore, community implies both similarity and difference (Cohen, 1985, p.12). Increasingly, the language of community is used in terms of solidarity (Crow and Allen, 1994, p.184), which is evident in the atheist community, particularly in the US. Crow & Allen, (1994, p.1) suggest community ties may be structured around links between people with residence, interests, common attachments or some other shared experiences that serve to generate a sense of belonging. Belonging implies much more than geographical location; it suggests that one is an essential member of the community (Cohen 1982, 21). I am adopting Cohen's (1985, p.20) approach — that to understand 'community' you must seek to capture members' experience of what community means to them. Rather than asking, 'What does it look like to us?', ask 'What does it appear to mean to the members?' Hence looking outwards from its core (Cohen, 1985, p.20).

The Sunday Assembly is building a sense of community that differentiates it from a theistic church, which is problematic because it does not have a supernatural belief to bind its community together, thus the longevity of the Assembly has been questioned. However, by building community through existing post-Christian structures, rituals and practices, the Sunday Assembly is able to capitalise on a small number of church-leavers.

Throughout the interviews, I would ask participants if it felt like they were searching for a community before finding the Sunday Assembly, and if they now felt part of a community since attending. When I asked Thomas if he felt like he had a nonreligious identity, he responded, 'I suppose a little bit. Since I've become part of Sunday Assembly, yes'. Thus, the collective had cemented his nonreligious (agnostic) identity. Thomas told me, 'My brother stopped going [to church]. My mum is still a Christian'. This is illustrative of the generational shift towards nonreligion. However, Thomas's brother, a scientist, had not been to church for 'an awful long time', but had recently started to go to a Catholic church again with his wife. Thomas told me about the conversation he had with his brother:

> I can't believe I said this to him, but we'd had a couple of pints, we were on a walk on Boxing Day, and I almost fell over when he told me this. I was absolutely shocked, and I shouldn't have said this, it was unfair, but I said, "Wow, so you believe Jesus is the Son of God and died for our sins?" I shouldn't have said that. He thought about it for a little while. He winced a bit, he wasn't very comfortable, and he said, "Ah, it's a nice thing to do on a Sunday". Yes, exactly. Nice thing to do on a Sunday.

Thomas told me that he was absolutely certain he was attending the Sunday Assembly to find a local community. He reminisced about one of the first he attended (in Islington, the Nave) and recalled a strapline Sanderson Jones used that had stayed with him — "Why is it just religious people get to hang out on a Sunday morning, sing songs, listen to good speakers, and be nice to each other?"

When discussing if community was more prevalent in smaller Sunday Assemblies, Joanna told me about her visit to Crystal Palace (a much smaller congregation in

South London), saying it 'struck me as more what the community thing is all about. Because when they did the notices, it was the local scouts need something or other; it was literally like the parish notices. It is very difficult to bring that about in central London when people are coming from all over the place'.

From the interview data and fieldwork, it was clear that a core group existed within the congregation that contributed to the social events and activities. Jonah explained how the Sunday Assembly London had a core group of about 180 people who attended at least 50% of the services, but the biggest group of people were those who attended once and then did not return.

It was evident from the Sunday Assembly Social Group that the same people continually posted events and engaged in the community. However, this trend may have had an adverse effect on inclusion. Newcomers seemed to struggle to break into this established community who attended regularly. Esther identified the core group of the congregation as appearing like a separate entity — an inner circle. Esther continued to express how she personally felt that she existed on the periphery of this social group and recognised how the core group could overshadow 'calmer' members of the congregation. She expressed how this inner homogeneous group could create a dominant atmosphere at the Sunday Assembly. She spoke of how she met people who she felt were similar to her, but would then often lose sight of them and fail to reconnect with them at future Sunday services. There were aspects of the community in which she would have liked to have been more involved, as she struggled to make friends when first moving to London as a student. However, identifying as a public introvert but privately extroverted, Esther found it hard to initiate small talk and, after the first few Sunday Assemblies, would stand by herself during tea and cake time at the end of each service.

Esther mentioned how she only felt part of a community now that she was volunteering as a helper during the Sunday service, but still felt a disconnect from the Assembly throughout the rest of the week. She did admit that, in attending the interest groups, where the numbers were smaller, meeting people was easier than on a Sunday. Esther grew up in an active church community in Europe and values human interaction. She noted 'how as humans we need to socialise, but especially in

a city like London — it's not a coincidence that's why it [the Sunday Assembly] started here', indicating the loneliness of the city.

As previously mentioned, it was a different story for Andrew, who grew up within an incredibly close evangelical community. Andrew identified that he made social connections through the church. All his best friends were part of the same church community. When Andrew moved to London for work, by which stage he was no longer religious, he could not capitalise on existing church networks to meet people as he had once done. He struggled with making friends outside of the church environment and so visited the Sunday Assembly, which he had planned to do before moving. Andrew quickly established a friendship group of around six males who would communicate regularly via social media. Andrew used the Sunday Assembly as a platform for friend building, then created a smaller sub-community that would meet outside of the normal service.

Martha had continued to attend church after losing her (Christian) faith, primarily for the social aspect. But she explicitly remarked how she was still looking for a community to join. She was incredibly active in other social pursuits that were, to some extent, fulfilling her need for community. Yet she was unable to find what she was looking for at the Sunday Assembly and admitted, after her second visit, that she was unlikely to return. Martha didn't like the 'dance breaks' or how the Sunday Assembly appeared to be a constructed happiness. She remarked that the core group could unintentionally create an exclusivity, which had left her feeling 'unnoticed'. Martha felt the Sunday Assembly resembled the evangelical movement with charismatic Christians 'waving their hands in the air — maybe it's natural for them, but it's certainly not natural for me to behave like that'. Similarly, Esther, aged 24, had moved away from Christianity, but on attending the Sunday Assembly she generally felt uncomfortable, as did her parents when she brought them along. Despite its claims to being open to all ages, the Sunday Assembly would definitely seem more suited to Generation Y.

For Andrew, on the other hand, the Sunday Assembly presented a 'home away from home' and the structure and similarities of an evangelical movement meant he was quick to become part of the community. He stated: 'What I'm looking for is a group

of people that I'm in regular contact with', so the social side for him was more important. He went on to say: 'Typically, what you do as a Christian, when you move to a new town, you find a new church'. So the Assembly was used by Andrew to develop his social capital. Community at the Sunday Assembly seems largely dependent on an individual's level of involvement with the group. Members of the congregation feel a greater sense of community once they become more deeply involved, whether through volunteering or attending a smaller interest group.

In **Chapter Seven**, I introduced a rationale for attending the Sunday Assembly as a coping mechanism during times of crisis or change. Eve discussed being at a stage in her life at which she was lacking community mainly due to her close friends having moved away, had children or gotten married. As a result, she now considered the Sunday Assembly to be a big part of her identity. For Eve, being an Assemblier was holistic, and she had decided that being part of the Assembly was more important and had taken over from her identifying as an atheist. Even though she still identified with the label 'atheist', the Sunday Assembly had meant that:

> religion or no religion isn't overly important to me as a thing anymore… It's been great finding a community of people that are like-minded…. there is just a bit of me that just really feels like I'm a happier person when I have that sense of belonging that comes from being part of a community. I definitely feel like I have a community now. It's definitely made me happier. Yeah, it definitely felt like it was lacking before. I'm not sure I can quite explain why, but it just always felt a bit like I missed a sense of belonging… I do think it probably appeals to people who are at that stage where their community is changing, for whatever reason, which tends to be in their 30s and 40s. It's a place to go to meet new people.

People attending the Sunday Assembly are open in their quest to finding community and many have left close religious communities behind. Elizabeth discussed how the Assembly, at a different point in her life, would have been something she needed a lot more (for example, when you move to a new city). Looking back, Elizabeth toyed with the idea of attending church for her kids to meet people. However, the contradiction remained that, even though a church can provide community, its

congregation all believe in God and this is what ultimately put Elizabeth off from attending.

One question I asked during the interviews was: 'Do you feel like the Sunday Assembly could work in smaller towns, rather than in cities like London, Brighton and Bristol, where it was much easier to establish?' The answer was a resounding 'No'. It would seem that the need for a Sunday Assembly in more remote towns and villages is unlikely, as a close (and closed) community already exists in these places. The Sunday Assembly would simply not find its niche, and would likely be construed as some urban, 'hipster' fad constructed by the liberal elite.

However, it cannot be denied that in urban centres, the Sunday Assembly is thriving. During my interview with Ty, I asked him why he thought the Assembly was flourishing. He remarked:

> I think it is taking some of the best parts of religion, this sense of community, this sense of belonging, this sense of congregation without what a lot of people consider the very negative parts of religion — this sense of guilt a lot of the time. This sense of a strict set of codes that you have to live by and if you don't, you are therefore a sinner or should be punished. So, yeah, that's why it's continuing to grow. Take something we know and present it in a more acceptable package. I guess people want to connect; that's why it continues to grow. We already have religious congregations that people growing up move away from, like me, and then this plays on what you enjoyed in your childhood experiences, but in adult experiences.

Such childhood experiences of religion (Christian) in a generational shift and trend towards nonreligion is allowing the Sunday Assembly to capitalise on church-leavers that still seek to congregate and find community, but are unable to do so as it is contradictory to their nonreligious beliefs. However, a number of people who attend the Sunday Assembly do not want to be part of the community, rather they want to be part of the 'moment' and enjoy the talks. This was apparent in Abigail's interview when she described the focus on community as 'a little bit forced; they are very much trying to push this 'community' on us. There's a lot of people like me, I

think, who go along to hear the talks; it does not mean we want to go to their social every Thursday'.

Previously, I mentioned that people who had grown up in largely nonreligious households were attending the Sunday Assembly not because religion was a chain of memory and they were trying to reclaim a sense of community lost, but because they never had one to begin with. To illustrate this, Elizabeth said she had always wanted community because 'I wasn't raised with church or anything, nor were my parents, really. Growing up, it was always other people doing it. They had their friends from church and I always felt a little bit like I was missing out on something. Not in terms of the religion but in terms of the community'.

A large number of the people I interviewed and spoke to during my fieldwork remarked that the Sunday Assembly only felt like a community during 'opening hours', after which they'd return to their lives. It can be said that some instantly find community; generally, those who have grown up attending a Christian church into their teenage years. For others, it can take a much longer time to feel part of a community and for others still, they will never feel that sense of belonging and may simply not want to.

Why Attend the Sunday Assembly?

On 5th December 2015, I attended the Sunday Assembly's Day Called Wonder. This one-day conference was dedicated to 'celebrating life, building communities and wondering deeply'. It was created to help Sunday Assembly organisers and to inspire attendees. One invited speaker was Rev. Dr. Andrew Pakula, the minister of New Unity (mentioned in **Chapter Two**), a popular Unitarian congregation in North London that has close ties with the Sunday Assembly. New Unity believes in good, focusing on social justice in the community, striving for growth and love. Like the Sunday Assembly, New Unity uses the term 'radically inclusive'. Pakula, an atheist, posed the question, 'What are we looking for in life, what are we craving?' Ultimately, Pakula concluded that we strive for a community in society, a sense of social cohesion. Notably, community can mean very different things and can be

found in different forms —within a small village, within suburbia, within a central metropolis like London (home to the first Sunday Assembly). Amusingly, Pakula argued that hosting an event or community meeting within a small population ('somewhere boring') is easy. Why? Because, he argued, these communities do not have anything going on; they can organise anything within reason and people will attend.

This was apparent from Susan's interview, when she explained that she grew up on a small island where 'everyone knew everyone' and you could not 'walk past somebody's house without going in for a cup of tea'. This notion of a romanticised former community manifested in many of the interviews. Similarly, the small town in Western Europe that was home to Esther had only two churches and these churches housed the community and were central to all organised town events and meetings.

Conversely, London caters for every niche, and from my interviews, those who attended the Sunday Assembly were also involved in other social groups, whether it was the Women's Institute, 'Skeptics in the Pub' or theatre groups — the Sunday Assembly was not their only source of community or entertainment. It was clear that some participants saw the Sunday Assembly as purely entertainment; it combines elements of comedy, reflection, mindfulness, poetry, signing and lectures. For some, this is all they craved; this is all they needed. During my fieldwork, I heard several people refer to it as 'the show' and even once heard a member of the committee refer to the congregation as 'punters'. Nevertheless, Pakula argues (and I agree with him on this point) that people do not visit the Sunday Assembly solely for entertainment. Arguably, London boasts some of the best entertainment in the world. If you are looking for an inspirational lecture or stimulating talk, you can visit the British Academy (or even the Conway Hall, at other times); London also boasts an extensive list of free talks. There has been a huge rise in craft clubs and choirs if you are seeking community. Furthermore, there are thousands of pubs and restaurants you can go to drink, eat and socialise. There is a big comedy circuit, an abundance of charities and plenty of places where you can sing, laugh and be entertained. So why do people wake up early on a Sunday morning to visit the Sunday Assembly when they could stay in bed and watch a TedTalks on YouTube?

Nancy Ammerman (1999, p.370) suggests 'What happens in congregations is different from what happens in other social gatherings… because they are religious, transcendent experiences and ideas about God are central to the values congregations protect and disseminate among their members'. Yet, if the Sunday Assembly does not mention God, which is central to Ammerman's argument that differentiates the social from the congregation, how does it create belonging? This question is central to **Chapter Nine** on collective values. However, the social is not differentiated from the congregation in the Sunday Assembly's case; it still relies on a congregational model and existing structures and practices to create community.

Pakula argues that if you create places and experiences that people long for, and a sense of community, they will continue to visit; thus the Sunday Assembly will continue to grow. Places where you can truly be yourself, let your guard down, be loved as well as love others while helping make the world a better place. Although I think Pakula's point to be valid, I argue further that the Sunday Assembly is tapping into something much more than a sense of community, which can be found in many forms in London; it is tapping into a sense of belonging. Therefore, one key question in my analysis is: *How does the Sunday Assembly differ from other community groups?* This has been answered first through understanding the Sunday Assembly as a post-Christian community, and further, by scrutinising why the exceptional Sunday Assembly London continues to flourish. It is important to recognise that the first Sunday Assembly was hosted in Islington, North London and that the Sunday Assembly continues to work in particular areas, notably liberal elite, 'hipster' environments — Bristol, Brighton, London, L.A. However, it failed in Berlin (despite Berlin being recognised as a liberal European city), amassing a congregation of only 20-30 people before closing. The Paris Sunday Assembly also no longer runs. The reason why London has flourished is that, firstly, it is going through a post-Christian transition with the rest of Britain; secondly, it has a large and diverse youthful population born in the early 1980s (Generation Y) that has transitioned from Christianity to nonreligion.

As previously touched on, the Sunday Assembly claims to adopt an apolitical stance and takes a 'won't tell you how to live your life' stance. It does, however, position itself implicitly to the left. This can be observed through its presence at LGBT

marches and protesting against Trident. As a result, Smith (2013a, p.85) argues that atheist groups have to provide other identity incentives to grow. Examples include the values of equality, freethinking and scientific progress. Organised atheism is not the only coalescence for individuals lacking belief, but it does tend to involve and imply other sociopolitical beliefs and social goods (Smith, 2013a: 86). Explicitly, no dogma exists.

Therefore, what values and ideas are central to the congregation that the Sunday Assembly can tap into, and how does the Assembly bind people together without ideas about God? The following chapter will illustrate that individuals at the Sunday Assembly do share collective values that make the creation of a binding community much easier. In the final chapter (**Ten**), I conclude with how the Sunday Assembly is creating 'belonging' without religious faith (believing).

Conclusion

Community is something that is built, and the strategic model that the Sunday Assembly has developed depends largely on social media and digital methods to confirm its position as a secular community. This has not always been easy, but the Assembly would seem to flourish best in urban areas in which there is a high concentration of liberal-minded Generation Y individuals searching for a semblance of belonging. A continual trend has been the high amount of people attending for the first time and not returning, which presents the Sunday Assembly congregation as somewhat vicarious; yet a strong core community has still been forged. What is evident from the interviews is that strong community attitudes exist within the smaller sub-groups of the congregation, but that Sunday Assembly newcomers find it more difficult to increase meaningful social connections and a sense of community by merely attending the wider Sunday service.

CHAPTER NINE

'WONDER MORE' — SUNDAY ASSEMBLY (UN)-BELIEF, VALUES AND WONDER

'"Live Better, Help Often and Wonder More"? Oh yeah, that's my life motto' – Hannah

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the Sunday Assembly as a secular community, I argued that participants were searching for a community and recovering the social in the post-Christian. In this chapter, I foreground an understanding of (un)belief, wonder and awe through analysing the Sunday Assembly as organised nonreligion. This chapter directly answers my research question: *In the transition to a post-Christian British society, has wonder and secular enchantment replaced belief in a deity, and if so, how?* To answer this question, I firstly consider the notion of wonder and, more explicitly, nonreligious wonder. I argue that awe and wonder are not exclusive to religious experiences and that these terms have been reinvigorated within secular domains in recent years.

Secondly, through my ethnographic research, I analyse what the Sunday Assembly means when it discusses the importance of 'wonder[ing] more'. I present an understanding of wonder through the Assembly by drawing upon the work of Zuckerman (2009, 2014) and make the connection of wonder through 'aweism'. I then draw upon the in-depth interviews with members of the congregation to illuminate what the term 'wonder' means to them, as well as discovering what they individually wonder about. Often, it is the case that we know what nonreligious people do *not* believe in. Therefore, this chapter then shifts to the beliefs of the Sunday Assembly, both individually and as a collective. This is achieved by analysing the congregation's nonreligious beliefs and arguing that, despite the diversity of unbelief, the congregation does share collective (un)beliefs through similar values and worldviews. This is realised through analysing the data from the interviews and, specifically, in regard to asking participants their key values.

A Taster of Nonreligious Wonder

'Just for me, I'm an atheist who's in awe', stated Diana Nyad on American chat show Super Soul Sunday in 2013 — happily coinciding with the start of this research project. 'Well, I don't call you an atheist then,' replied Oprah Winfrey. 'I think if you believe in the awe and the wonder and the mystery, then that is what God is'. Quite the statement and, unsurprisingly, the comment instigated something of a stir among the nonreligious. It suggested to many that atheists cannot feel wonder without being religious. Spencer Bullivant (2016, p.108) ethnographically studied *Camp Quest*, a nonreligious American summer camp, and found that nonreligious families have difficulty in expressing themselves, as feelings of connection with nature and humanity were sentiments likely to be expressed in religious language. Wonder and awe are often inexplicably intertwined with religion and God. Yet, we all have an appetite for wonder (Dawkins, 2006, p.114). Additionally, awe and wonder have the ability to trigger admiration and the opening of hearts and minds (Haidt, 2003, p.863). It may be for this reason that awe and wonder are often discoursed in a religious context and attributed to the fitting and desirable response to the presence of God (Haidt, 2003, p.863).

Wonder is an essential element in the emergence of a higher order notion of existence (Fuller, 2006, p.375). However, wonder is not exactly the same as awe — wonder has its own dynamic, it leads to the desire to understand (Evans, 2012, p.126-127). Projected by one's desire to comprehend the unknown, wonder's most salient feature 'is its evocation of the existence of something more, some ultimate presence of causal agency that might account for otherwise inexplicable phenomena' (Fuller, 2006, p.378). Therefore, wonder facilitates the human experiences that lead one to believe in an unseen order — God.

Why, then, would a secular congregation use 'wonder more' as part of its slogan, given the connotations wonder has with religiosity? Academic research has shifted to include nonreligious experiences of wonder. Preston & Shin (2016) conducted a five-part study of 1064 adults and their spiritual experiences (profound movements of personal transcendence, connection and wonder). Their research found that religious and nonreligious people recalled 'different kinds of spiritual experiences

— where religious people recalled events that were more explicitly religious, nonreligious people reported more alternative spiritual sources (e.g. nature, yoga, science)' (Preston & Shin, 2016, p.220). They found that, while spirituality is not defined by any specific belief, it is characterised by a sense of smallness that the ritualised aspects of religious practice stimulate (Preston & Shin, 2016, p.220). Furthermore, they also found that the 'wonders of science can be a rich source of awe and spirituality without a religious interpretation' (Preston & Shin, 2016, p.220).

The Sunday Assembly perceives wonder as a connective, to each other and to the world we live in. Most importantly, wonder advocates the realms of possibility. Wonder is complemented by many of the same emotional characteristics of joy, being able to generate abiding engagement with the surrounding world. Wonder instils the world with an alluring quality, fostering amplified openness and receptivity (Fuller, 2006, p.370). Dworkin (2013, p.2) argues that many people who identify as atheist have experiences and convictions similar to, and just as profound as, those of believers.

Ruth discussed having a 'religious experience' while attending a gospel church and described it as thus:

> I wouldn't call it a religious experience, because I still know there isn't a God. I had this belief in a God feeling, even though I knew at the time there wasn't one. It was a feeling of connectedness to everything and transcendence, they had a gospel choir and really good music and everyone was singing. That's the one reason; I really wanted to try to get that. I've never had that before in my life. It made me wish I was religious. Also, I feel like, if you're not religious, then it's quite hard to get a community, and I really feel a lack there, I really feel like I want a community. Also, I just like singing.

Atheists may not believe, or rather may lack belief, in a 'personal' God(s), but that is not to say they do not believe in anything. Atheism, being a lack of belief, does not define what a person does believe. Dworkin (2013, p.2) stated that those without

God can feel an inescapable responsibility to live their lives well, with respect for others, which is discussed in the values of the participants forthcoming. Hence the phrase 'good without God' (Engelke, 2015), popularised by Unitarianism and the Sunday Assembly.

Religious experience of wonder is bounded through the medium of a religious doctrine and a conception of God (Furedi, 2013). Fuller (2006, p.383) argues that a life fashioned by wonder displays moral positions rather different from those exhibited by lives comparatively devoid of this emotion. Wonder elicits our prolonged engagement with life, our sustained desire to connect with the ultimate meanings and purposes of the surrounding world (connectedness being an important pillar of the Sunday Assembly). Deborah, a 26-year-old PhD scientist, highlighted this:

> I love the "wonder more". I love it because I think it's about not taking the world for granted. That is another thing that I find annoying sometimes when you talk to religious people and they are, like, "Oh, but it wouldn't seem wonderful without religion". But if you're a scientist you think, wow, this is amazing and all this has evolved. It's all really, really cool. Science makes things more amazing, not less amazing. So, I love wonder more.

The nonreligious can equally find nature's great spectacles not just arresting, terrifying, but breathtakingly and eerily wonderful. 'They express a conviction that the force and wonder they sense are real, just as real as planets or pain, that moral truth and natural wonder do not simply evoke awe but call for it' (Dworkin, 2013, p.3). Dworkin (2013, p.5-6) introduces the term 'religious atheism' — whereby he argues that to be religious does not necessarily mean a belief in a God. The aptitude to experience the mysteries of our existence, as well as amazing events, excites our imagination through a sense of wonder. Wonder is a portal, a door onto a world that is accessible — in no other way except through the questions it awakens in us (Miller, 1992, p.45).

Certainly, a secular Western wonder has been invigorated. Brian Cox's[17] *Wonder of Life* and *Wonder of the Solar System* are televisual evidence of a shift in wonder from religion to a more scientific discourse in popular culture. In 2013 and 2014, Cox's *Stargazing* attracted nearly four million viewers interested in the wonders of the universe, with no credit to God(s) for the creation of it. Furthermore, David Attenborough's natural world TV series *Planet Earth* (2006) and its follow-up, *Planet Earth II* (2016), remain two of the top-rated television shows ever made.[18] This nonreligious wonder has the capacity to beckon us toward the unknown and animate our desire to know it (Miller, 1992, p.130, 59). Wonder in recent decades has attracted periodic interest from philosophers and theologians, but not something that has been explored sociologically (Evans, 2012, p.2). As a result, my research analyses wonder from a sociological perspective through the ethnographic research conducted at the Sunday Assembly and through organised unbelief.

'A Life of Wonder'

The Sunday Assembly references wonder in relation to connectedness and uses phrases like 'live a life of wonder'. It believes that 'hearing talks, singing as one, listening to readings and even playing games helps us to connect with each other and the awesome world we live in'. I witnessed this feeling of connectedness when visiting the Sunday Assembly Brighton. The normal Assembly ritual and structure was delivered — firstly a poem before the main speaker, Andy Bradley (founder of Frameworks 4 Change), delivered a 15-minute talk on the theme of compassion and making cities more compassionate. The talk was charged with emotion as Bradley discussed his recent depression, and he picked up on the fact that no one was mindlessly staring at their phone with their heads down. Instead, he held the attention of the room and the congregation was connecting with his lived experience. As he spoke, I realised my friend, who had not previously been to a Sunday Assembly, began to get emotional. When I asked her why, she was not completely sure and certainly did not expect to have such intense feelings prior to attending. However, she said the talk had inspired a stillness to feel empathy and compassion for those less fortunate.

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[17] Brian Cox, an English Physicist
[18] IMDB (November 2016) rated 9.5/10

The Sunday Assembly aims to inspire collective awe and wonder through the lived experiences of others. This could be 'wondering' about the theme of the week — for example, 'Why did a woman decide to marry herself?', 'How do you travel across the world without flying?' or 'The wonders of an octopus!'

> To wonder is to look at something with an open mind and open eyes — to see something from a completely different viewpoint. A moment of wonder is the starting point of all new thoughts and new things. Being able to discover something new about yourself and the world we live in (Day Called Wonder, 2015).

The Sunday Assembly facilitates the wonder part of its motto in a number of ways. It has an annual 'wonder conference' located annually in different regions of the world (London, Atlanta, Utrecht, San Diego). These conferences are packed with interesting and thought-provoking speakers and sessions. On a localised level, the London congregation hosts a small 'wonder more' group (which I attended) with philosophical topics such as happiness being discussed.

I would argue that 'wonder' for the Sunday Assembly parallels Zuckerman's aweism. However, the 'wonder more' is the most misunderstood of the Sunday Assembly's tri-part motto for the participants and also brings into question how salient the motto is.

'Aweism'

Zuckerman first discussed aweism in 2009 in the *Free Enquiry* and has since developed it into a chapter in his book, *Living the Secular Life* (2014). In this section, I summarise Zuckerman's main argument on aweism and bridge the gap to provide an understanding of how the Sunday Assembly uses the term 'wonder'.To understand the term aweism, firstly we need to understand Zuckerman's (2014, p.204) own positioning and how he self-identifies. Zuckerman talks of atheism in the same way I introduced the term in **Chapter One**. He does not believe in any God that has ever been created, concocted or imagined by humans. For Zuckerman, mysteries about the world and universe exist, to which we may never know the answer, but this does not warrant belief in a creator as a matter of lack of evidence.

This agnosticism about the universe, coupled with atheism in terms of God, was how many of the participants identified. In one interview, Samuel summarises his position (which is very similar to Zuckerman's self-identification):

> Nonreligious. With respect to theism, I'm an atheist, so any theistic proposition that makes claims to what the creator would or wouldn't want, you know, who they want you to have sex with, what they want you to eat, is manifested by humans with the claim of divinity added on to it. The question of the nature of the universe is one where you strictly have to be agnostic because we don't have an answer. So, it could be there is a creator and for whatever reason it closely envisages a Christian tradition or a Hindu tradition or a Jain tradition or there could not be. There is no strong reason to preference that interpretation over any other. So, for that reason I am agnostic.

However, Zuckerman (2014, p.204-205) raises a point, which this chapter aims to tackle: using the term 'atheist' is a negation. It declares what you don't believe in, what you don't think is true and what you don't accept.

Zuckerman (2014, p.205) explains how he would rather offer a 'positive designation, an affirming description, not merely one that negates or denies what others believe in'. In contrast, the term secular humanist declares what you are for — believing in science, reason, rationality, tolerance, human rights and the belief in the potential of humans (2014, p.207). However, for Zuckerman, this term captures what he supports, not what he is. You may be an atheist, agnostic, secular humanist (or, all of the above), but as Zuckerman (2014, p.209) positions it you are also something more, and the word that comes closest to the profound overflowing feeling sometimes felt is 'awe'. Zuckerman explains that being an aweist does not mean you are in a 'constant ever-flowing state of awe' (209). Yet, the feeling of awe can capture you fleetingly, or in a rather deep and haunting sense. Such feelings can be invoked through nature, interacting with people (connecting) or contemplating the mysteries of the universe.

Aweism encapsulates the notion that existence is ultimately a beautiful mystery, that being alive is a wellspring of wonder, and that deepest questions of existence, creation, time and space are so powerful as to inspire deep feelings of joy, poignancy, and sublime awe. Aweism, humbly, happily rests on a belief that no one will ever really know why we are here or how the universe came into being, or why, and this insight renders us weak in the knees while simultaneously spurring us on to dance. An aweist is someone who admits that living is wonderfully mysterious and that life is a profound experience (Zuckerman, 2014, p.209-210).

Zuckerman (2014, p.211) argues a religious or religiously spiritual person will interpret feelings or experiences of wonder, awe and mystery as there being *evidence* of something more existing, something holy. An aweist makes no such leap of faith. 'An aweist just feels awe from time to time, appreciates it, owns it, relishes it, and then carries on — without any supernatural or otherworldly baggage' (Zuckerman, 2014, p.211). 'Thus aweism, though steeped in existential wonder and soulful appreciation, is still very much grounded in this world' (Zuckerman, 2014, p.211).

Therefore, Zuckerman (2014, p.212) summarises:

A lack of belief in God does not render this world any less wondrous, lush, mystifying, or amazing. A freethinking, secular orientation does not mean one experiences a cold, colourless existence, devoid of aesthetic inspiration, mystical wonder, unabashed appreciation, existential joy, or a deep sense of connection with others, with nature, and with the incomprehensible. Quite the contrary. One need not have God to feel and experience awe. One just needs life.

Wonder Through the Eyes of a Sunday Assemblier

When the Sunday Assembly talks of wonder as connection and feelings of amazement at the beauty of the world, it invokes aweism. I now demonstrate the connection through aweism and wonder by analysing wonder from a Sunday Assemblier perspective and consider if this term can add new meaning.

During my interviews, I asked participants what 'they wonder about'. The question sometimes created ambiguity, but was the most discussed of the tri-part motto and some of my participants did not subscribe to Zuckerman's notion of aweism. As Adam puts it:

> The "Wonder More" bit, I've always wondered, if you pardon the pun, whether it means "be curious" about the world or "be in awe" about the world. The first I'll certainly sign up to, the "be curious" bit; the "be in awe" bit I'm not so keen on... You see a lot of Brian Cox documentaries and it's like "there are billions of stars out there". So what! You can count now. That kind of awestruck wonder doesn't do it for me. What I'm wondering is that how is it that all these billions of stars are still going around in perfect circles? That's weird.

For Ruth, wonder and awe are characteristics of nonreligion, unlike Oprah Winfrey's interview suggestion. On the contrary, Ruth believes 'religious people don't wonder as much as nonreligious people. Maybe I'm being mean. It's about being amazed by everything, what's happened, how we have got to where we are'.

It was different for Mary. Mary had stopped attending the main Sunday Assembly service and only maintained contact through the smaller groups like the choir. When I asked Mary what she wondered about, she felt she had lost her sense of wonder when she stopped going to the Assembly. Thus, the Sunday Assembly was providing her with access to learning new things and listening to talks, which she didn't do anymore and now finds it hard to connect with this part of the Assembly's motto.

For many participants, 'wonder' often invoked the universe, life on other planets, the stars and, as Ava put it, 'how to live a good life, how to find contentment and how to find happiness'. For Miriam, the 'wonder more' was the hardest part of the motto to relate to as she connected wonder to 'the spiritual airy-fairy'. It would be safe, therefore, to assume that 'aweism' would be a term Miriam would also find hard to relate to. From another perspective, Phoebe thought 'it's wonderful to be

alive' and how thinking about what the future may bring is 'awe-inspiring'. For Esther, wonder was about expanding horizons. In her interview, she stated:

> I so like learning about things I don't know and stories, and for me that is the "wonder more" part — expanding your horizons that are, for me, the talks at the Sunday Assembly. Expanding your horizons is part of the liberal, open and tolerant identity that I have.

Esther made a leap between finding wonder and being liberal, tolerant and open to new ideas — key values to achieving wonder.

As mentioned, wonder was often expressed in relation to wondering about the universe and being alive. Jacob, during his interview, expressed how just being alive is a wonder. However, he found it difficult to now reconnect with people needing a deity to explain the wonders of the universe; thus the concept of aweism could be a label Jacob might adopt. 'If you take God out of the picture, you are left with something that is just incredible. It's wondrous'. Jacob invoked a Douglas Adam's-style perspective: 'Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?'

Other interviewees also made the universe the focus of their wonder. Andrew expressed an appetite for wonder and referenced Brian Cox's Wonders of the Universe, stating there is beauty in that perspective of the world. This was the same for Nathanael, who viewed wonder as being in awe of the universe, science and nature. What the Sunday Assembly London congregation wondered about was largely themed around science — Kevin wondered about 'dark matter and astrophysics'.

For some, wonder was more grounded within the everyday; for others, it was wound up with humanism. Grace wondered about society and Gabriel wondered about how 'other people's actions have an impact in the world and is that a good thing or not? Should we be trying to impact the world? Is there a direction or is it all for nothing?'

A question of 'effective altruism'.[19] The wonder of purpose and 'Is it all for nothing?' was discussed in a couple of interviews. Phoebe discussed 'wonder[ing] why you're here' and while 'you're here' what you can do rather than just consuming material needs. For Eve, wonder was something, if done too much, could cause an 'existential crisis quite easily'. She expressed that she could go from wondering to thinking, 'Oh God, what is the point of it all? None of this has meaning. This is futile'. Eve stated she was careful not to delve too deeply.

During an interview with Susan, she expressed wonder in terms of theology. This was the only interview in which a participant wondered if God does exist. Susan also discussed notions of fate, expressing concern as to whether she was living her life in the wrong way. She wondered 'if there is somebody thinking about what I'm going to do next and I don't want them to get cross at me because it wasn't part of their plan'. Wonder and awe still being bound up in religious thinking was problematic for Rachel, who, despite being nonreligious, was uncertain if she could classify herself as an atheist as she still maintained a curiosity for wonder. Lastly, Thomas wondered about the pursuit of happiness, trying to figure out the exact formula for what made him happy and what would make him happy (this ultimately manifested in values and not beliefs for many).

From my research, wonder could be grouped within four categories:

1. Wondering about the universe and nature.
2. Wondering about society and the impact of actions.
3. Wondering about the profane, i.e. when will I be able to afford a house?
4. Wondering about purpose.

In summary, Zuckerman's concept of aweism provides a useful category for the description of some participants. However, for Adam, being 'awestruck' was not something he could relate to, thus aweism falls flat. Also, wonder has not replaced faith as a disposition; rather, wonders of the universe (Brian Cox) and in awe of

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[19] Effective Altruism (www.effectivealtruism.org) was a platform several participants were familiar with or actively involved in, relating to the 'live better' and 'help often' pillars of the Sunday Assembly motto. It represents something of an alternative route after the 'new atheism' movement.

human nature (David Attenborough) prove current in popular culture, as old questions are explored secularly without the religious connection.

Many of the participants grew up with varying degrees of religiosity (refer to *Table 5.1*) and now have transitioned to nonreligion; these questions are explored through science. An upsurge in secular wonder and awe is the result of a post-Christian shift. What the participants wondered about is a novel distinction between what they believe and what they value; in the next section, I discuss belief from a nonbeliever's perspective.

Belief From a Nonbeliever's Perspective

Hervieu-Léger (2000, p.74-75) argues that if 'modernity has deconstructed the traditional systems of believing' it may not have forsaken belief.

> [Believing] denotes the body of convictions — both individual and collective — which are not susceptible to verification, experimentation and, more broadly, to the modes of recognition and control that characterize knowledge, but owe their validity to the meaning and coherence they give to the subjective experience of those who hold them. If one here talks of believing rather than belief, it is in order to include not merely beliefs in the accepted sense, but all the resources of observance and language and the involuntary action which such belief its multiple forms displays: believing is belief in action, as it is experienced (Hervieu-Léger, 2000, p.72).

Therefore, believing is a way of gaining meaning and the 'way of believing' is more important than what is believed (Hervieu-Léger, 2000, p.70-72). This research has found that the Sunday Assembly places emphasis on not discussing other ideologies (political and religious); thus if a collective identity (in negation to a religious identity) is negotiated through organised structures, it is not achieved directly through the Sunday Assembly model. The Sunday Assembly does offer a loose identity through its motto, and despite not telling 'people how to live their lives' offers opportunities for altruism through community events and volunteering.

Day (2011, p.202) makes the point, 'once we stop analysing whether people are more or less religious, we can turn to the proper questions: what do people in a certain place and time believe in and how are those beliefs sourced, valued, practiced and integrated in other parts of social life? In doing so we can reclaim belief as both religious and a nonreligious term'. Day (2011, p.158-173) presented a typology of belief with seven dimensions — content, sources, practice, salience, function, place, and time — that 'helped complexify and nuance people's beliefs and demonstrate their social nature'. Day (2011, p.172) discovered two predominant belief orientations. The first, *anthropocentrism*, situates power and authority with people and not gods; the second, *theocentrism*, has god at the focal point; both orientations create a sense of belonging.

In this section, I place emphasis on what members of the Sunday Assembly congregation *do* believe in and illustrate that their belief is anthropocentric as they believe in 'doing good turns'. During the 35 interviews for this research, I asked participants about the Sunday Assembly motto, but more specifically I asked: 'What do you believe in?' This was a question I borrowed from Day's (2011) study on *Believing in Belonging*, in which Day would purposefully not load questions with religiosity to give informants as much control and choice as possible over how they interpreted and answered them (2011, p.36). I opted for a similar style, leaving questions open and deliberately ambiguous.

The above question would sometimes lead to long pauses; questions on your beliefs are questions you self-negotiate but not often voice aloud. Participants were much more likely to express things that they did not believe in rather than what they did believe in (in negation to religion and the supernatural). Joanna preferred to use the term 'nonreligious' rather than 'atheist', even though she did not believe in a deity. During the interview she told me: 'It does [religion] not play any part in my life. I don't believe in God or anything like it, therefore it is totally irrelevant'.

The majority of participants responded to the question, 'What do you believe in?' along the lines of, 'Nothing supernatural, whatsoever'. However, on occasion, polarised views were expressed. For example, Susan identified as being agnostic,

but leaned towards the position of an agnostic deist. When asked what she believed in, Susan responded:

> I'm from a very religious background. I went to Sunday school every week when I was little and my grandfather was a vicar and my uncle is chaplain at a hospice and my uncle's partner is a vicar. So, it's a very religious background. But I went through a phase of "God does not exist" as a teenager and my family were very supportive, thankfully. I wouldn't describe myself as Christian but I think — more than anything, I hope — there is something out there. I don't know if I believe in God as such, or what Christianity defines as God. But I would like to think something is there.

On the other hand, Hannah spoke of her belief in:

> Being moral and a fulfilling person. That's what I was taught growing up. My mum grew up in a Russian orthodox family and my dad is very, very Muslim.

For Thomas, his beliefs were currently fixed but, importantly, they were open to change, which illustrates the fluidity of belief also found in Cotter's (2015) work. Thomas stated:

> Initially, it's a very quick answer. I don't know what I believe in. I am open-minded, but I have pretty reasonable powers of logic and deduction. I suppose I'm scientific in nature, so I don't know. I'm exploring what I believe in. It seems unlikely to me — that is the key word — it seems unlikely to me that there is a God that is represented by any of the religions that I know of. That seems unlikely… I'd be happily proven wrong. I need better logic than what has been presented to me so far.

For Eve (like the majority of participants), her beliefs were rooted in science, but she alludes to the comfort provided through prayer and being religious, she told me:

> I believe in science, ultimately. I think I'm a scientist at heart. Over the years, I've definitely had those moments going, "I wish I believed. I wish I believed in some bigger power or bigger thing." Because when you are

having difficult times in life, which everyone does (I definitely have), sometimes you just think, "Gosh, I wish I could hitch up to church and go, 'If I pray to this thing, then I'm going to be okay'." But I just never managed to take that leap.

In one interview, Leah discussed belief from a humanist perspective. She believed:

In doing good turns even if you don't benefit from it… You can't change the world and it's very easy to think I can't change the world so I will continue the same route, making money for myself, but what can I do to make a small difference?

Answers to the question 'What do you believe in?' generally oriented around belief in a God(s). Grace expressed the following:

I'm definitely a committed agnostic, in the sense that I don't subscribe to any religious connotations of what God is. I don't subscribe to a connotation of a God, I don't subscribe to a force that has good or bad, or a punishment or judgement, or what you do now you will reap later. I don't subscribe to any of those notions — what I considered as an unknown entity of God, let's say. It's just something that sometimes I think you feel a connection to things, or when you listen to music… You feel suddenly moved by something. I don't know what that is; I just believe it is something. I don't believe it to be anything that is solidified or characterized by religion.

For the Sunday Assembly participants that I interviewed, belief was often intertwined with science and reason as opposed to faith or the supernatural. Correspondingly, spirituality was often seen as a term associated with the supernatural. As Jacob stated during one interview: 'Spirituality definitely alludes to the supernatural realm, and I don't believe in that'. A common response when trying to understand someone who is nonreligious was 'I do not believe in that'. Therefore, LeDrew (2013b, p. 465) suggests an alternative view of understanding atheism, not in terms of 'losing beliefs, but rather in terms of the development of other kinds of beliefs'.

So, do other kind of beliefs manifest collectively through the Sunday Assembly congregation?

Sunday Assembly Collective Values

Zuckerman (2009, p.953) argues: 'It is often assumed that someone who does not believe in God, does not believe in anything, or that a person who has no religion, must have no values. These assumptions are simply untrue. People can reject religion and still maintain strong beliefs. Being godless does not mean without being without values'. It is important to note that this study is limited to the beliefs and values of active atheists and the active nonreligious. Members of the Sunday Assembly congregation may have different attitudes to those who are religiously indifferent and 'closet atheists', and also those who do not partake in organised nonreligion.

Having analysed belief from an individual participant perspective, this section now details the values of the Sunday Assembly and illustrates that, despite the heterogeneous make-up of those Assembliers who identify as nonreligious, they still share collective values. During the interviews, I discovered that one way to discuss participants' beliefs was to ask about their values. Normally, beliefs are what you hold to be true, whereas values are what you hold to be important.

Stringer (1999, p.67) contends that:

> clearly it is not the case that any one congregation is simply a collection of individuals with disparate and unrelated views on worship or any other matter. There must be some kind of communal discourse, or at least some kind of limit which is set within the collective. The problem, however, comes when we try to define what this collective discourse might actually consist of.

To explain the collective, values of the participants were clustered into 10 main anthropocentric themes:

1. Truth
2. The autonomy of liberal individualism, freedom and agency

3. Friendship
4. Family
5. Happiness, especially in relation to money
6. Community
7. Human interaction
8. Equality
9. Taking care of the planet (environmentally)
10. Treating others as you would like to be treated — 'the golden rule'.

These themes are representative of a profile that suggests that Assembliers are liberal, value happiness, have humanistic principles and reflect Madge & Hemmings (2017, p.876) research on young 'nones', whose participants expressed a 'strong affinity with science, evidence and proof'. Of greatest distinction is the high emphasise on the importance of community. These values are compatible with Western contemporary society both for the religious and nonreligious. The Sunday Assembly does not challenge people's beliefs or values; rather, it reiterates them. While the values listed above may appear to be generic, they are somewhat distinctive in regard to Twenge's (2014) study, based on 1.2 million participants, to find generational differences. Twenge (2014, p.95) found that, for Generation Y (referred to as 'generation me'), life goals related to narcissism were valued more than intrinsic values such as affiliation and community feeling, which was the opposite for the participants.

To illustrate these themes, Susan said she valued honesty and, from her Christian upbringing, felt her values were still similar to those espoused by Christians, valuing people 'who try to be good and to also be as good as they possibly can'. Susan spoke of trying to live a life with having little 'negative impact on people' as her most important value, but concluded jokingly that 'good manners and morality go hand in hand'. Susan, despite being nonreligious, also wondered about the existence of God and thus shows that nonreligion is not a binary category, rather it is fluid, complex and can have different levels of religiosity. Ultimately, the golden rule — 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' (seen in many cultures and religions) was discussed in various forms. For example, Deborah spoke of happiness and 'being nice to each other'. Ty spoke of valuing 'peace and love and trying to do as

214

little harm as possible. I'm a big believer in every choice you should make, you should choose the choice that does the least harm to people or society'. The golden rule was also a key theme in Zuckerman's (2014) and Lee's (2014, p.125) nonreligious interviewee lives.

For Zachary, values were easier to discuss in negation to things he did not value (just like belief), for example, Zachary spoke of living a happy life over being wealthy. Cieslik (2015, p.422) acknowledges that 'being happy is a key feature of life in most societies today, yet strangely there has been little sustained analysis of the nature of happiness by mainstream British sociologists'. Yet, being happy was a value that was constantly cited by participants. Liberal individualisation, the autonomy of free choice, and agency were discussed by most of participants — being able to live the life you want, without hurting others.

Deborah listed 'equality for people to be able to be themselves regardless of their own beliefs' as a core value. Thomas stated during the interview that freedom and the ability to think whatever you want to think was a core value. Although being happy was most important, he stated: 'I think there's a lot of shit going on in the world, and I think we're all capable of being happy, but for various reasons, a lot of us aren't. I think the Sunday Assembly's got a role to play in that'. Thus, for Thomas, the Sunday Assembly was a driving force in creating happiness.

Humanistic values were implicitly and explicitly discussed in the interviews. Kevin listed family and friendship as being very important in his life, but also 'trying to make the world a better place'. Similarly, Hannah valued the 'environment, in the sense that I think it is very important to respect it'. Gabriel valued the importance of being 'nice to other people, try not to cheat other people. Be social, have a positive social effect on the world'. Jacob discussed the values of humanism as a guide for ideas, valuing love and respect. Eve discussed her values in reference to her political position (left wing and liberal), stating she felt this would be similar for most people who attend the Sunday Assembly, and believed that it was important for a caring society.

Many of the participants ranked family, friendship and human connection as key values. Esther commented:

> I value human interaction most. I'm a very social person, not social in the sense I'm an extrovert person and want to speak to everyone and want to be the centre of attention all the time. But my family and friends are really important, especially my family.

Phoebe, Jonah and Kevin also mentioned valuing friendship and family. Meanwhile, Jude and Sarah spoke of the importance of connecting with other human beings, and Elizabeth of placing value on community. Ruth, who was explicitly searching for community but was unsure as if the Sunday Assembly was yet to offer this, valued relationships greatly: 'I think that's partly why I went to the Sunday Assembly. Because I feel there aren't enough nonreligious people in my life. My two best friends are religious. My family isn't'. Thus, Ruth felt by attending the Sunday Assembly she might find like-minded people who were not religious.

Madge & Hemming (2017, p.872) maintain that those who identify as nonreligious are a heterogeneous group rather than conforming to neatly classified groupings, and this was apparent in researching the Sunday Assembly. However, core collective values and beliefs did manifest (happiness, 'the golden rule', equality, freedom, kindness, to name just a few).

Conclusion

This chapter has directly addressed my research question: *In the transition to a post-Christian British society, has wonder and secular enchantment replaced belief in a deity, and if so, how?* To address this, I have demonstrated how wonder and awe have been reinvigorated within the secular. This chapter has explored what 'wonder' means and the relationship it has with the secular. Furthermore, it has looked at the beliefs of the participants and if they relate to spirituality. Returning to the research question, some attribute the wonders of the natural world to the creation of God, others of a nonreligious persuasion do not. With more and more people in the UK, Europe and the US identifying as nonreligious, questions about existence and purpose remain. The Sunday Assembly's style of wondering more, which invokes

connection, and wondering through the experiences and narratives of others, fulfils a need that feeds into community. Wonder is the product of a post-Christian transition. Ultimate questions that were once answered by religious authorities are no longer universally accepted by the nonreligious, thus wonder has replaced belief in a deity for a new secular enchantment.

What became evident throughout the interviews was the ambiguous nature of the nonreligious. Often, they shared the same lack of belief in a religion, supernatural force or God, but this was not universal. However, collective values did manifest such as equality, kindness, truth, relationships and community, often feeding into existing humanistic principles. Lastly, the beliefs, values and worldviews of the Sunday Assembly London (as demonstrated in this chapter) show the transition from the 'new atheism' of the mid- to late 2000s to a new-new humanistic atheism — post-New-Atheism.

In the next chapter, I pull together the threads of **Chapter Six** (The Rituals of the Sunday Assembly), **Chapter Seven** (Living Better), **Chapter Eight** (Helping Often) and **Chapter Nine** (Wondering More) to offer a theoretical discussion on the Sunday Assembly providing a niche to those who still seek to belong but no longer believe within contemporary post-Christian society ('belonging without believing').

CHAPTER TEN

REIMAGINING THE SECULAR IN AN UNIMAGINATIVE WAY

'There's something to it [the Sunday Assembly] … I mean, I almost want to say mystical. I know that it's really not mystical because I don't believe in that. There's some sort of magic to it that just works'. – Nathanael.

Belonging Without Believing

In this chapter, I explore the phrase 'belonging without believing' — that is, to belong (to the Sunday Assembly) without believing in a prescribed religion. I analyse the generational change in nonreligion that has allowed the Sunday Assembly to grow rapidly by capitalising on Christian church-leavers. Furthermore, I explore the key terms at work — what does it mean to belong?

Davie (1994, p.92-93) expressed caution that the terms 'believing' and 'belonging' should not be considered rigidly. Davie (1994, p.92-93) notes 'the disjunction between the variables is intended to capture a mood, to suggest an area of inquiry, a way of looking at the problem, not to describe a detailed set of characteristics'. While I agree with the fluidity of belonging, I believe that particular characteristics (for example, rituals, recognition, obligation) found within the Sunday Assembly specifically create a sense of belonging. I draw upon the work of Day (2017) to understand belonging as a process. Finally, I argue that, while feelings of belonging are much stronger when present at a Sunday Assembly event, the organisation struggles to permanently plant these in the hearts of the majority of its congregational members, despite its best efforts.

Before tackling these issues, it is important first to recognise a generational shift (refer to the main introduction) in the British religious landscape, which has displaced a sense of belonging. As a result, this has presented the perfect opportunity and timing for the Sunday Assembly's success as perhaps the most well-known nonreligious, secular community.

Grace Davie (1994) famously wrote over two decades ago that 'the overall pattern of religious life is changing. For it appears that more and more people within British society want to believe but do not want to involve themselves in religious practice'. Hence, the phrase 'believing without belonging' was coined. Twenty-two years later, has the (non)religious landscape changed once again?

'Believing without belonging' has since spawned several variations. Davie (1994) argues that the UK witnessed a shift towards the end of the 20th century where people were less inclined to attend religious practice; rather, they opted for a privatised religious belief. Voas (2005) suggests a new variation — 'neither believing nor belonging' — as he felt neither religious belief nor belonging were being transmitted effectively between generations. Therefore, Glendinning & Bruce (2006, p.41) raise the question of 'the popularity of alternative beliefs and practices, and the possibility of new ways of believing or belonging'. Day (2011) suggests that we are now observing 'believing in belonging', with people choosing religious nominal identification and illustrates the importance of belonging. Catto & Eccles (2013, p.49) present research into '(dis)believing and belonging', arguing that an atheist identity can foster modes of belonging as well as disconnect (they do not test this finding in an active offline nonreligious organisation like the Sunday Assembly). Furthermore, Stolz et al (2016, p.v) show that, from their research, 'unbelieving' may be a more probable outcome for the future of religion. However, my research shows that there exists a proportion of the population of unbelievers who also seek to belong.

One year before the Sunday Assembly was born, Bullivant & Lee (2012, p.21) wrote, 'unlike other minority groups studied by social scientists, the nonreligious do not tend to join, not even nominally, specifically nonreligious organisations'. This may be true for the majority of nonreligious people; the thought of congregating based on a lack of belief will certainly alienate many of the nonreligious. Despite quick success, the Sunday Assembly only attracts a modest global attendance of 4,056 (August 2015, see *Figure 2.5*). When this number is compared to Phil Zuckerman's estimate of between 500 and 750 million worldwide who do not believe in God, it puts Assembly attendance in perspective. In terms of religious belonging, Voas & Crockett (2005, p.14) argue an increasing number of people

believe that belonging does not matter (that is, to actively participate in attending church).

Similarly, Catto & Eccles (2013, p.53) conclude from their study that 'disbelieving in religion is more important to British young atheists than formal nonreligious belonging'. However, they argue that informal belonging to online communities is also common. Nevertheless, in the case of the Sunday Assembly, belonging clearly does matter, even if the Sunday Assembly attracts a much smaller population of nones. A premise for attending the Sunday Assembly is 'belonging without believing'. In **Chapter Eight**, I discussed Thomas' brother, who was nonreligious and had started attending the local rural church with his family. People attend church for a whole host of reasons; for example, it could be for the affiliated schools, the company, the desire for connectedness, or the music. They belong without believing.

Mountford (2011, p.1) quotes the author Philip Pullman as declaring:

> I am a Christian Atheist; a Church of England Atheist, a Book of Common Prayer Atheist… All those things go deep for me, they formed me; that heritage is impossible to disentangle… I've absorbed the Church's rituals and enjoy its language, which I knew as a boy, and now that it's gone, I miss it.

The phrase 'Christian Atheist' resonated with Mountford, as it described people who 'value the cultural heritage of Christianity — its language, art, music, moral compass, sense of transcendence — without actually believing in God' (Mountford, 2011, p.1). It connects with religion being a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) — a lineage of belief that is kept alive by memory. For many at the Sunday Assembly, they have also absorbed Christian rituals and structure and that heritage is proving difficult to forget.

Returning back to my characteristics that help foster belonging, Abby Day's most recent work (2017) offers an important comparison between how belonging is nurtured in the lives of Generation A religious women and Generation Y's organised unbelief.

Day (2017, p.20) hypothesises a process of seven steps of belonging:

1. Recognition
2. Social intimacy
3. Integration
4. Routinization
5. Obligation
6. Ritualisation
7. Internalisation

Recognition refers to being remembered and being greeted (Day, 2017, p.198). This is especially evident at the Sunday Assembly, with volunteers welcoming regular members and newcomers alike with a smile. Often, Sanderson Jones does the same and says goodbye to everyone at the end. The social intimacy is inherent in the narratives of people's lives being recalled and discussed, which helps to establish a safe space. During the Assembly, conversation mainly focuses on what the congregation has thought of the main talk. From my own perspective, and indeed from the perspective of many of my interview participants, it was difficult to build social intimacy if you did not attend other midweek activities. However, a stronger sense of social intimacy could be found in the smaller groups, especially the 'Live Better' peer-to-peer group.

During the Utrecht 2016 annual conference, I took part in a trialled version of the new Sunday Assembly secular-styled 'Alpha Course'. This involved writing down the highs and lows of your previous year and sharing them with someone in the group you did not know. I recall opening up to a woman who then recounted her difficult year to me. Social intimacy was definitely focal.

The integration element is the ability to be included in events. The Sunday Assembly London was incredibly good at organising events outside of the service (something other congregations wished to replicate), through a noticeboard of events taking place, an announcement at the end of the service and a table for first-timers. Furthermore, email lists every week would detail what Assembliers were doing, facilitating integration and the joining of social events. The 'routinization'

that Day (2017) found refers to a regular attendance and participation in church events. This was also an important factor of the Assembly community, whereby people often remarked how they enjoyed the ritualised nature of attending and planning their weekends (and life) around attending. The 'obligation' refers to being given a regular job — for example, greeting people or being part of the tea team. Day refers to this as being part of a 'rota' of responsibility and interdependence. This particular aspect is what the Sunday Assembly really excels at; it is in this spectrum that it can create belonging by enlisting an army of volunteers to help out; in these splinter groups of voluntary teams, community and belonging is more prevalent. However, the helping these volunteers mainly do is primarily within the Assembly and thus they are helping themselves before they help the wider community.

The sixth element of Day's steps of belonging, ritualisation, refers to becoming part of 'holy' events and also the familiarisation that accompanies this. From a Sunday Assembly perspective, this is evidenced in the rituals and liturgies it uses to create belonging (as indicated in **Chapter Six**).

The last of the seven effective strategies that Day (2017, p.198) argues brings newcomers and regulars to a sense of belonging is 'internalization'. These are the habits and practices that become mundane, part of normal life. Internalization is when the church becomes a part of yourself, to the extent that you no longer have to choose to go to church; you just attend. For the majority of the Sunday Assembly, attendance is very much about choice; thus this aspect might be deemed less significant.

What is Belonging?

Why return to a congregational setting, when you could attend many other social activities in London? Ammerman (1999, p.362) presents one potential reason. She expresses the notion that congregations are among the most effective generators of social capital, functioning to provide points of identification and belonging in modern society. However, Ammerman (1999, p.363) suggests that 'congregations are places of belonging, but belonging to a religious community has a moral weight not always granted to other memberships'. The Sunday Assembly does not carry the

same level of 'moral weight' as some theistic congregations, however a participant recounted earlier how Sanderson emailed him after a period of absence. This has both advantages and disadvantages. The lack of moral weight creates a vicarious environment. The pressure for the community to attend is not as strong; it allows people to 'dip in and out' as and when it suits them. This, of course, presents a difficult challenge for a (relatively) fledgling community like the Sunday Assembly. How can it create a binding community, especially if the 'community' is different at each assembly?

Voas & Crockett (2005, p.20) argue that 'belief and belonging are essentially connected, so that deterioration in one is associated with a decline in the other'. As belief deteriorates in the UK, belonging naturally declines with religious affiliation. But what does not decline is a social need to belong to something (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), whether or not people are finding this need at the Sunday Assembly.

Baumeister & Leary (1995, p.497) identify the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation; to fulfil this need, human beings must form and uphold a minimum number of ongoing, meaningful and positive interpersonal relationships. Baumeister & Leary develop a 'belongingness' hypothesis that consists of two criteria: first, it is necessary for regular, affectively enjoyable connections to blossom with a few other people; second, these interactions must occur in the 'context of a temporarily stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other's welfare'. In order to quench this need to belong, 'the person must believe that others care about his or her welfare and like (or love) him or her' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.500). In addition, 'ideally, this concern would be mutual, so that the person has reciprocal feelings about the other... viewed in this way, the need to belong is something other than a need for mere affiliation' (1995, p.500). This is essentially what Pakula was inferring in the previous chapter and relates to the 'help often' outlook the Assembly are trying to foster and facilitate. A level of mutual affection materialises in an interview with Andrew who stated:

> Yeah, I do [feel like I belong]. That's what I was aiming for. I belong. It
> works both ways. I can belong there [at the Sunday Assembly] and feel at
> home there with people, but also, I'll be missed if I'm not there.

Andrew's extract relates to Day's first pillar of 'recognition' as a fundamental point in creating belonging.

May (2011, p.374) engages with the question of people's everyday sense of belonging in relation to their cultural material and contexts and how these connects with the self and social change. Felski (2002, p.608) contends that the 'everyday life thus epitomizes the quintessential quality of taken-for-grantedness; it speaks to aspects of our behaviour that seem to take place without our conscious awareness'. May (2011, p.370) argues that a sense of belonging emerges if we go about our everyday lives without paying much attention to it. This feeling of belonging materialised in an interview in which the participant expressed notions of belonging 'because I go there [Sunday Assembly London], I belong because I'm there'. Conversely, when our expectations of the everyday are not fulfilled, 'it is from this lack of fit that a sense of unease, of not belonging, emerges' (May, 2011, p.370).

As previously mentioned, for many members of the congregation, the Sunday Assembly is not their only point of contact for community; one participant was also a leader in the Girl Guides. Consequently, 'few people feel a sense of belonging to merely one group, culture of place but rather experience multiple senses of belonging' (May, 2011, p.370). However, from my interviews, usually multiple layers of belonging had been displaced; individuals may have left their local church, losing a sense of belonging and community. Furthermore, many people attending the Sunday Assembly London were not native Londoners and had moved to the capital, dislodging a sense of belonging to one particular place.
Putman (2000, p.274) contends that:

> Each of us derives some sense of belonging from among the various communities to which we might, in principle, belong. For most of us, our deepest sense of belonging is to our most intimate social networks, especially family and friends. Beyond that perimeter lie work, church, neighbourhood, civic life, and the assortment of other "weak ties" that constitute our personal stock of social capital.

For many of the participants in this research, moving to London had worn down what Putman refers to as 'weak ties' and, of course, the intimate social connections that create belonging may be strained.

But how important is good leadership to effectively create a congregational sense of belonging?

Charisma Fosters Belonging

The concept of charisma often arises in the study of new religious movements (NRMs). German sociologist Max Weber (1968) established a tripartite classification of authority comprising the components 'legal', 'traditional' and 'charismatic'. Of most relevance to the Sunday Assembly is Weber's charismatic authority, based on the charisma of leadership. Charisma, defined by Weber, is 'a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional qualities' (1968, p.48).

Cimino & Smith (2014) allude to Sanderson Jones' charismatic qualities when they visited the '40 days and 40 nights tour'. They state:

> Sanderson Jones seemed caught up in the spirit, even if he would adamantly argue that it wasn't the Holy Spirit. With his shoulder-length hair and beard, Jones bore a resemblance to Jesus, or at least an Old Testament prophet, but he played the part of a Pentecostal preacher as he paced the platform.

Of course, Jones is fully aware of this uncanny resemblance to an idealistic depiction of a prophet, but does not claim anything of an 'emissary prophet' (McGuire, 2008, p.252) with supernatural or superhuman powers. The idea that celebrities can be classified as god(s) or idols has become a recurrent theme (Ward, 2011). Drescher (2016) found, when speaking to an individual who had attended the launch of Silicon Valley Sunday Assembly congregation, that (Pippa) Evans and Jones were a 'draw' to why people attended and thus highlighted their celebrity status. Jones does possess exceptional 'leadership' qualities — a relentless

positivity, dedicated drive, enthusiasm for life, the ability to command the attention of a room, a comedic nature (formerly a stand-up comic) and affability.

During the interviews, Pippa Evans was mentioned, too. Thomas stated, 'I'm a great Pippa fan. I think she's lovely and charming and enchanting. I met her privately and she was lovely'. Similarly, Thomas mentioned how he was now on first-name terms with the co-founders. Stolz & Usunier (2014, p.11) discuss how 'secular religions' lack the criteria of transcendence, despite having the capacity to integrate, provide identity and give meaning. However, they argue these elements are not linked to a deity; it is the leader, the inventor of the brand that is venerated.

Recognition developed as a theme from my interviews in two ways:

a) Being recognised by others as part of the community.
b) Being recognised by the core group of Sunday Assembly London, specifically Sanderson.

It became apparent that recognition from the 'founding father' had a positive correlation with members of the congregation's sense of belonging. This materialised in the following interview:

> Yeah, yeah. I wouldn't say it [feelings of belonging] was very strong, but yes. I would say that I belong there. Yeah, Sanderson, bless him, works very hard at remembering people's names. That's impressive. He always knows me. In fact, I hadn't been for some time and he emailed me.

Furthermore, suggestions of recognition through charismatic authority were further cemented in the following extract:

> I've met a lot of cool and like-minded people [at the Sunday Assembly], people that are a bit like me — not normal. Sanderson especially, because he is so at home, he is the person that makes you feel you belong and makes you feel like you're right where you are. So, in that sense, when I'm there, especially when I see him and one or two others who are a bit like that as well, then I'm there, but outside of the Sunday Assembly, not so much.

From this extract, strong impressions of 'belonging without believing' develop, but in the sense of only when present at the Sunday Assembly service. Baumeister & Leary (1995, p.500) recognise that 'frequent contacts with non-supportive, indifferent others can go only so far in promoting one's general wellbeing and would do little to satisfy the need to belong. Conversely, relationships characterised by strong feelings of attachment, intimacy or commitment but lacking regular contact will also fail to satisfy the need'. The latter part of their argument is particularly pertinent to my findings at the Sunday Assembly. I found that those who did not attend regular events during the week and only attended occasionally did not get the same sense of belonging. This was characterised in the following extract:

> When I'm there, when I'm there in the midst of it, I feel this is somewhere I belong — like-minded people. Perhaps, if I go again to the midweek things, I would experience it more.

This indicates that belonging is fleeting. Drescher (2016) argues that nonreligious organisations like the Sunday Assembly rarely prompt a formal affiliation, even with the loose configuration of an 'atheist church' that borrows from existing religious practices. Rather, Drescher (2016) argues that 'people "belong" in a specific moment, and that feeling of "belonging" has to do with being in the same place with people of similar interests, rather than with a shared commitment to making the event and its relational encounters continue through practices and institutionalization'. Certainly, there is a core group of Sunday Assembliers people who are devoted to belonging to the community (evidenced in the first Assembly tattoo, see **Chapter Two** *figure 2.9*). However, belonging is difficult to maintain when attending infrequently and not involving oneself in the social activities. I spoke to one participant about his attendance at a Sunday Assembly social event and he expressed how he did not feel instant belonging:

> I just feel like, in London, people go to so many events where they go to speak to random different people; it was a bit like that. I think I would have to attend or it would have to be more often and have more stuff for me to do. You can't say to someone "let's be friends" after five minutes.

Gaining a sense of belonging and a connection with a community are things the individual needs to work at. The extract below emphasises that belonging is something that does not happen overnight; it requires time and work:

> I don't think I've been going to it [the Sunday Assembly] enough. It's gotten quite big and unless you actively go to the small groups and stuff like that, I don't think you're really part of it. I think I've said hello to Sanderson before, but then he has so many people to talk to I don't think he'd remember if I ever said hello to him again.

This extract also illustrates the importance of a charismatic leader. The Sunday Assembly's (2013) rule of no one person hosting more than 50% of services is not adhered to by the flagship Sunday Assembly London, where Jones takes the reins more often than not. The energy Sanderson channels during a service is reciprocated by the London congregation. His positivity is certainly infectious. As other franchised Sunday Assemblies, under more hushed tones, dwindle and fizzle out (Paris, Berlin, Crystal Palace, Amsterdam, although Amsterdam was to later relaunch in 2016), it begs the question: How much does the Sunday Assembly require and rely upon a charismatic 'frontman' to lead, create belonging and cement community?

The Bristol Assembly proudly eschews charismatic leadership. Rather, it takes a more introverted approach and has continually been a strong chapter in attendance. It does not bear comparison (and may not want to) with its exuberant big brother. Other franchises — for example, Utrecht in Holland and Los Angeles — have comedic and extroverted influences to the fore. Under these conditions, where comedy and strong leadership is present, Assemblies are attracting regular numbers.

As Pippa Evans pursues other comedy theatre interests with success, Sanderson Jones' decision to make the Sunday Assembly his mission in life has not always been well received by others wishing to challenge his authority. From my ethnographic research, several participants have expressed wishes for Sanderson Jones 'to act more like the Queen, rather than the government'; in other words, to have less control over key decisions made by committee. The Sunday Assembly is becoming increasingly bureaucratic in how it is branded, and has adopted a more

rigid structure in terms of appointing board members, accreditations of new assemblies, the training of new start-ups and annual general meetings. These changes may ultimately result in a Weberian (1968) routinization by which 'charismatic authority is succeeded by a bureaucracy controlled by a rationally established authority or by a combination of traditional and bureaucratic authority'. McGuire (2008, p.177) notes that Weber recognised charismatic leadership as a fuel for social change, i.e. a new secular community, 'the process of trying to maintain and defend innovation typically results in routinization'. I have certainly witnessed a noticeable shift — a routinization of charisma — in researching the Sunday Assembly from its grass roots in 2013 through 2016, the dynamism of the Sanderson Jones/Pippa Evans co-leadership morphing into the stability of a global franchised bureaucratic organisation. However, McGuire (2008, p. 253) notes that 'routinization usually compromises the ideals of the original message; it is a necessary process for the translation of the ideal into practice'.

The Sunday Assembly has not compromised its original message, yet routinization ripples have been observed in the changing nature of the brand. Over a three-year period, it has transitioned from an 'atheist church' to a 'godless congregation' to a 'secular community'.

As the Sunday Assembly continues to evolve, why are people searching for belonging there?

Why Are People Searching for Belonging At The Sunday Assembly?

The interviewees presented different reasons for seeking belonging, although the main narrative thread is one of people seeking a secular version of a church, a nonreligious community that could replicate the positive aspects (often experienced personally, while they attended church) of a religious congregation without dogma. Some participants expressed different reasons for attendance. Many of my interviewees had attended Humanists UK meetings but these did not provide the sense of community they were looking for. Ruth explained how she occasionally went to Humanists UK lectures but people would turn up and then leave straight after. Gabriel explained how other atheist groups would ridicule the religious and

this was not the kind of community he was searching for. Similarly, Adam expressed a humanist worldview but subsequently found that the Humanists UK:

> Seems to be more about attacking religion than it is about making individual people happy. I accept that there's a place for that and I don't disagree with any of what they say, but the balance struck me as not being quite right. What I was trying to get out of humanism effectively was how to be a happier person.

Lastly, Jacob told me how the humanist groups he had attended attracted interesting speakers and people were on his wavelength. However, they lacked a community aspect and although the Sunday Assembly (at that point) was not a 'magic bullet' to solving his search for a community, it was a better fit than other nonreligious groups. Though Ruth had not found her sense of belonging or community at the Sunday Assembly either, she commented: 'I think it's not as good as religion in the sense that it does not give you as much community as religion or that amazing feeling I had'. She described the 'amazing feeling' as 'like a belief in God feeling and that everything would be ok and that everything was fine and I just felt connected to everyone and everything and I was connected to everything in the world'. Ruth is Jewish (secular) and partakes in the cultural practices of Judaism without attending synagogues. Ruth appeared to be on a quest to find community and belonging and I imagine the Sunday Assembly to be just one stop on this journey.

One interviewee felt part of a community and a sense of belonging simply because 'I know people. Everybody knows me and I know them'. While this feeds into the recognition pillar of belonging, I asked the participant further questions to unpack what he meant:

> For me, it's very much because I volunteer and I am involved in doing things. I don't think I'd feel particular belonging sitting in the body [of the Sunday Assembly], you don't get to know people that way. I get to know people by doing things. I am a doer.

Peter discussed belonging at the Sunday Assembly and the post-Christian transition during his interview. He stated:

> [The Sunday Assembly reminds me of when I was a Christian, and talking about the church I went to. Even though, of course, this isn't church, nevertheless almost nobody's heard of it. To talk about a godless congregation, actually, I think the people it makes most sense to are either the people who are still Christians, or who used to be Christians. I know that is not true of everybody at Sunday Assembly by a long way. It's just that I think those of us who have been through that ... I don't know your background, but if we had just met and your background was that you used to be a Christian and now you're not, I could explain the Sunday Assembly to you and you would get it immediately. You would absolutely get it immediately. If you had no religious experience or background, you'd probably think this is completely weird. I find describing it a little bit embarrassing because I don't want to be seen as too weird.

Nathanael discussed how the Sunday Assembly is fighting not to be evangelical. Yet it has become so meaningful to its core group who take the act of belonging very seriously indeed, that it perhaps does inadvertently ape Christian evangelism. Still, Nathanael was able to relate the Assembly's values because 'they're really getting this feeling of belonging that you just have to share'.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that, through a generational shift in nonreligion (discussed at length in the main introduction), belonging has been relocated. It has shown how the Sunday Assembly attempts to create belonging through the use of recognition, ritualization and routinization. Despite its best efforts, belonging still remains difficult to achieve for certain members of the Assembly's congregation. Though the main (London) Assembly generates feelings of deep connectedness and belonging in a particular time and place, interviewees expressed how these feelings of belonging did not last for the rest of the month. Furthermore, 'belonging without believing' is perhaps a concept people are searching for but not all are necessarily finding at the Sunday Assembly. However, a strong core group who attend the social

activities express deeper feelings of belonging without believing. Belonging is very much multi-layered — belonging to the congregation, the band, the choir, the small groups, and the entire network of Assemblies.

The Sunday Assembly is shaped by the religious memory of Christianity and is still contemporarily fashioned by religion, adopting rituals (refer to **Chapter Six**) and searching for practices and structures (like its secular Alpha Course, refer to **Chapter Seven**) to construct community and belonging as it grows. So, we can speak of the Sunday Assembly living and adapting in a transitioning post-religious, specifically post-Christian society.

CONCLUDING THE PHENOMENON OF THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY IN A TRANSITIONING POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE

'Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief' (Taylor, 2007, p.727).

Introduction

While conducting this research, at Easter 2015, former UK Prime Minster David Cameron ruffled a few nonreligious (and religious) feathers when he stated: 'Britain is still a Christian country'. Easter 2016, Cameron proclaimed we must 'proudly defend Britain's Christian values'. Easter 2017, Cadbury's and the National Trust dropped 'Easter' from their 'egg hunts', which received widespread media attention, and were accused of airbrushing faith by the Church of England. Cameron's statements might not be entirely true, as Woodhead (2017, p.247) argues:

> If we compare Christian and "no religion" there is a striking contrast
> between the youngest cohort (18–24) with a majority (60 per cent) reporting
> "no religion" and a minority (27 per cent) identifying as "Christian", and the
> oldest cohort (60 and over) where the proportions are roughly reversed. If we
> exclude those belonging to non-Christian faiths, two thirds of under-40s now
> say they have "no religion".

My Findings

This research has addressed four focal questions:

1. In what ways have secular congregations contributed to the formation of a new nonreligious identity?
2. What does the recent growth of secular congregations, specifically the Sunday Assembly, reveal about believing, belonging and community?
3. In the transition to a post-Christian British society, has wonder and secular enchantment replaced belief in a deity, and if so, how?
4. What does the growth of secular congregations reveal about the relationship between religion and secularisation?

To answer the first question, I have demonstrated that the Sunday Assembly profile is estranged from the discourse surrounding the 'new atheism' of the mid-noughties. The vast majority of participants interviewed were not anti-theistic in their beliefs. It is this small but growing population of the nonreligious that are choosing to congregate and create secular communities based upon a chain of religious memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). As previously discussed, the Assembly adopts an apolitical stance and is careful to not explicitly tell the congregation how they should be living their lives. Therefore, it is not moulding a new nonreligious identity in their image. However, it is facilitating a safe space for nonreligious populations to develop a collective identity that already conforms with and confirms their prior values. Values which often manifest during the themed talks, for example, reducing carbon emissions when travelling.

The second question situates the Sunday Assembly in a broader shifting religious landscape to explain what a secular community can reveal about belief, belonging and community. Lee (2015, p.129) acknowledges the Sunday Assembly's attempt to replicate religious communal life, however, Lee contends that no nonreligious communities have:

> rivalled religious traditions in terms of their scope. Their focus is on existential philosophical questions, day-to-day wellbeing, and community for community's sake; but they do not give detailed direction in terms of how to dress, what to eat, how to wash the body, and so on. This may indicate a limitation in terms of the area of life that nonreligious cultures address and how comprehensive and how bounded a community they are capable of generating or supporting.

While I recognise Lee's point to be a valid one, a bounded core community that has found belonging does exist, even if it is a small number (approximately 10%) of those who do attend. I identified that community and belonging are often sought (found by some, but not by the majority), but these feelings are difficult to cement when not attending the Sunday Assembly.

If a religious economy exists (Stark, 2006), the Sunday Assembly is certainly trying to capitalise on the nonreligious market. As the steep decline in Church of England attendance continues, 'belonging without believing' can take flight and is reflective of the various ways of belonging outside of organised religion. It has allowed the Sunday Assembly to capitalise on (a small minority of) people leaving their religion (particularly Christian), but who still seek to reclaim a sense of belonging to a community.

Even though the Sunday Assembly is reimagining the secular in an unimaginative way by mimicking existing structures, by doing so it is tapping into a memory of a post-Christian population that seeks to belong, but does not want to believe. 'Belonging without believing' is a variation on Davie's (1994) 'believing without belonging', which has since spawned several variations (for example, Day, 2011, Catto and Eccles, 2013) and criticisms (for example, Voas and Crockett, 2005). These illustrate that the religious landscape is changing once again. Sunday Assembliers are evidence of a small number of the nonreligious who culturally seek to belong to a congregation (as opposed to a sports team, book group or countless variations of community organisations) without believing in a religious doctrine. I found that, while many of the congregation were consciously (or subconsciously) seeking a community, not all participants felt part of a community.

I have answered the third research question, which explores wonder, by delving into Sunday Assembliers beliefs and values. I argue that, while no supernatural bind exists that could prove consequential to the longevity of the Sunday Assembly, collective values act as the social glue that brings people together. **Chapter Nine** also synthesises existing research and understanding of wonder and awe to analyse the curiosity of nonreligious wonder in the 21st century. I argue that ultimate questions that were once answered by religious authorities are no longer universally accepted by the nonreligious, thus wonder has replaced belief in a deity for a new secular enchantment.

This thesis details a narrative of change from early secularisation to the development of nonreligious studies in the sociology of religion to address a growing 'unbelief' in the 21st century. I have argued first in **Chapter One** and then throughout my thesis

that the Sunday Assembly is the product of a transitioning post-Christian society and Christian memory. To answer the last research question, as to what the Sunday Assembly reveals about the relationship between religion and secularisation, the adoption of a church skeletal structure indicates that a post-Christian transition is not an easy transition, one particularly felt by those who left their religious tradition. Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, hypothesises a feature of the 'future of the religious past' is that 'much of our past, which our modern narratives tell us is firmly behind us, cannot thus simply be abandoned' (2007, p.770). Therefore, society cannot simply jump from 'religious' to 'unbelief' (as if these were clear, bounded and distinct categories) without transitional phases, and secular society still wants to hold on to what religion provides, but not directly. The Sunday Assembly fulfils this role of holding on to what religion provides, but not directly, by adopting the congregational format but secularising the structure and practices. To return to a previous statement, it reveals that, despite a transitioning to a post-Christian society, 'we are very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief' (Taylor, 2007, p.727). I previously mentioned in **Chapter Two** the New York schism, the Godless Revival centred around an atheist variety show which took place in 2014. They stated that they were not a congregation and they would not dictate how people should live. Furthermore, they decided it was not a secular church and they would not hold a "service". I discussed how it fizzled out within 18 months and thus shows how the Christian memory is an integral chain in the Assembly's future.

Another example to support the difficulty of completely discarding what religion provides is the popularity of faith schools for their supposed provision of values, strong religious ethos and academic record. Many parents who send their children to faith schools are not religious. But it is not uncommon in the UK for parents to start attending their local church in order to gain entry for their children to what might be the better performing faith school in their local area. This type of behavior may change as Theresa May's Conservative government, in 2016, responded to criticism and said it would relax faith school admission rules.

It is this current transitional phase that has provided the correct conditions for the Sunday Assembly to take flight as an idea and global congregational movement. Clichéd as it may sound, the world was not ready for the Sunday Assembly even as

recent as 25 years ago — simply put, it would not have served a purpose or fulfilled a niche. However, with the dawn of the new millennium, then post-9/11, post-new-atheism, and the decline of Christianity in the UK, the Sunday Assembly could thrive as a 'half-way house' for those leaving their religion and those who had never been religious, but who sought what religious communities had exclusively to offer (refer to **Chapter Eight** on social capital).

The Future of the Sunday Assembly in a Post-Christian Era

Despite its relative success, the future of the Sunday Assembly has been brought into question, namely by the chief executive of Humanists UK, Andrew Copson (Adley, 2013). At present, the Sunday Assembly taps into predominantly Christian church-leavers as its main demographic for attendees. If Christian heritage is abandoned completely and this transitional phase becomes redundant, the current model and structure of the Sunday Assembly will no longer be relevant; thus it will need to continue to evolve or risk similar decline to the Church of England. Whether the Sunday Assembly goes down the road of a 'secular spirituality' or embraces the buzzword of 2016/2017, 'wellbeing', or even trains its congregational leaders as secular chaplains, thereby creating new rituals and strengthening community ties, whichever path it chooses it will need to adapt with each new generation to create a slightly different brand to draw new individuals in.

In **Chapter Two**, I indicate how the Sunday Assembly is now part of the GCSE religious studies curriculum as a point of reference and source of nonreligious wisdom. It is this kind of innovation that will ensure the Assembly remains talked about among Generation Z. The Sunday Assembly has tapped into Generation Y, which has largely grown up with some degree of religious tradition, has now left it behind but still clings to notions of 'belonging without believing'. As sociologists, we know that nonreligion is 'sticky' in a way that Christianity is not (Woodhead, 2016). 'For every one person brought up with no religion who has become a Christian, twenty-six people brought up as Christians now identify as nones' (Bullivant 2017, p.13). 'This ensures the continued growth of "no religion" even if the birth rate is somewhat lower for nones than for religious people' (Woodhead, 2016, p.249). However, what this new generation of Millennials and beyond seek

will be a new challenge for the Sunday Assembly. The format of its current structure resembling a modern Christian church may lose its impact once there is no longer a Christian memory within the congregation to tap into.

In **Chapter One**, I introduced Japan as a case study noted by Osakabe (2015), where the Sunday Assembly failed to launch. Meeting on a Sunday does not have any religious connotations in Japan, whereas in post-Christian Britain Sundays still convey religious overtones. The Sunday Assembly is born from a post-Christian culture, and while the rituals, liturgies and practices it adopts may bear a striking resemblance to a modern Christian church framework (as discussed in **Chapter Six**), these familiarities are alien to the vast majority of Japanese people. Pew Research Center (2015c) reported that, in Japan in 2010, only 1.6% of the population identified as Christian, compared to 57% reporting unaffiliated and 36.2% Buddhist. By 2050, the number of Christians will rise minimally to 2.3% (Pew, 2015c); therefore, I would support Osakabe's argument that the Sunday Assembly will not find a place in Japanese culture, likewise any other country/culture where nonreligion is the norm, for example, in Estonia.

This argument has also been taken up by Katie Aston (2013), who wonders how the cultural reference to Christianity will play out in the future, as well as how the Sunday Assembly will attract nonreligious people from minority groups who may be unfamiliar with the Christian references and social codes. Aston (2013) recognises the disadvantage of this approach; it may produce negative memories for those who have rejected this format of institutionalised religious practice, and the secular service resemblance may be too overwhelmingly familiar. Furthermore, in reference to Osakabe's (2015) argument, someone of any other faith (not Christian) or no faith background will find the secular service (which resembles a modern Christian service) unfamiliar and may find little to latch on to. This became evident during the interviews for a minority, but overall the 'fuzzy fidelity' (Voas, 2009) that the Sunday Assembly adopts ultimately meant that many who had grown up with varying degrees of religiosity felt a positive affiliation to this post-Christian format.

Implications and Future Research

This research has filled an important knowledge gap within the sociology of religion and secular studies by studying the Sunday Assembly from its inception in 2013 to three years into its journey as a secular congregation. The thesis has gone beyond the reason for why people attend and has signified deeper implications about the changing nature of belonging, believing and the need for community. Importantly, this study's primary focus has been on the Sunday Assembly London, it being the first Assembly and considered the largest, most influential and the model to which other franchised congregations should adhere. While the research also offers overviews of British Assemblies outside of London, other European, American and Australian congregations will need further research and analysis. I have argued and evidenced through fieldwork that the Sunday Assembly is born from a post-Christian society, which would support congregational success in America, and why congregations have either failed to launch (Japan) or simply fizzled out (Paris, Berlin). Cities that are deemed liberal and multicultural do not necessarily constitute the foundations for Sunday Assembly success. Rather, if the conditions for transition to post-Christianity are ripe, individuals will continue to seek to belong, seek community and seek congregation, as religion is a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). To test this hypothesis, future sociological, anthropological and historical research into the Sunday Assembly and where it has been/will be set up is welcomed.

During the interviews, questions were focused on why the participants attend the Sunday Assembly, their beliefs, their values and what impact it was having in their lives. Future research may wish to focus on lived nonreligion more generally and not in an organised capacity, or rather lived nonreligion when people are not attending the Sunday Assembly. One avenue of future research would be to understand unbelief more broadly. We know a small population attend and accept organised nonreligion, but what role does religion play in their everyday lives? I was often told that religion was not a part of their lives (anymore) or simply they were indifferent (although Lee [2014] shows that this is a form of relationality). Either way, there has been a change in popular discourse from a New Atheist outlook to one more sympathetic of the functionality of religion in contemporary society.

Further research may wish to address these additional questions: If they are supposedly 'indifferent' to religion, do members of the Sunday Assembly have religious weddings? Do they christen their children? Do they accept the role of a godparent or are they secular guide parents? What secular alternatives and rituals have been created beyond the Sunday Assembly that people adopt? Do Assembly members oppose religious schools? Do their children attend religious schools? Do religious people attend the Sunday Assembly, and if so, why? How do they feel about religious politicians and secularism more generally? What do they think of religious holidays like Christmas and Easter? Lastly, how does the sociality and belief of the Sunday Assembly nonreligious population differ to 'nones' more generally — those who do not participate in organised nonreligion? How distinctive are their collective values?

I have focused primarily on the growth of the Sunday Assembly and what this can tell us about the changing (non)religious landscape in the UK. In future research, a mixed method approach, given the time and resources, would be beneficial to compare survey data with semi-structured interviews.

This thesis has created a framework to understand the Sunday Assembly through a post-Christian lens, and offers a theoretical framework into why the organisation has flourished in the 21st century. It has also outlined the fact that questions still exist that need answers, as to what a lived nonreligious identity looks like beyond organised unbelief. This research has shown that Sunday Assembly is a Generational Y movement, but additional research into young people's lives (Generation Z) and the children of nonreligious parents would offer an interesting comparison. I suspect that the new 'digital' generation is finding community and belonging through alternative forms. Perhaps the post-Christian structure in which the Sunday Assembly currently operates — standing up to sing, bowing one's head for a moment of reflection, meeting on a Sunday morning at 11am — will become unfamiliar if the chain of memory is broken.

A Final Word

This thesis has highlighted generational (Y) trends towards nonreligion in the UK that have allowed the Sunday Assembly — a secular community that uses existing

religious structures, rituals and practices — to flourish. It is through this post-Christian transition and religion as a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) that people are still seeking to belong, but do not wish to believe in a religious doctrine. The Sunday Assembly 'ideal type' is ethnically white, British, middle class, from a (Christian) religious background but no longer believes, and has certain somewhat humanist values. As one of my participants, Joanna, summarised, 'The Sunday Assembly suits who it suits'.

These findings have been my unique contribution to not only the field of secular/nonreligious studies but also sociology. Callum Brown (2009, p.198) concludes in *The Death of Christian Britain*, 'the culture of Christianity has gone in Britain of the new millennium. Britain is showing the world how religion, as we have known it, can die'. Conversely, the growth and initial demand of and for the Sunday Assembly indicates that a Christian culture still exists and the congregational community structure is still sought in the post-Christian world. A Christian memory still persists and, for Generation Y, the Sunday Assembly offers a functional alternative to a congregational religious community.

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Appendices

Permission for Academic PhD research: The Sunday Assembly London.

Doctoral Research: The Sunday Assembly: The Social Phenomenon of Godless Congregations.
Attention: Dr Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Dr Sonya Sharma and Professor Basia Spalek of the Department of Sociology at Kingston University London.

Dear Dr Collins-Mayo,

I am writing this letter to give permission to Josh Bullock, PhD researcher of Sociology at Kingston University London, to conduct an ethnography of the Sunday Assembly, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL. The ethnographic research will be conducted between these dates: September 2014 – September 2015.

I am aware that the purpose of his research is to deepen public understanding of the recent phenomenon of godless congregations, and to develop broader understandings of the nature of belief and belonging, wonder, and atheist identity.

I also understand this his research will include the following methods: an ethnography that will include participant observation as an on-going method to gather data. Josh will frequently visit the Sunday Assembly fortnightly to gain vital insights into why the congregation is flourishing.
I am also aware his research will include administering a poll to understand the demographics of those who attend. In order to administer the poll, with permission, Josh, in addition to handing out a short demographic survey to members at services, he will also place them on each seat for members to complete.

Lastly, Josh's research will include a total of 30 semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the interviews is to explore irreligious identities and how an irreligious identity is lived. Furthermore, the interviews will help to illuminate the larger census statistics on religious nones.

By signing below, I, Sanderson Jones co-founder of the Sunday Assembly authorise permission for Josh Bullock, PhD researcher at Kingston University London to conduct the research provided in this document. The research has full approval from the ethical committee at Kingston University.

Name: Sanderson Jones

Signature:

Email:

Date: 06-08-2014

Researcher:
Josh Bullock. PhD Researcher. Kingston University, London. Email: k1350718@kingston.ac.uk

06/08/2014

Interview Consent Form

The Atheist Church: The Social Phenomenon of Godless Congregations.

This study is about the recent growth of godless congregations. Focusing on the Sunday Assembly London. In a private interview, I will ask you to talk about your experience of attending the Sunday Assembly London. The interview will assist in developing broader understandings of the nature of belief and belonging, wonder, and atheist/nonreligious identity. The study will offer an explanation to why godless congregations are currently thriving in society.

Research questions:

1. In what ways have secular congregations contributed to the formation of a new nonreligious identity?

2. What does the recent growth of secular congregations, specifically the Sunday Assembly, reveal about believing, belonging and community?

3. In the transition to a post-Christian British society, has wonder and secular enchantment replaced belief in a deity, and if so, how?

4. What does the growth of secular congregations reveal about the relationship between religion and secularisation?

The interview will last approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour, and will be digitally-recorded.
The findings of the research will be disseminated through a range of outlets; including conference papers, book chapters, and articles in academic journals and in various media outlets.

Researcher:
Josh Bullock.
PhD Researcher.
Kingston University, London.
Email: J.Bullock@kingston.ac.uk

FOR THE PARTICIPANT:

- I voluntarily agree to take part in this interview.
- I confirm I am over the age of 18.
- The nature and purpose of the research in which I am involved has been explained to me in writing/verbally.
- I authorise the researcher to use the data I provide but understand that my name will be changed and other identifying details disguised.
- I understand that any recordings (both audio and written) undertaken are for the purpose of transcription of data and will be stored securely.
- I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.

- I understand that I may withdraw from this research and remove permission for any data obtained from me at any point without having to give a reason for withdrawing. If I wish to withdraw permission, I will contact the researcher to request this.
- I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records

Name:

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Signature:

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Sample Interview Questions:

1. How did you hear about the Sunday Assembly?
2. What initially attracted you to attend the Sunday Assembly? – Why do you come along?
3. What do you believe in?
4. What do you value?
5. Would you describe yourself as spiritual?
6. What is your religious belief?
7. Is this part of your identity?
8. Did you previously have a religious belief? – When did you lose your faith? Why did you lose your faith?
9. Do your family share the same belief? Are your parent's religious?
10. Have you been to any other congregation other than the Sunday Assembly in the last year? Or since leaving your faith?
11. How often do you attend the Sunday Assembly? – Fortnightly, monthly, when you can?
12. Who do you attend the Sunday Assembly with? Have you been to any other assemblies?
13. What Sunday Assembly activities do you take part in - If any? Are you a member of any of the small groups, choir, or other activities the Sunday Assembly host - would you be interested in joining and if so, why?
14. What aspects do you enjoy about the Sunday Assembly? What is your favourite part of the service?
15. What aspects do you dislike about the Sunday Assembly?
16. What part does the Sunday Assembly play in your life?
17. Do you feel part of a community at the Sunday Assembly? Has attending increased your social connections? Do you feel like you were searching for a community before?
18. Do you feel a sense of belonging attending at the Sunday Assembly?
19. Why do you think the Sunday Assembly is continuing to grow? Do you think it will continue to grow?
20. Would the Sunday Assembly work in a small town/village? Or somewhere that is not Western/Christian?
21. What does the motto "Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More" mean to you?
22. What do you wonder about?
23. During the moments of reflection, what do you think about?
24. What is sacred to you?
25. What do you value?
26. Would you describe the Sunday Assembly as being a part of your identity?
27. Has attending the Sunday Assembly had an impact on your life? Positive or negative? – has participation changed you as a person, e.g. skills, confidence, and identity.
28. What do you think the demographics of the Sunday assembly are?
29. Would the S.A be as successful if it wasn't for a charismatic front man like Sanderson?
30. Do you think the Sunday Assembly has any rituals?
31. Do you think the S.A is for extroverts?
32. Do you donate to the S.A?
33. Do you feel more positive than when you walked in?

Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What is your highest academic qualification?
5. What is your occupation? - Job title?
6. What is your relationship status?
7. Could you be in a relationship with someone who is religious?
8. What social class would you consider yourself to be?