

Modern but Not Meaningless:
Nonreligious Cultures and Communities in the United States

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This dissertation is the product of support and feedback from numerous mentors, colleagues, friends, family members, and community members.

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Chapter 1

Paradox or Paradigm?

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

The occasion for this secular sing-along was the second annual international conference of the Sunday Assembly, a network of "atheist churches" whose leaders intentionally, and only slightly ironically, appropriate the Protestant church model to affirm secular values and build community among the *nonreligious*. Organizers and members from various local chapters had come from all over the United States and Britain to meet one another, share questions and concerns, and celebrate their successes

as a growing organization. The gathering, “A Conference Called Wonder,” was being held during a time of rapid growth within the organization, which was founded in London in early 2013 and quickly spread to over 70 local “assemblies” by 2015. As a result, energies were high as conference attendees participated in three days of workshops meant to help them improve and grow their local assemblies, workshops on topics like “How to Be a Better Host,” “Secular Spirituality,” “Building Effective Communities,” and “Secular Seasons and Holiday Magic.” And the MCs of the conference were the founders of Sunday Assembly, British comedians Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, who continuously reaffirmed the importance of the congregational form for building nonreligious community and the superiority of secular worldviews for living life to its fullest. On the final day of the conference, which was a Sunday, everyone gathered for a Sunday Assembly service full of pop song sing-alongs, inspirational readings, motivational talks, and affirmations that they were all fulfilling Sunday Assembly’s mission to help the nonreligious “live better, help often, and wonder more” by creating and contributing to their local assemblies.

In this dissertation, I investigate the seeming paradox of an atheist church like the Sunday Assembly. Why would atheists, who are by definition *without* theism, want to start a network of churches to celebrate and ritualize their lack of religion? Answering this question requires investigating not just the Sunday Assembly itself, but also investigating our commonly shared assumptions about what it means to be an atheist and why it seems paradoxical that atheists would create a church-like community. I have spent the last ten years, and the bulk of two graduate programs, devoted to better understanding the beliefs, practices, and identities of the nonreligious – including

atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, and the rapidly growing demographic of people who identify as simply “none” or “nothing” when asked for their religious identification on a social survey (Pew 2015). As someone who was raised in an extremely insular and conservative religious community, but who had left that community as an adult, I started graduate school with a keen interest in sociological theories of religion and the people who leave it. However, my deeply meaningful journey away from religion, and the variety of nonreligious people, practices, and communities I had encountered along the way, were not reflected in the social scientific theories I was learning in my courses. Instead, I found a widely shared narrative that the loss of religion is a largely negative experience that comes with an inevitable loss of meaning, morality, and community. As I explain in more detail in this first chapter, much of the social scientific theorizing about the consequences of modernization and secularization is based in what Charles Taylor (2007) calls a “subtraction story” – a story of moving *away* from stable social identities, communities, and religious beliefs, and moving *toward* a hollow and meaningless secular modernity that leaves individuals feeling uncertain, anomic, and socially isolated. In this narrative, which continues to permeate both academic and public discourse, atheists and other nonreligious people are assumed to be amoral, anti-social, and lacking in the meaningful belief systems and communal obligations that come with religion.

In the following chapters, I show how atheist churches like the Sunday Assembly disrupt this narrative of loss by revealing the meaningful cultures and communities that nonreligious people are constructing without religion. A vibrant atheist community with emotion-filled rituals and a community-centered ethos does not line up with the dominant depiction of modern, secular individuals as being purely rational, individualistic, and

anomic. This is because rather than simply the *absence* of religious beliefs and practices, atheist churches signal the *presence* of substantive nonreligious beliefs and practices. And I show how cultural, practice-oriented investigations of these nonreligious cultures and communities can shed new light on core sociological questions about social change and meaning-making in contemporary social life. What are the consequences of modernization and secularization for identity formation and community engagement? What do people need individually for meaning and purpose and socially for structure and order? How are rituals, traditions, and moral obligations being created and sustained in a time of increased religious disaffiliation? The case of the Sunday Assembly offers a new lens through which to interrogate these questions and build new theoretical understandings of the meanings attributed to religion, identity, and community in the modern world.

The Metanarrative of Modernization

What is modernity and where does it come from? Though the furor surrounding the debate between the defenders of the Enlightenment and the postmodernists seems to have cooled somewhat, understandings of what “modernity” is, and what, if anything, reliably brings it about, is more central than ever to the intellectual agenda of the human sciences (Reed and Adams 2011: 248).

Theorizing the causes and consequences of modernization has been a central concern for sociology since the field’s inception. Much of the foundational theoretical work that contemporary sociology is built on centers around arguments about how identity formation and social life have changed and will continue to change as a result of modernization. Scholars like Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber were all concerned about the loss of meaning, collectivism, and identity coherence they believed

would result from modernizing forces like capitalism, bureaucracy, secularization, and the expansion of the nation-state. Stemming from these foundational theories, there have been ongoing debates about whether and how various societies are modernizing and what it really means to be a fully “modern” society. And while there have been important extensions and critiques of early modernization theories, many of their dominant assumptions still operate in the background of contemporary research about identity construction, social cohesion, and meaning making in modernity.

The earliest versions of modernization theory typically characterize modernization as a universal, and largely inevitable, process that acts on all societies in the same way. The belief was that all societies are marching through a series of predetermined stages – moving away from the local communal ties and social certainties of pre-modern society toward the increasing differentiation, globalization, and uncertainty of modern societies. For example, Weber (1922) argued that modernization breaks down the protective framework of small communities and religious traditions, replacing them with the rationalized and impersonal institutions of law, science, the market, and the bureaucratic state. He was concerned about the rationalized logics of modern institutions that he argued operate “without regard for persons,” and he believed modern individuals become “disenchanted” by modern systems that operate solely on “teleological efficiency, rational calculation, and control.” Durkheim (1912) focused on the shifts in social solidarity that he saw resulting from modernization. He theorized that as a society grows and becomes more complex, it goes through a process of moving away from a “mechanical solidarity” characterized by high social solidarity and low social diversity and toward an “organic” solidarity characterized by low social solidarity and

high social diversity.

While there are ongoing debates about these early theoretical accounts and their characterization of modernization as a universal and inevitable process, these theories have spurred the production of what is now a pervasive metanarrative in the social sciences about the causes and consequences of “modernization” (Clark 2012; Reed and Adams 2011; Taylor 2007). As I will show throughout this chapter, much of our contemporary social scientific research operates with a set of shared assumptions about the origins of modernization, the core processes involved in modernization, and the key characteristics that signal a society is fully “modern.” Examples of this narrative come from scholars like Habermas (1985) and Giddens (1991) who explain that Western transitions from “pre-modern” life to “modern” life were first established in post-feudal Europe with the rise of Enlightenment thinking, industrialization, and capitalism. Enlightenment thinkers sought to upend traditional ways of knowing and of organizing social life, seeking to replace societal norms created by religious mandates and monarchs with objective science, rational institutions, and democratic political systems. And as the Enlightenment project’s pursuit of rationality and progress spread, it helped to spur rapid globalization and technological advancement, all of which are argued to have reshaped the ways that identities and institutions are constructed and maintained in modern societies.

Some of the key characteristics of modernity in these theories include “calculation, bureaucracy, rationality, capitalism, disenchantment, industrialization, secularization, [and] individualism” (Reed and Adams 2011: 249). For example, Giddens (1991) argues that there are three main elements of modernity: the separation of time and

space, the disembedding of social institutions, and institutional reflexivity. In pre-modern societies, Giddens argues, time and space were connected through the situatedness of place. However, in modern societies, the “when” of actions is no longer connected to the “where” because technological advancements in communication and transportation have separated time and space. Giddens explains that, in modernity, “changes are not just local, but inevitably universalizing” (16). As a result, institutions have become increasingly reflexive and susceptible to “chronic revisions in the light of new information or knowledge” (20). Other key features of modernity include secularization and the supposed “epistemic rift” that grows between scientific and religious institutions in modern societies (Berger 1967; Reed and Adams 2011; Taylor 2007), increased individualism and social mobility (Durkheim 1912; Bellah et al. 1985; Putnam 2000), and bureaucratized institutions that prioritize instrumental rationality over values-based logics of action (Brint 1994; Weber 1922).

These changes at the societal and institutional level are argued to have in turn disrupted the stable identity schemas that once grounded identity formation in the “pre-modern” world (Baumeister 1987; Calhoun 1995). Whereas individuals once understood their lives solely in terms of the historical period and physical space within which they were immediately aware, the global and interconnected modern world makes such solipsism nearly impossible. Individuals in the modern world are also argued to become “disembedded” from increasingly reflexive social institutions, experiencing a “‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time-space” (Giddens 1991). The result is that modern individuals must now constantly reflect upon and reorient their identities in every new context (Archer 2012;

Giddens 1991; Taylor 2007). In short, identities are no longer experienced as unchanging or entirely ascribed by one's family, class, or religion; instead, identity construction is increasingly seen as an achieved project and as a socially constructed, unstable, and in-process endeavor that individuals actively work on (Brekhus 2008).

While more complex than my brief description here, the above narrative represents many of the major tenets of modernization theory. One important critique of this narrative is based in skepticism toward the idea that modernization is a universal, linear process in which there is a convergence toward a single model of the modern industrialized nation-state (see Reed and Adams 2011). While many scholars agree that *some* societies look “modern” in the ways predicted by classical modernization theories, there is less acceptance of the idea that there is only one way to be modern or that the process is universal or linear. Eisenstadt (2002) suggests that there are “multiple modernities” and that modernization processes are shaped by culture and context. Scholars have also questioned the strict dichotomy set up between pre-modern and modern societies in modernization theory (Clark 2012). For example, many scholars have countered the claim that modern societies are inherently secular, either by pointing to the highly religious nature of many supposedly “modern” societies (Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008; Gorski and Altinordu 2008) or by citing historical evidence of secularity in pre-modern societies (Clark 2012). As a result, some argue that we have never been fully “modern” (Latour 1993), while others argue we have moved past modernity into *post-modernity* (e.g. Harvey 1991).

My goal in outlining this metanarrative and its critics is not to refute it wholesale (though many have, see Clark (2012)). Many of these processes and characteristics can

indeed be found in contemporary societies that we call modern, and there is no question that social life and conceptions of identity have changed over time. However, despite numerous critiques and extensions of this universalizing narrative, its core assumptions still shape important debates among social scientists about identity and community in contemporary societies. Many of our research questions and instruments are constructed in ways that take certain aspects of modernization theory for granted, which limits our understandings of the ways contemporary societies operate. Equally important, modernization theories typically go beyond simply describing these societal changes from an objective lens; they often also come with normative claims about whether these changes are good or bad for individual and societal well-being. In general, the narrative of modernization is typically a narrative of loss, or what Taylor (2007) called a “subtraction story.” And these normative assumptions have in many ways shaped research on and theorizing about nonreligious beliefs and identities, as the decline of religion is argued to be one of the central dynamics leading to this modern, anomic state of affairs.

What We Lose with Modernization

Theorists of modernization do point to some positive gains that result from modernization processes, including a move toward more democratic political systems, rapid scientific advancement that promises to make our lives longer and more comfortable, and an expansion of our knowledge and networks through globalization and increased contact between previously isolated cultures. However, there are many concerns about what we might lose or what we have already lost as we continue to

modernize. These presumed losses can be categorized into three broad arenas, each of which I describe in more detail below: the loss of meaning that comes with secularization and de-traditionalization, the loss of certainty that comes with the reflexive nature of modern institutions and identities, and the loss of community that comes with the increased individuation and individualism of complex modern societies.

Secularization and the Loss of Meaning

Secularization theory posits that as societies modernize and are increasingly exposed to science and technology, individuals will no longer need religion to explain their worlds. In combination with an increased emphasis on religious critique and scientific rationality, modernization's educating effects are argued to ultimately result in the decline of religion's public significance, the differentiation of religious institutions and secular institutions, and the eventual loss of religious beliefs (Cassanova 1994). Thus, secularization is often seen as an inevitable product of modernization. And while the precise definition of secularization and whether or not it is a measurable reality are topics of intense debate among social scientists, at its most general, secularization is defined as the process whereby the political and/or societal significance of religion and its institutions wane slowly and religion becomes differentiated from the secular public spheres of social and political life (Casanova 2011; Gorski and Altinordu 2008). This empirical trend, manifested in different ways across the globe, but particularly in the West, has given rise to numerous social scientific studies of secularization that attempt to explain and predict the changing religiosity of modern societies. These studies range in focus, from measuring individual beliefs and practices, to measuring the influence of religious norms and elites, to measuring the differentiation of religious and secular

institutions (Clark 2012; Gorski and Altinordu 2008).

Similar to critiques of modernization theory more generally, many have critiqued the presumed universality and linearity of secularization. However, most agree that modernization has changed the ways that individuals relate to religious ideologies and institutions in important ways. Numerous scholars of religion have noted a trend in which religious beliefs and identities have shifted from being fixed and unquestioned to reflexive and contested (Berger 1967; Cadge and Davidman 2006). For example, Wuthnow (1998a) argues that there has been a shift from ascription to achievement in American religious identities. He finds that people in the U.S. have shifted from a spirituality of *dwelling* in a given religious identity to a spirituality of *seeking* out new forms of belief and practice. Similarly, Martí (2015, 2017) developed the concepts of “religious reflexivity” and “strategic religiosity” to conceptualize the ways that modern religious individuals are forced to constantly reassess the compatibility of their beliefs and practices with the logics of the secular public sphere. He argues, “Religious action no longer depends on stable identities based on prior socialization. Instead, the dynamics of religious identity today are dominated by continual assessments of appropriateness, relationality, and self-image” (Martí 2017: 7).

With this changing religious landscape has come the loss of what Berger (1967) calls the “sacred canopy.” Berger argues that humans are biologically wired to search for meaning and order in their lives, and that religion is particularly good at providing that meaning and order. Religion, Berger argues, establishes a “sacred cosmos” that is unparalleled in its “world-maintenance” capabilities because it locates social institutions and human action in the context of an immortal, external cosmos. However,

secularization and pluralism have led to an “individuation” of religion; religion is no longer a “monopolizing nomos” but instead has to take a market-approach to world-building and world-maintenance. The consequence of secularization, then, is the disruption of a widely shared and taken-for-granted religious cosmos, which Berger believes has caused severe anomie and existential anxiety. He explains, “. . .there has arisen a problem of ‘meaningfulness’ not only for such institutions as the state or of the economy but for the ordinary routines of everyday life” (125).

This sentiment – that the decline of religion caused by increasing pluralism and scientific rationality has resulted in a loss of meaning – is shared by many. For example, Giddens (1991) argues, “Personal meaninglessness – the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer – becomes a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity” (9). And Taylor (2007) suggests there is now a “wide sense of malaise at the disenchanted world, a sense of it as flat, empty, a multiform search for something within, or beyond it, which could compensate for the meaning lost with transcendence” (302). This increased meaninglessness is argued to stem not only from the loss of religion more generally, but the loss of tradition and ritual that comes with increased rationalization and disenchantment (Bell 1997; Giddens 1991; Houtman and Aupers 2007). Bell (1997) explains that secularization is often correlated with the displacement of ritual because rituals are considered to be irrational and thus “somewhat at odds with modernity” (138). This narrative suggests that in pre-modern societies, ritual binds people together at a societal level and creates social solidarity, while in modern societies ritual is either absent altogether or retreats from the public sphere and remains relevant only to religious subgroups. Giddens (1991) suggests that this absence of ritual in modern contexts

removes an “important psychological prop to the individual’s capacity to cope with [life] transitions” and to create meaningful identities (148). Relatedly, this narrative also posits a loss of tradition. Many argue that secularization has also meant de-traditionalization and the disruption of long-standing norms, values, and social practices (Giddens 1991; Houtman and Aupers 2007). Without the “sense of firmness of things” that tradition once provided, the modern individual is left “bereft and alone in a world in which she or he lacks the psychological supports and the sense of security provided by more traditional settings” (Giddens 1991: 148).

While there are many who argue that modern individuals find new ways to create meaning in modernity, it is often assumed that these modern meaning systems are less meaningful than more traditional meaning systems. For example, Reed and Adams (2011) use the concept of “moral re-enchantment” to explain how modern individuals attempt to replace the meaning systems they have lost. However, this has resulted in the creation of a multitude of competing meaning systems that lack the “holistic organization” that religion once provided (see also Berger 1967). Reed and Adams (2011) contend that this leaves modern, secular individuals “invested with a longing that can never be fully satisfied” (253). Similar assumptions come from scholars like Eliade (1959) who argues that attempts to find meaning in modernity will always be transient and “tragic,” and Taylor (2007) who argues that the modern condition is characterized by the “fragility of meaning” and the “felt flatness” of modern attempts to create new meanings. Taken together, it is a commonly shared assumption in social science that modernization means secularization and the loss of religion, which results in de-

traditionalization, the retreat of ritual, and an overall loss of meaning that leaves modern individuals in a constant, but ultimately unfulfilling, search for the meaning that was lost.

Reflexivity and the Loss of Certainty

A second major theme in modernization theories that continues to motivate scholarship today is the presumed loss of certainty that is argued to stem from the reflexive nature of modern identities and institutions (e.g. Giddens 1991). Certainty is considered to play a crucial role in shaping people's attitudes and behaviors (Tormala 2016). Across numerous theoretical treatments, including uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg 2010), terror-management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, and Arndt 2008), self-verification theory (Swann and Buhrmester 2003), and identity theory (Burke and Stets 2009), it is argued that people typically avoid uncertainty and continuously seek out certainty through things like joining identity-affirming groups (Hogg 2010) or adhering to certainty-filled belief systems (Anisman, Matheson, and Ysseldyk 2010; Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg 2010). However, despite this presumed need for certainty, identities and beliefs in the modern world are typically argued to be *less* certain than in the past. In modernity, certainty is argued to become a "scarce commodity" that individuals are continuously striving to obtain but usually fail to fully realize (Martí 2015). The increase in abstract systems, competing logics, and porous institutions that characterize modern societies has resulted in individuals coming to experience their beliefs and identities as reflexive and uncertain, and there have been many studies devoted to assessing the causes and consequences of this increased uncertainty (Archer 2012; Berger 1974; Giddens 1991; Taylor 2007; Wuthnow 1998b).

In these lines of research, it is often assumed that uncertainty is negative and that people ultimately want or need a stable meaning system to anchor their beliefs and actions (Burke and Stets 2009; Hogg 2010; Swann and Buhrmester 2003). Indeed, social psychologists typically characterize uncertainty as “paralyzing,” “disorienting,” and “cognitively taxing” (see Arkin, Oleson, and Carroll 2010). This has led to a range of concerns about the potentially negative effects of increased uncertainty in modern contexts (e.g. Giddens 1991). An example relevant for my analysis of nonreligious cultures comes out of research into the consequences of existential uncertainty. To be existentially uncertain means to question one’s beliefs about the afterlife, about transcendent beings or forces, or about the purpose of life more generally (Landau et al. 2010; Schnell 2010). As I explained earlier, sociologists of religion have long contended that religions construct shared understandings of the world that are unparalleled in their ability to provide meaning and order, thus reducing existential uncertainty (Anisman et al. 2010; Berger 1967; Geertz 1973). As such, it is a common concern that modernization and secularization will produce harmful existential uncertainties.

This assumption has motivated numerous studies that attempt to measure the effects of existential uncertainty on individual well-being. For example, when compared to the nonreligious, people who are actively religious are often found to be healthier (Hayward et al. 2016; Krause and Wulff 2004), happier (Ellison, Gay, and Glass 1989), and more embedded in identity-affirming social networks (Ellison and George 1994; Lewis, MacGregor and Putnam 2013). And this is often attributed to the certainty-inducing nature of religious ideologies. However, other studies suggest a more “curvilinear relationship” between religion, secularity, and well-being (Baker et al. 2018:

44; see also May 2018). For example, Baker et al. (2018) find that atheists – who are found to be more certain about their beliefs and who join nonreligious social and political groups at higher rates – reported similar, or in many cases better, mental and physical health outcomes when compared to affiliated theists. In contrast, health was significantly worse for nonaffiliated theists and agnostics. They conclude that while religious incongruence and uncertainty are linked to negative health, existential and ideological certainty that is supported through group participation, religious *or* secular, is linked to positive health.

Thus, despite a growing awareness of the ways that secular ideologies can also provide certainty, social science research typically characterizes uncertainty as negative and anxiety-inducing, but also as one of the “defining challenges of modern life” (Arkin et al. 2010: 1). The changes brought about by modernization have worked to disrupt longstanding traditions and values and, as a result, individuals have in many ways become “unmoored” from historically stable identity categories and belief systems, and they must now constantly reflect upon and reorient their identities and beliefs in every new context (Archer 2012; Baumeister 1987; Brekhus 2008; Giddens 1991; Habermas 1985; Taylor 2007). While some scholars have suggested that uncertainty can be positive and constructive in some situations, and most would agree that some forms of uncertainty are a natural part of identity construction and social interaction in the modern world, the consensus seems to be that “uncertainty that is subjectively excessive is aversive, particularly uncertainty directly about or reflecting on who we are, what we should think, how we should behave, and how we should interact with others” (Hogg 2010: 408). In other words, continuous uncertainty around an identity or belief that is central to an

individual's sense of self is typically seen as problematic, but this kind of uncertainty is also assumed to be a core feature of modern, secular life.

Individualism and the Loss of Community

The third major loss that is assumed to come with modernization is a loss of communal obligation or what some call "public commitment" (e.g. Lichterman 1995). Due to the increased individuation and individualism that comes with modernity's increased reflexivity, pluralism, and differentiation, modernization narratives typically presume there has been a detrimental loss of community in modern societies. On the one hand, as Durkheim (1912) and others have theorized, modernization results in a more complex division of labor and increased individuation and differentiation. Modernizing societies shift away from a mechanical solidarity in which identities and experiences are largely homogenous toward an organic solidarity in which identities and experiences are highly heterogenous and "the individual can only rarely and with difficulty understand himself and his activities as interrelated in morally meaningful ways with those of other [individuals]" (Bellah et al. 1985: 50). As a society grows and formerly shared beliefs and traditions start to fade, individuals begin to search out new meanings and to achieve a greater sense of individuality that is separate from the identities of others.

However, increasing individuation is not just some latent function of the modernization process, it is also understood to have been an explicit moral project of the Enlightenment. In their struggle against monarchical and religious authority, Enlightenment thinkers promoted the right to self-government, the dignity of the individual, and the value of independent thinking. As a result, an ethic of individualism is often found to permeate societies shaped by these Enlightenment ideals. The United

States is an illustrative example. As a “frontier society” that conceives of itself as having broken the chains of monarchical oppression to set out and build a democratic society, notions of freedom, self-reliance, and independence are dominant in American culture (Bellah et al. 1985; O’Brien 2015; Williams 2013). O’Brien (2015) explains, “The idea that Americans generally prioritize individual rather than collective pursuits and celebrate voluntarily initiated action over socially obligatory commitments consistently shows up as both an empirical finding and a background assumption in the works of those who study U.S. culture” (173). In short, not only have modern individuals created and become more aware of their own individuality, the assumption is that they have come to value and act on that individuality more than their commitments to the social or the communal.

Lichterman (1995) illustrates this assumed dichotomy between the individual and the communal through what he calls a “seesaw metaphor.” He details dominant communitarian accounts of 20th century American life that cast individualism as antithetical to public commitment and that argue there has been a “historical tilt toward the personal.” These accounts provide evidence of a societal “turning inward” that is characterized by a culture of self-fulfillment, personalism, and “lifestyle enclaves.” For example, Bellah et al. (1985) lament the rise of what they call “utilitarian” and “expressive” individualism in the United States. Utilitarian individualism is a single-minded devotion to success and material gain over moral and social obligations, and expressive individualism is the focus on a “deeper cultivation of the self” at the expense of the cultivation of the community. Bellah et al. (1985) and others (see Giddens 1991; Putnam 2000) suggest that rather than engaging with and contributing to the larger community in which one is a part, modern individuals are increasingly likely to silo off

into “lifestyle enclaves” that engage only people who share their self-serving “lifestyle” preferences. For these scholars, the concern is that this modern individualistic ethic erodes an underlying shared morality and social obligation that is necessary for a “good” society (see also Bellah et al. 1992).

As part of this turn inward, it is argued that modern individuals are less likely to volunteer or to be civically engaged, and when they do get involved, they now do so in more individualistic ways. For example, Wuthnow (1998b) finds that volunteerism in the United States in the 1950s was centered around being a “good neighbor” and a long-term member of local community groups, but by the 1990s civic involvement was defined “less in terms of membership than in terms of effectiveness and accomplishments” (46). Instead of long-term memberships and tight-knit communities, scholars like Wuthnow (1998b), Putnam (2000), and Day (2006) argue that a “plug-in style” of volunteerism has become the norm. This style of engagement is characterized by more a transient engagement with a variety of single-issue civic organizations, with volunteers typically focused on helping individuals “person to person” rather than working toward a larger collective good. As Bellah et al. (1985) put it, “The associational life of the modern metropolis does not generate the kinds of second languages of social responsibility and practices of commitment to the public good that we saw in the associational life of the ‘strong and independent township’” (177). And in addition to the *changing* nature of volunteerism, contemporary research finds that rates of volunteerism typically also *decline* in modern societies because individualist and modernist worldviews are less likely to motivate volunteerism than are more traditional worldviews stemming from religious commitments or civic republicanism (Beyerlein and Vaisey 2013; Ryle and

Robinson 2006).

Of particular concern for many sociologists of religion and civic engagement has been the decline in religious community resulting from the modernizing force of secularization. In the contemporary United States, for example, Protestant sects and their congregational form are seen as “the backbone of American civil society and thought to be the main generator of social capital” (Williams 2007: 50; see also Bellah 1967; Martí 2017). At the core of American congregationalism is the notion of the autonomous individual who is free to come and go as they please, but who *chooses* to come to church out of a sense of moral and social obligation (Williams 2007). Individuals who do so are seen as good people, better family members, more willing to help others, and generally more successful participants in the civic sphere (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Graham and Haidt 2010; Williams 2007). Not only do Christian churches see by far the highest number of participants of any other voluntary association in America from week to week (Lichterman 2006), they are also the blueprint for many other types of associations. What Warner (1994) calls a “de facto congregationalism,” non-Protestant religious and secular organizations in the U.S. often conform to the institutional structure of the congregation due to legal and cultural isomorphic pressures. Thus, with rising rates of religious disaffiliation have come concerns that Americans are losing a central feature of their associational life and that this is detrimental to public commitment and social capital (e.g. Bellah et al. 1985).

Taken together, community and social obligation are typically argued to have been lost, or at least severely diminished, with modernity (Bauman 2001; Bellah et al. 1985; Delanty 2003; Hummon 1990; Putnam 2000). As individuals become increasingly

differentiated from each other and aware of their own individuality, the narrative goes, they become less invested in their community and in engaging outside of their own lifestyle enclaves. And this “community lost” narrative predicts a range of negative consequences for this loss, including increased social disorganization, isolation, selfishness, crime, anxiety, and feelings of placelessness (Hummon 1990). As a result, much of the rhetoric surrounding the concept of “community” in social science is tinted with nostalgic and/or utopian ideals of community as an unequivocal good that, if recovered, would solve the problems brought about by modernization (Bauman 2001; Collins 2010; Delanty 2003; Joseph 2002). “Community is nowadays another name for paradise lost – but one which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there...but no amount of sweating will ever reopen the closed gate to communal innocence, pristine sameness, and tranquility” (Bauman 2001: 3, 18). Much like the narratives surrounding the loss of meaning and certainty that come with modernization, a final dominant theme in modernization theories is a presumed loss of community and the assumption that modern individuals are anxiously searching for its replacement.

Shallow Secularists?

These “subtraction stories” of modernization that I just outlined have played an important role in shaping our understandings of what modern individuals and societies are like. They describe the modern individual as secular, rationalistic, uncertain, anxious, isolated, and self-serving and they cast the modern, secular individual as the embodiment of a disenchanting, individualistic, and uncertain modernity. In fact, Collins (2004)

suggests there is a “modal personality” for modern societies based in Durkheimian organic solidarity, a personality that is “unconforming, relativistic, thinks and talks in abstractions, is cool in social commitments, tolerant of differences, lax on violators” (348). Similarly, Taylor (2007) suggests that modern, secular people have “an admiration for the power of cool, disengaged reason, capable of contemplating the world and human life without illusion” (9). And this commitment to rationality and pluralism is assumed to leave modern individuals with weak social ties, loads of existential uncertainty, and no real language for talking about meaning, transcendence, or shared moral values (Bellah et al. 1985; Besecke 2001; Collins 2004).

All of this comes together to create a stereotypical image of the contemporary nonreligious person – particularly atheists and agnostics – as emotionally shallow, overly rationalist and individualist, and in an ultimately unfulfilling search for meaning and belonging. In large part due to these dominant narratives about modernization and secularization, nonreligion is typically assumed to simply be the *lack* of belief or participation in a meaningful religious subculture, a rejection of traditional forms of community and morality, and the rationalistic end result of modernization and secularization. Nonreligious people in modern societies are not only seen to be lacking the social and existential benefits of religion, but they are also typically urban, educated, and pro-science (see Baker and Smith 2015), all of which are argued to compound their emotional “coolness” and weak social commitments. For example, Louis Wirth (1938) famously argued that the complexity of city life weakened social ties and local sentiments, creating a person “at once more cosmopolitan and rational and more disengaged and blasé.” And numerous scholars have pointed to education as being

positively associated with individualism, including Bellah et al. (1985) who suggest that highly educated people “travel light with regard to family, church, locality, even nation” and Ryle and Robinson (2006) who find that education has an individualizing effect in which secular, highly educated people are less likely than religious people to derive a sense of community from their neighbors, friends, co-workers, or ethnic groups. Finally, the pro-science and atheistic worldviews espoused by many nonreligious people are thought to hinder meaning-making and transcendence. What Taylor (2007) calls the “buffered self,” there is an assumption that nonreligious people’s commitment to science and rationality leaves them “disenchanted” and closed off to emotionally fulfilling rituals and beliefs (see also Giddens 1991; Reed and Adams 2011; Weber 1922). Taylor (2007) writes,

The unbeliever wants to be the kind of person for whom this life is fully satisfying, in which all of him can rejoice, in which his whole sense of fullness can find an adequate object. And he is not there yet. There is something he aspires to beyond where he’s at. He perhaps hasn’t yet fully conquered the nostalgia for something transcendent. In one way or another, he still has some way to go (7).

These stereotypes in turn shape contemporary research on religion and nonreligion. Much of the social scientific research on the nonreligious takes a comparative approach, attempting to assess whether and how the nonreligious measure up to the religious on standard measures of engagement and well-being (measures that were often created with only the religious in mind). For example, sociological research on volunteering rates often finds that religious individuals volunteer more than the nonreligious, arguing that religious people are more compassionate (Krause 2015), sympathetic (Einolf 2011; Loveland et al. 2005), and communal (Bainbridge 2005), and

that church involvement fosters reciprocity, trust, and social capital that acts as a “feeder-system” into volunteerism and community engagement (Guo et al. 2013; Lewis, MacGregor and Putnam 2013; Johnston 2013). Similarly, the religious are often found to be healthier (Hayward et al. 2016; Krause and Wulff 2004) and happier (Ellison, Gay, and Glass 1989) than nonreligious people, in large part due to the identity- and belief-affirming nature of religion.

In the United States, where religion still plays a dominant role in social and political life and where a majority of people are still religious (see Pew 2015; Williams 2007), these stereotypes about the amoral, anti-social, and anomic atheist drive distrust of and discrimination against the growing nonreligious demographic, but particularly atheists. In the United States, atheists are disliked and distrusted (Cook, Cohen, and Solomon 2015; Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011), believed to be immoral and/or elitist (Edgell et al. 2016; Wright and Nichols 2014), and are discriminated against in the workplace, the military, and by their friends and family (Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017; Hammer, Cragun, and Hwang 2013; Hammer et al. 2012; Wright et al. 2013; Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014). Operating from an underlying assumption that atheists are a harbinger of the impending meaninglessness, uncertainty, and isolation that come with modernization and secularization, many Americans – both academic and non-academic alike – are concerned about rising rates of religious disaffiliation and what they might mean for individual and social well-being.

It is in this context that the creation of an “atheist church” like the Sunday Assembly seems paradoxical. Our narratives characterize atheists as disenchanting, disengaged, and disembedded from meaningful social institutions and practices, which

translates into the assumption that an atheist church must just be a humorous oxymoron. However, my goal in this dissertation is to offer a counter to this narrative of nonreligious disengagement and meaninglessness in modernity. Based on three years of ethnographic research with the Sunday Assembly, I argue that the nonreligious are agentic actors in the modernization process rather than just passive recipients of its supposedly inevitable consequences. Instead of a demographic burdened by a detrimental loss of certainty, community, and meaning, I found a rich nonreligious field full of politicized certainty and meaningful uncertainty, contested conceptions and practices of community, and a meaning-filled discourse of “scientific spirituality” that combines the language of spirituality and transcendence with commitments to secular worldviews and scientific rationalism. I ground my analysis in a cultural, practice-oriented approach to understanding contemporary identity, community, and meaning-making, and I show how paying attention to things like process, context, and the everyday cultural work that goes into constructing meaning can help us think beyond the limiting dichotomy set up between modernization and meaning in our theoretical narratives. Rather than the universal search for certainty-filled beliefs, transcendent collective rituals, and ready-made communities full of like-minded people that our theoretical narratives often assume, many nonreligious people find meaning in uncertainty, solitary experiences of secular spirituality, and a more porous and organic conception of community. My findings call into question our dominant theoretical narratives that presume certainty, spirituality, and community are static and universal meaning systems that individuals are naturally driven to seek and that can only be found through a reconstitution of pre-modern values and institutional forms. Instead, I use the case of the Sunday Assembly to

show how nonreligious people are finding new ways to make meaning in modernity, and how these meaning systems are constructed, contextual, and contested.

Sunday Assembly and the Nonreligious Field

The Sunday Assembly was founded during a period of rapidly rising rates of religious disaffiliation in both the U.S. and the U.K. The percentage of people who claim no religious affiliation in both countries has almost tripled since the 1980s, with the sharpest increases starting in the early 2000s (Hout and Fischer 2014; Pew 2015; Sherwood 2017; Voas and Chaves 2016). In the context of these growing rates of religious disaffiliation, there has been a rapid increase in the number of secular, atheist, humanist, and other nonreligious social and political groups created to cater to this demographic (Cragun, Manning, and Fazzino 2017; García and Blankholm 2016). From political organizations that attempt to legislate against religion in the public sphere, to online and in-person social groups built as spaces of community and ritual for the nonreligious, the “nonreligious field” in the United States includes a wide range of organizations, ideologies, and identities (Kettell 2014; Quack 2012; Schutz 2017). And this distinct field of shared symbols and discourses shapes the meanings that nonreligious Americans construct around their nonreligion.

While there are a number of intersecting discourses within this nonreligious field, Kettell (2014) identifies four of its dominant discourses and/or practices: reducing the influence of religion in the public sphere, criticizing religious belief and promoting nonreligious worldviews, improving civil rights and social status of secular people, and community building and group cohesion. Kettell (2014) suggests that these discourses

often come into conflict due to divides between what he calls “confrontational atheists” who utilize a combative approach to religion and “accommodationist atheists” who take a more conciliatory stance. He finds that some nonreligious groups embody a more confrontational and political approach by engaging in legislative battles over church/state violations, while other groups are more geared toward acting as a substitute for religious institutions.

As a result of negative stereotypes about nonreligious people, described above, one of the dominant discourses in the American nonreligious field is an identity politics that emphasizes the de-stigmatization of atheism and the need to battle religion’s hegemony in public and political spheres (Cimino and Smith 2014; LeDrew 2015). Through the founding of national organizations like American Atheists, The Freedom From Religion Foundation, and the Openly Secular Coalition, many nonreligious organizations engage in social and political battles to destigmatize nonreligious identities and keep the wall between church and state intact (LeDrew 2015; Kettell 2014). These groups call on the nonreligious to “come out of the closet” and mobilize against the discrimination of atheists and other “nones” in American society, as well as fight the slow creep of religious ideology into what they believe should be a secular public sphere (Anspach, Coe, and Thurlow 2007; Frost 2012; LeDrew 2015). With the help of a highly politicized “New Atheist” movement in the mid-2000s, fueled by aggressive, anti-religious journalists and academics like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, the more politicized and confrontational forms of atheism have in many ways come to dominate in the nonreligious field.

In contrast to the political and often anti-religious rhetoric coming out of many

nonreligious organizations, there are a growing number of nonreligious organizations focused more on fostering communal connections and secular rituals for the nonreligious (Bullock 2017; Cimino and Smith 2014; Smith 2017; Schutz 2017). The Sunday Assembly is one of the more recent and popular examples of this nonreligious form, though there are others. For example, Unitarian Universalist churches often cater to nonreligious demographics in ways that affirm secular values while also promoting communal and ritual practices (Hoop 2012). And the British Humanist Association (now known as Humanists UK) embraces humanism as their rationalistic moral philosophy and focuses on providing concrete alternatives to religious life transition ceremonies like funerals and weddings (Bagg and Voas 2009). However, Unitarian and humanist organizations often also cater to religious people and include both religious and nonreligious themes in their services. At atheist churches like the Sunday Assembly, the Houston Oasis, the Seattle Atheist Church, and the North Texas Church of Freethought, the goal is to remain explicitly nonreligious and to focus on promoting secular beliefs and values.

While most atheist church-like organizations have only one or two chapters, the Sunday Assembly is notable for the way it rapidly expanded to over 70 local chapters within two years of its founding in 2013. While many of these chapters have since dissolved, at least 30 chapters still remain active in 2020. The first chapter of the Sunday Assembly was founded by two British comedians in 2013, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. As Evans explained during her introductory comments at the Conference Called Wonder I described at the beginning of this chapter, the two comedians met on a road trip to a comedy gig in Bath. They connected on the idea of a church-like environment where

nonreligious individuals could sing songs and listen to inspirational talks together, offer emotional and social support for fellow nonreligious individuals, and collectively construct nonreligious rituals and practices that might produce a deeper sense of meaning among the nonreligious. They initially set out to organize such a community in London and were met with a surprising amount of success. They began to put together a “Make Your Own Assembly Kit” online, making it widely available to see if they could build a network of assemblies across Britain and beyond. Soon after, the number of assemblies exploded to over 70 individual assemblies across the globe, from Hamburg, Germany, to Sydney, Australia, to Cleveland, Ohio, though most of the assemblies were located in the U.K. and the U.S. The organization’s rapid expansion even caught the attention of the media, and many news outlets dubbed Sunday Assembly “the first atheist mega-church” (e.g. Walshe 2013; Winston 2013). However, unlike most churches, the Sunday Assembly is explicitly non-hierarchical and there are no pastor-like figures leading the local chapters. All of the local organizing is volunteer-based, though a few paid staff positions were created to manage the international network when the organization started to grow.

The Sunday Assembly motto is “Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More,” and this is reflected in what the local assemblies center their services and activities around. To “Live Better,” they sing songs together, form small groups based on interests like watching Ted Talks and playing games, and they have a section in their services called “One Thing I Do Know,” which is a space for members from the community to share an experience that taught them an important lesson. To “Help Often” they put on monthly volunteering activities and advocate for helping each other out by starting phone trees

and cooking food for people who are sick or going through a hard time. To “Wonder More” they bring in speakers to give inspirational and educational talks, and a portion of their services is devoted to the reading aloud of inspirational poems and passages from books. They also have a moment of silence in their services where they reflect on the things they are learning and how they might apply them to their lives going forward. Sunday Assembly strives to be apolitical and avoids inserting itself into any political or social debates that might hinder the organizations goals of being “radically inclusive.” While the organization and its activities are explicitly nonreligious, the Sunday Assembly charter states that the organization is open to anyone who wants to join, regardless of beliefs. As such, the talks, readings, and music are, for the most part, free of any anti-religious *or* pro-atheist rhetoric. Instead, the assemblies focus on topics like science, personal empowerment, healthy lifestyle choices, and community betterment. The goal of the organization is to be a positive community environment for nonreligious people, and a major piece of that positivity stems from the collective singing of pop songs for which the Sunday Assembly is known. As co-founder Jones joked at the 2015 conference, the Sunday Assembly is attempting to “change the world with joy and Jon Bon Jovi.”

Modern but Not Meaningless

Some see “godless” as negative. Although some “-less” words are negative, many are positive. Godless is no more negative than is “artless,” which means “genuine, sincere.” There is nothing intrinsically negative about the “-less” suffix. In addition, achieving more of one thing can often mean less of something else. To get more money frequently means having less time—or less conscience. And the opposite is true: A cloudless sky means more sun. A cordless phone means more freedom of movement. When Sunday Assembly defined itself as a “godless congregation” it was recognizing that every “-less” is also a “more.” Sunday Assembly is

intrinsically, inherently god-*less* because we are world-*full*.

Martin, atheist, Sunday Assembler

This dissertation is centered around an ethnographic case study of the Sunday Assembly and how its creation, as well as its relationship with the larger nonreligious field, shed new light on longstanding assumptions about disengagement and meaninglessness in modernity. I argue that rather than atheist churches being a paradox, the commonly shared assumption that atheism is the opposite of meaning and community stems from a dominant paradigm that permeates our academic and public discourses about the consequences of modernization and secularization. By investigating the ways that new rituals, identities, and communities are being created and contested in the nonreligious field, I provide an illustrative empirical case for building new theoretical understandings about the meanings attributed to modernization and secularization and for investigating a range of orientations to certainty, spirituality, and community among the growing nonreligious demographic in the United States.

I spent three years conducting ethnographic observations and interviews with the Minneapolis/St. Paul (MSP) chapter of the Sunday Assembly. From March 2014 to August 2017, I attended their Sunday services and many of their social events, such as volunteer outings, potlucks, and trivia nights. I also attended the monthly organizing meetings where decisions about the services and the organization were made. As part of this ethnography, I interviewed 25 MSP assemblers, from the founding members of the chapter to occasional attendees. I started observing the MSP chapter before their first official assembly, so I was able to observe how the chapter built their community from the beginning and the ways they negotiated the boundaries of their growing chapter in

relation to the larger international organization and the surrounding nonreligious field. In addition to collecting data on the MSP chapter, I attended the Conference Called Wonder in 2015 where I met numerous organizers from other chapters in the United States and the United Kingdom, spoke to and listened to the founders speak about the organization and its goals, and sat in on workshops and organizational meetings. I was also added to the organizational email listserv called Sunday Assembly Everywhere, where I gained access to over 5,000 emails in which members and organizers from assemblies all over the world engaged in online discussions about the goals and structure of the organization. And in an attempt to include perspectives from nonreligious people occupying other spaces in the nonreligious field, in the fall of 2017 I interviewed 25 nonreligious people in the Twin Cities that had never attended the Sunday Assembly. Some of these “nonreligious non-assemblers” had joined other nonreligious groups – some were involved in humanist or Unitarian communities and others were involved in the more political atheist groups in the area – but many had never attended or even heard of organized nonreligious groups of any kind.

I found that Sunday Assembly chapters are created and populated by nonreligious people who want to move past the idea that atheism is a “rejection identity” based solely in a rejection of religion (see Smith 2011). Instead, Sunday Assemblers are searching out ways to build positive identities and communities around their nonreligion. In a nonreligious field full of politicized atheist identities and anti-religious discourse, Sunday Assemblers are looking for a more communal, ritualized, and emotionally enriching way to express their nonreligious beliefs and values. An MSP assembler expressed this widely shared sentiment perfectly when he told me,

When you see atheists in the news, their stance towards people who are not atheist is a negative stance. And I've been to other atheist groups who were just so negative. And that was something that I started thinking about, this whole idea of having an identity that was formed *against* something else. But a lot of people don't want to make an intellectual argument out of their reason for living. They want it to be more holistic and emotional. And with Sunday Assembly, now we are formed around this identity of *becoming* something else.

However, what it is that Sunday Assembly would become was much less clear when the organization was founded, and this dissertation is in many ways an investigation of that becoming. I found that Sunday Assemblers had to continuously negotiate the boundaries of the organization, and of their own nonreligious identities, in an attempt to balance the selective appropriation of religious practices at Sunday Assembly with their commitment to nonreligious beliefs and values. In the following chapters, I show how these negotiations reveal the complex and contested nature of the meanings that nonreligious people attribute to certainty, spirituality, ritual, and community. Rather than the universal search for certainty-filled beliefs, transcendent collective rituals, and ready-made communities full of like-minded people that our theoretical narratives assume, many nonreligious people find meaning in uncertainty, mundane individual routines, and a more organic, inclusive conception of community. These findings call into question our dominant theoretical narratives that presume certainty, spirituality, and community are static and universal meaning systems that individuals are naturally driven to seek and that can only be found through a reconstitution of past traditions and religious meaning systems. Instead, I use the case of the Sunday Assembly to show how these meaning systems are constructed, contextual, and contested, and how people's orientations to these meaning systems can change over time.

In Chapter 2, I outline my theoretical approach to this case study and lay out the conceptual tools that enabled me to think outside of the standard paradigm of modernization to find these nonreligious meanings. Drawing on work from cultural sociologists, social psychologists, and the growing subfield of nonreligious studies, I argue for a cultural, practice-oriented approach to understanding contemporary identity, community, and meaning-making. I highlight research that suggests secularism, individualism, and uncertainty can in fact be conducive to individual well-being and communal engagement rather than always detrimental to them. And I show how paying attention to things like process, resonance, context, and the everyday cultural work that goes into constructing meaning can help us think beyond the limiting dichotomy set up between modernization and meaning and reveal how modern actors creatively combine their commitments to the seemingly dichotomous discourses of religion and science, individualism and community, and secularity and spirituality.

In Chapters 3 through 5, I apply this practice-oriented approach to my case study of the Sunday Assembly and re-examine the presumed losses of modernization that I outlined in this chapter – the loss of certainty, the loss of transcendent meaning, and the loss of community. In Chapter 3, I examine the ways that nonreligious people think and talk about uncertainty. I find that uncertainty is just as often experienced as positive and motivating as it is isolating or anxiety-inducing, and that while certainty-filled beliefs and identities are available for the nonreligious, they are just as often rejected for more uncertain ones. Rather than a constant search for certainty, many nonreligious people find meaning in uncertainty and describe it as a motivating framework for their nonreligious beliefs and identities. I also detail the ways that nonreligious people move between

uncertain and certain orientations toward their nonreligion over time. While some nonreligious people exhibit a more “trait-like” orientation where they are relatively certain or uncertain about their nonreligion for long periods of time, others describe a more context-dependent, fluid, and “state-like” engagement with the certainty they attribute to their nonreligiosity. And I describe how a certainty-filled identity politics within the nonreligious field shapes people’s perceptions of uncertainty and their participation in the Sunday Assembly.

In Chapter 4, I develop the concept of “scientific spirituality” to explain how atheists and agnostics at the Sunday Assembly are creating and participating in secular rituals, both collective and individual, to create a sense of greater meaning and purpose in their lives. Whether it be through exercise, meditation, or collective singing, many atheists and agnostics use the language of spirituality to describe meaningful practices and experiences, but they often qualify these experiences with scientific explanations or the promise that those explanations will come with scientific advances. I show how, in contrast to the dominant understanding of nonreligious worldviews as being meaningless and incapable of producing transcendent experiences or collective effervescence, nonreligious people are actively constructing a new language and practice for spirituality that borrows from religious forms but maintains a commitment to scientific explanations. Drawing on their scientific understandings of things like neuroscience, psychology, and physiology, many assemblers and non-assemblers talked about how they could consciously cultivate secular spiritual experiences, either on their own or in a social environment. And I will show how a “trial-and-error” approach to ritual development at the Sunday Assembly runs counter to our dominant sociological theories of ritual that

characterize ritual failure as always detrimental to transcendent experiences and collective cohesion. However, I also found a resistance to these more intentional and “manufactured” attempts at scientific spirituality. Some nonreligious people are seeking out more organic and solitary spiritual experiences that are just as scientifically explainable, but that rely less on structured rituals and doing research into how to bring those experiences about intentionally. Chapter 4 details how Sunday Assemblers have to negotiate both approaches to spirituality in their attempts to cultivate secular spiritual experiences in their services.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I investigate the contested conceptions of community I encountered in my case study. In contrast to our dominant narratives of secularization causing a loss of community, I find that nonreligious people almost always express an interest in being part of a community and a commitment to contributing to the larger public good. However, the conceptions of what a community is and what it means to be engaged with your community are contested in the nonreligious field. The Sunday Assembly was in many ways created with a narrative of loss in mind, promising to offer a meaning-filled, community-oriented space for nonbelievers that many perceived to be lacking in the nonreligious sphere. However, similar to the contested conceptions of spirituality I describe in Chapter 4, conceptions of community are also contested in the nonreligious field, and not all nonreligious people think that community has been lost or that replicating the church form is the best way to find it again. Many nonreligious people find traditional communal forms, particularly churches, to be inauthentic and exclusionary in ways that conflict with their more organic and porous conceptions of community. Importantly, in contrast to the seeming consensus in social science that the

nonreligious are anti-social and uninterested in community, almost all of the nonreligious people I encountered in my fieldwork talked about community as a good thing and many were active participants in multiple forms of community. However, I will also show that community takes work to construct, and many nonreligious people are in the process of creating new communities in the wake of leaving their religious communities. Thus, I argue that the largely quantitative literature on nonreligious volunteerism and community engagement has failed to capture the in-process nature of community construction, and I show how a practice-oriented approach to the “becoming” of community sheds new light on questions of commitment and engagement in modernity.

Chapter 2

Constructing Meaning in Modernity

During my three years with the Sunday Assembly, two of the most common words I heard used to describe the organization were “becoming” and “balancing.” As I described in Chapter 1, Sunday Assemblers often talked about how they were working to become something more than simply the rejection of religious beliefs and practices, and that required balancing the selective appropriation of religious practices with a commitment to secular beliefs and values. However, while Sunday Assemblers are borrowing from a traditional church-like form to give structure to its gatherings, they also see themselves as constructing an entirely new way of doing community in contemporary society. This sentiment permeated the rhetoric coming from the leaders of the international organization, but also trickled down into the everyday discourse of local chapters. For example, during a discussion on the Sunday Assembly Everywhere email forum about how to balance the organization’s goals to be “radically inclusive” of everyone’s worldviews while at the same time remaining an explicitly nonreligious space, a local chapter organizer explained to everyone that this was a sophisticated balancing act that no other organization has attempted before. He wrote,

I want to reassure anyone struggling a bit with finding the right balance that that’s okay. The space we are trying to create and the language that you need for it is quite sophisticated to begin with. It embodies a wider paradigm shift, synthesizing several philosophical movements that reject traditional categories and dissolve barriers of identity. Put simply, there aren't any other groups that try to negotiate the boundaries in the way that we do. Some folks might not be familiar or comfortable with the mindset. But the whole purpose of this is to toe the line. We have to embrace the fact that this is a balancing act.

While not always expressed this explicitly, Sunday Assemblers were very aware of the constructed and fluid nature of the boundaries they were creating, and discussions about how best to negotiate those boundaries were common on the email forum, at organizing meetings, and even during the Sunday services. And like the local chapter organizer's allusion to a "wider paradigm shift" in the above quote, there was a shared sense that the Sunday Assembly was the product of a more modern way of doing identity, community, and spirituality that was just as meaningful as more traditional forms. I will delve into these discourses in much more detail in later chapters, but first, in this chapter I outline the cultural, practice-oriented approach that I used to understand these discourses of becoming, balancing, and mixing traditional forms with modern worldviews. Rather than assuming a static and meaningless modern world full of secular people with no commitment to or language for talking about certainty, transcendence, or shared moral values, this practice-oriented approach enables me to investigate the everyday practices, beliefs, and discourses that nonreligious people use to actively construct new cultural meanings in modernity.

Practice-Oriented Approaches to Culture

Debates abound in sociology about the correct approach to studying culture and whether culture is primarily about the ends or the means of action (see Kaufman 2004; Sewell 1999; Swidler 1986; Vaisey 2009; Wuthnow 1987). Historically, "culture" was understood to be the opposite of "structure," the former being the predominant beliefs and values of individuals and the latter being patterned arrangements of rules and resources (Sewell 1992). From this lens, culture is characterized as "soft," whereas

structure is “hard” or “material” (Sewell 1992: 3). As a result, a common social science understanding of culture is that it is largely, if not completely, shaped by structural constraints, an “exogenous phenomenon” with very little room for the intervention of human agency (Kaufman 2004). In this conception of culture, the idea is that “culture affects human action through values that direct it to some ends rather than others” (Swidler 1986: 281).

However, more recent approaches to culture reject the structuralist notion that culture is entirely determined, instead framing their analyses around the autonomous, agentic, and structuring capacities of culture itself (Kaufman 2004; Sewell 1999). In one camp are conceptions of culture as a largely autonomous sphere or structure that is either dependent from, or actively shapes, structural forces. Sewell (1999) outlines some of the major approaches in this camp, one of which is a conception of culture as a distinct institutional sphere devoted to making meaning. This sphere is argued to be built in relation to other spheres, like economics and politics, and within the cultural sphere are practices like art, religion, and fashion. To study culture from this perspective is to study the activities that take place in this sphere and the meanings produced by them. A second approach theorizes culture as creativity or agency. This approach understands culture to be a realm that is relatively free of the deterministic forces of social structures and where meaning is made outside of the constraints of structure. Similarly, a third approach sees culture as a system of symbols and meanings. This approach was made popular by Clifford Geertz (1973) who coined the term “cultural system” to denote an abstract, autonomous realm of culture with its own logic and coherence.

Thus, while some scholars argue that culture is determined by structure, others argue that culture determines structure. However, cultural sociologists recently developed a third approach that focuses on the ways that culture and structure are in constant interaction. What Sewell (1999) calls a “practice-oriented” approach to culture, this third approach rejects the idea that culture is a bounded, deterministic set of symbols and meanings and instead operates with the assumption that culture is “a sphere of practical activity shot through by willful action, power relations, struggle, contradiction, and change” (Sewell 1999: 44). This approach emphasizes how practices, histories, and “tool kits” are used by individuals to actively create and maintain culture (Sewell 1992; Swidler 1986). Kaufman (2004) characterizes this new school of thought as “post-hermeneutic” and argues that cultural sociology has shifted away from *exogenous* explanations that define culture as determined by other forces toward *endogenous* explanations that focus instead on culture as agentic and somewhat, if not entirely, autonomous. He explains that this approach to cultural analysis focuses on the “causal processes that occur within the cultural stream: mechanisms such as iteration, modulation, and differentiation, as well as processes such as meaning making, network building, and semiotic manipulation” (336). Scholars in this camp reject both the idea that culture is determined by structure, as well as the idea that culture is an entirely separate sphere with its own deterministic logic. Instead, they ask where culture comes from in the first place, seeking to explain how actors find, use, and create meaning in their everyday lives. Thus, “the meaningfulness of culture is something to be explained, not something used to explain” (Kaufman 2004: 340). Kaufman (2004) explains,

The new interpretative cultural sociology has reconciled itself to the fact that, if there is no single, unified set of meanings attached to cultural

symbols, then cultural consumers' interpretations of those symbols might be equally varied, thus requiring careful consideration in their own right. From this observation a new focus on the existential dilemma of consumption has emerged: if social actors do not bring preformed conceptions and worldviews to the field of cultural consumption, and if such consumption does not translate into the simple absorption of prepacked conceptions and worldviews, then where does meaning come from? What sustains and transforms it across the cultural field? (340).

It is with this practice-oriented, endogenous approach to culture that we can start to see the meaningfulness of modernity and the ways that individuals are doing more than just *reacting to* the inevitable losses of modernization; instead, they are *actively creating* modernity and imbuing modern forms with meaning and purpose. In their work on culture in the transitions to modernity, Reed and Adams (2011) detail how “subjectively meaningful action becomes an important causal mover” in modernity and that “humans, in interaction with each other, create emergent understandings that take on a life of their own, and thus causally direct social processes” of modernization. Clark (2012) makes a similar argument in his critical history of secularization theory, suggesting that secularization is “not a process, but a project; not something happening autonomously within the phenomena, like ocean currents or hurricanes, but a project urged by some individuals who seek historical validation for a cause” (190). In other words, rather than assuming that meaning is lost with modernity, a practice-oriented approach to cultural change opens up avenues for investigating how new meanings might be created in response to modernizing forces in ways that, in turn, shape the modernization process itself.

To uncover these newly constructed meanings, scholars using practice-oriented approaches focus on things like process, intersectionality, resonance, narrative, context, and the messy and mundane everyday cultural work that goes into identity and

community creation in contemporary societies. For example, in her work on ritual, Bell (1997) utilizes what she calls “practice theory” to focus on how rituals are made and sustained in everyday practices rather than looking at ritual activity as simply an expression of deterministic cultural forces. Similarly, McDonnell, Bail, and Tavorý’s (2017) theory of cultural resonance calls for a focus on the “contingent, processual interactions between cultural objects and audiences” and the ways that actors actively make cultural congruence rather than simply finding it from a pre-formed meaning system. In practice-oriented approaches to identity construction in modernity, scholars investigate the “becoming” of identities and how ontological narratives, intersectionality, and embodied practices shape self-understandings (Johnston 2016; Somers 1994; Tavorý and Winchester 2012; Winchester and Green 2019). And in the sociology of religion, scholars like Edgell (2012), Ammerman (2006), and Taves (2009) argue for cultural, practice-oriented understandings of religion that decenter the metanarrative of religion’s loss in the modern world and that emphasize contestation and fluidity. With what is often called a “lived religion” approach, rather than assuming that religious meanings have attenuated in modernization, these scholars investigate the changing nature of religion and how religious and nonreligious identities are continuously created and negotiated in everyday interactions and mundane routines (see also Lee 2015; McGuire 2008; McRoberts 2004; Nelson 2005).

A key aspect of practice-oriented approaches that is useful for rethinking meaning in modernity is the idea that discourses and practices surrounding things like ritual, community, and certainty are constructed and contextual rather than natural and universal. In other words, rather than some natural and universally shared drive for

identity certainty and ritualized belief-systems that is often assumed in our social scientific narratives, the meanings surrounding certainty and the practices and beliefs that resonate with individuals are in fact diverse, contested, and can change over time. For example, in Lynch's (2012) theoretical treatise on the sacred in the modern world, he argues that we need to approach sacred forms not as naturally occurring and stemming from some universal or fundamental experience of the sacred, but instead we should try to understand "what specific experiences (embodied ways of feeling, thinking, and acting) are bound up with historically contingent and socially constructed forms of the sacred" (15). Similarly, scholars like Jackson (2019), Collins (2010), and Studderts (2016) argue for an understanding of community as a verb rather than a noun, and propose that we investigate the ongoing performance and "becoming" of communal forms rather than assuming community is a static "thing to be possessed, lacked, or lost" (Rogaly 2016: 657). In these ways, it becomes possible to frame the growth of nonreligious cultures in the contemporary United States as the creation and growth of *new* rituals, values, and communities, rather than just the loss of old ones. Often, like in the case of the Sunday Assembly, these new forms borrow from and reimagine aspects of older forms, and a practice-oriented approach allows for an investigation of how this cultural work happens and the meanings that modern individuals attribute to its products.

While not all practice-oriented research is based in qualitative methods, much of it is, and this is because qualitative methods are built to get at questions of process, practice, and context (Lichterhan 1995; Small 2009; Yin 2002). The task of operationalizing a practice or belief into a survey question requires a conception of these beliefs and practices as largely static and universal. However, qualitative methods like

interviewing and ethnography allow for investigators to map the ongoing processes of meaning-making and their often fluid and “incoherent” nature (Johnston 2016; Pugh 2013). Thus, grounded in the cultural, practice-oriented approach I just outlined, my three-year ethnographic case study of the Sunday Assembly promises to offer new insights into the cultural work that goes into constructing meaningful identities and communities without religion.

Disrupting the Dichotomies of Modernity

As I described in Chapter 1, there is a widely shared paradigm in social science about the consequences of modernization and secularization that presume strong dichotomies between certainty and modernity, secularity and spirituality, and individualism and community. However, research that takes a more cultural, practice-oriented approach to theorizing identity and community in contemporary society has disrupted these dichotomies by revealing how certainty can still be found in modern society, how individualism can promote community, and how a commitment to scientific rationalism does not necessarily preclude transcendent, meaningful experiences. I detail each of these lines of research below and then draw on the conceptual tools they provide as a framework for the empirical chapters that follow.

The Contexts of Uncertainty

One set of conceptual tools comes out of social psychological research into people’s orientations toward uncertainty and the importance of context for how that uncertainty is experienced. Despite a seeming consensus in social science that uncertainty is negative, there is research that points to some potentially positive aspects of uncertainty. For some, living in the spaces “between and betwixt” identities is itself a

meaningful position to occupy (Lim, McGregor, and Putnam 2010: 598; see also Butler 1990; Taylor 2007). For example, Landau et al. (2010) suggest that while uncertainty is negative in most instances, it can also be “channeled into constructive directions, spurring people to find novel, creative avenues” for creating meaning (p. 211). Similarly, Tormala (2016) argues that people tend to think more carefully and critically about a construct when they are uncertain about it, which can reduce extremism and increase critical engagement. Thus, a constant drive for certainty is not always positive, as certainty-filled identities and beliefs are more resistant to change, for better or for worse. For example, research finds that people will attempt to confirm and feel certain about their self-views, even if those self-views are negative (Swann and Buhrmester 2003).

This research suggests that the meaning of uncertainty surrounding individual beliefs and identities is more complicated than is often captured in our larger social scientific narratives. Not only are there different domains of the self that one might feel uncertain about – from beliefs, to attitudes, to identities – but research finds that whether someone feels uncertain in one domain might be influenced by whether they feel uncertain in other domains. Thus, it is important to consider the contexts in which people might experience uncertainty. For example, while much of the research in this area argues that certainty plays a crucial role in motivating action, others would emphasize the importance of the salience and centrality of an identity or belief for whether it motivates action. Styker and Serpe (1994) distinguish between salience and centrality, arguing that salient identities are those that are most likely to be activated in an individual’s life, while central identities are those that individuals themselves prioritize as important. These can and do overlap, but the idea is that identities, and their associated beliefs and attitudes,

are organized into a hierarchy of salience and centrality (see also Stryker 1980). Some identities are more important in our lives than others, either because we prioritize them as important or because they are relevant for social interactions in our everyday lives. And research finds that the more central and salient a belief or identity is, the more likely it will be that certainty surrounding that belief or identity will motivate thoughts and actions (e.g. Clarkson et al. 2009).

Research also suggests that people have different orientations to certainty and uncertainty, and that these orientations can change over time. Szeto and Sorrentino (2010) propose that individuals develop consistent “regulatory styles” for dealing with uncertainty that they call an “uncertainty orientation.” They argue that “some people head straight for [uncertainty], while others prefer to face uncertainty indirectly, or even ignore it altogether” (Szeto and Sorrentino 2010: 118). They posit two different types of people: uncertainty-oriented types who seek out uncertainty and try to resolve it in an “effortful and systematic manner” (p. 102), and certainty-oriented types who avoid uncertainty and rely more heavily on identity standards and group identifications to resolve uncertainty. Thus, an understanding of how people orient themselves to certainty and uncertainty opens up possibilities for seeing certainty as one kind of orientation toward meaning among many.

However, the above approach assumes a sort of trait-like nature to uncertainty orientations – that individuals are *either* uncertainty-oriented *or* certainty-oriented, and that they remain consistently so throughout their lives and across their different beliefs and identities. In contrast, others suggest a more “state-like” conception of uncertainty orientations. Wright (2010) suggests that uncertainty orientations can come in both “trait

and state versions” (p. 424). He argues that some people are “chronically committed” to one orientation or the other in a way that would constitute a stable personality trait, while others move between more transient states of certainty and uncertainty regarding a given belief or identity. And DeMarree et al. (2007) propose that some people may have “cross-situational consistency” regarding the certainty they attribute to their beliefs and identities, while others may have different orientations to certainty depending on the context or the construct in question. This suggests that people’s orientations to certainty and uncertainty can be fluid and that developing and maintaining orientations to uncertainty might be more important for some people and contexts than for others. It is also the case that social location determines how and when uncertainty is experienced, as people with marginalized identities often have less power to define the meanings surrounding those identities (Stets 2005; Sandoval 2000). In short, the contexts under which certainty and uncertainty are experienced matter for whether those experiences will be positive or negative and whether they will motivate actions.

The nonreligious are an especially illustrative case for investigating the meanings of certainty and uncertainty. For one, to be nonreligious often does come with experiences of uncertainty, especially in cases of religious disaffiliation. When someone questions or leaves a religious belief system, it often comes with existential doubts and identity uncertainty. In longitudinal studies mapping recent demographic changes in religious affiliation, scholars find that 20% of those who report “no religion” in one year will go on to report a religious identity the following year (Hout 2017; Lim et al. 2010), highlighting the fluid and liminal nature of many nonreligious identities. However, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, many nonreligious people *are* certain about their nonreligious

beliefs and identities, and it has in some ways become easier to find nonreligious certainties in the U.S. where there are a growing number of social and political groups being created to cater to the nonreligious and that are often built to be as identity-affirming and uncertainty-reducing as religious groups (LeDrew 2015; Kettell 2014). In Chapter 3, I detail how this context shapes the experiences of certainty and uncertainty in the lives of nonreligious Americans, which has important implications for our dominant theories about the meaning of uncertainty in the modern world.

Individualistic Communities

My analysis also relies on tools from cultural sociologists and sociologists of religion who have disrupted the presumed dichotomies between individualism and communalism and between secularism and spirituality that are posited in modernization theories. Rather than always hindering meaning-making and social connection, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that individualism and secularism can in fact be conducive to meaningful communal and transcendent experiences. By examining the contextual and fluid nature of contemporary discourses and practices of community and spirituality, this work provides useful alternative frameworks for re-thinking their presumed loss in modernity.

To start, numerous scholars have countered the “community lost” narrative that I described in Chapter 1 by complicating the static conception of community as a singular object that can be lost. This research provides evidence for the continued importance of community in modern life by showing how discourses, practices, and ideologies of “community” are varied and produced in social interaction. Rather than the loss of community more generally, many scholars suggest that only certain traditional forms of

community have been lost and that new forms of community are being created in their place. For example, in response to the “community lost” narrative is an argument for a narrative of “community saved” in which modernization and urbanization ultimately gave rise to strong community bonds based in ethnic enclaves, working-class communities, and inner-city neighborhoods (Ryle and Robinson 2006; Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). Others suggest a narrative of “community liberated” in which institutional porousness and technological advancements have made community more mobile and less dependent on local contexts, allowing for more community connections to be made across different “loosely bounded” networks (Delanty 2000; Fischer 1995; Ryle and Robinson 2006; Wellman 1979; Wuthnow 1998b).

Jackson (2019) explains that a dissatisfaction with the standard narrative of community lost has resulted in these and other alternate narratives, including a shift towards understanding community as a verb rather than a noun. She says, “Community is cast in this body of work as something performed through a variety of registers and intensities, a smile or one-off interaction as well as participation in a more structured group” (3). Studdert (2006) makes a similar argument, suggesting that approaching community as a verb and as “produced as an outcome of ongoing action in common” allows for a more complete understanding of how these outcomes can vary and change. He argues, “This allows us to think, not about community as something lost, ‘lacking’, having to be rebuilt ... but rather as a complex historical and holistic formation of actions and meanings constantly present” (623). And Collins (2010) argues that community is an “elastic construct” that can accommodate contradictory meanings, invoke relational thinking, and help people negotiate changing boundaries. In other words, community is

not some universal, free-floating meaning system that individuals pick up and put down at will; instead, different ideologies and practices of community are produced across different contexts. And community ideologies shape not only what communal spaces are like, but also beliefs about what they *should* be like, resulting in the creation of physical and symbolic boundaries between different communities (Collins 2010; Hummon 1990). In these ways, we can start to see community not as a singular thing that is now lost, but as an ever-changing and contested set of discourses, values, and practices.

This practice-oriented approach to community helps to disrupt nostalgic and utopian ideals of community, revealing both the exclusionary aspects of traditional forms of community as well as the potential for meaningful communal forms to be created around new discourses and values. Scholars like Joseph (2002) and Kaufman (2002) have argued that the communal forms that we are so often nostalgic for were not as conducive to social trust and an inclusive public good as they are typically characterized as being. Kaufman's (2002) historical analysis of voluntary associations in the United States reveals that what many see as the "golden age of fraternity" in the late 19th century was in fact a time of increased racial, religious, and class segregation. A major vehicle for this segregation was voluntary associations themselves, as voluntarism increasingly became a competitive, status-oriented, and politically motivated activity people used to sort into groups of like-minded people. Joseph (2002) makes a similar critique against "the romance of community," arguing that to invoke community is immediately to raise questions of belonging and power. Inherent in the creation of a community is the creation of boundaries, both social and physical, and Joseph argues that discourses of community that "naturalize" community as some "unequivocal good" work to mask the hierarchical

and exclusionary aspects of community. Similarly, Collins (2010) argues that community no longer means a “naturally occurring, apolitical space to which one retreats to escape the pressures of modern life,” instead communities are now sites of political engagement and contestation (7).

Thus, community forms and ideologies are not inherently and universally beneficial for the social good, but if we understand these forms and ideologies as constructed and context-dependent, it is also possible to also see how they can be diverse and change over time. “Traditional” communities based in shared religious ideologies, face-to-face connections, and embeddedness in a particular locality are not the only meaningful forms of community, and scholars have found that community can also take “post-traditional” forms that are less bounded to a specific place or shared moral meaning system (Delanty 2000). In these post-traditional forms of community, scholars are finding that discourses of individualism often help produce community engagement rather than hinder it. For example, There are numerous lines of research on religious groups (Hoop 2012; O’Brien 2015; Pike 2001) and non-profit organizations (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 1995; Pirkey 2015) that detail how discourses of personalism and expressive individualism are used to affirm social responsibilities and create communal obligations. In her study of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, Hoop (2012) finds that despite a lack of shared religious beliefs and values in the church, members were able to maintain communal connections through a discourse of individualism that created shared values around honoring each person’s own spiritual journey. Similarly, in his study of a grass-roots environmental activist group, Lichterman (1995) finds that an ethic of personalism was central to the group’s motivations for communal engagement. He

explains that in contrast to concerns about individualism diminishing a sense of public responsibility, this group “carried a form of commitment that is based in, rather than in tension with, practices of autonomy and authenticity ... The goal was not to indulge individual voices for their own sake but to create a Green group integrated through mutual respect for personal expression” (286). In short, in contrast to nostalgic narratives of community lost, practice-oriented approaches to community have found that not only can pre-modern forms of community be exclusionary, but modern discourses can in fact foster community and a commitment to the public good.

Secular Spiritualities

A similar set of tools can be found in practice-oriented approaches to spirituality in contemporary contexts. Scholars have begun to question the presumed dichotomy between a rationalistic, secular worldview and experiences of awe, wonder, and greater meaning. The term “spiritual” has historically been used to describe things that are not “material” or from this world, and until recently it was most often used by religious adherents to describe their other-worldly and supernatural religious beliefs and practices. However, scholars have found that the term “spirituality” underwent a major discursive shift over the second half of the twentieth century with the rise of New Age practices and the increased disaffiliation from organized religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Houtman and Aupers 2007; Huss 2014). Today, spirituality is characterized by a separation from institutionalized religion, a centering of the self, a detraditionalizing of religious practice, a deliberate construction and cultivation of religious symbols and rituals, and a this-worldly, horizontal orientation to transcendence (Besecke 2014; Huss 2014; Houtman and Aupers 2007).

While it is certainly the case that one can be spiritual *and* religious, and many are, there is a growing subset of Americans who see spirituality as separate from religion and who identify as “spiritual but not religious.” In Ammerman’s (2013) study of this demographic, she finds that many Americans still rely on a more “theistic” understanding of spirituality that is anchored in religious participation and supernatural beliefs, but she also finds an “extra-theistic” spirituality that is expressed without any references to deities or supernatural forces. This is a spirituality that is this-worldly and revolves around a sense of awe and wonder engendered by the natural world, by various forms of beauty, and by secular philosophies. Many scholars are now calling these experiences “secular spirituality.” This concept is meant to convey the various ways that individuals – including atheistic individuals who do not believe in any kind of god or higher power – seek out experiences of what some scholars call “horizontal transcendence,” which is a connection to something greater than oneself that is not supernatural – like a community, nature, or the vastness of the universe (Coleman et al. 2013; Cimino and Smith 2014; Schnell and Pali 2013; Steensland, Wang, and Schmidt 2018). In this research, scholars are finding that nonreligious people are attempting to transcend their everyday lives and routines through finding sacred meanings in science, nature, and community. So, while the concept of “secular spirituality” might seem paradoxical at first, it begins to make sense in light of these recent discursive shifts in how many people define the term spirituality.

Religion scholars have begun to theorize how these shifts in spirituality make even more sense in light the broader societal changes brought about by modernization and secularization. Many argue that modernization has given rise to both scientific

rationalism *and* an increasingly eclectic and detraditionalized spirituality, suggesting that scientific inquiry and the questing nature of contemporary spirituality are related cultural discourses premised on the values of exploration, questioning, continued innovation, and a never-ending search for meaning (Rowson 2014; Houtman and Aupers 2007). For example, Robinson (2018) states, “While science has been the rational head of modernity that has explored the world rigorously and schematically, spirituality has been its pulsating, emotional heart, exploring the mystical, transcendent, intuitive and ineffable.” So, while they are often seen as incompatible, science and spirituality do have meaningful points of connection. For example, Besecke (2001) describes the concept of “reflexive spirituality” to show how some people reflect on their spirituality from a rationalistic perspective, using expert and academic knowledge to make sense of their various beliefs and practices. Similarly, Eaton (2015) finds an “evidence-based spirituality” in his study of paranormal investigators who he finds apply the methods of science to try and understand supernatural phenomena like ghosts and energies. He argues that these investigators are refining their spiritual beliefs in ways that are compatible with the scientific method. And in a study of spirituality among scientists, Ecklund and Long (2011) find that over 20% of the physical and social scientists they interviewed exemplify what they call “spiritual atheism.” They find that many academic scientists believe they can pursue a spiritual journey much in the way they pursue scientific knowledge, using the framework of the scientific method to pursue deeper meaning in their lives.

Taken together, these practice-oriented approaches to community and spirituality reveal that the modern discourses of individualism, science, and rationality are not always

at odds with a commitment to community or a sense of transcendent meaning. An individualistic worldview can motivate public commitments, and a scientific worldview can facilitate transcendent experiences. This research reveals how community and spirituality are not singular cultural objects that can be applied universally across time and space. Instead, the meanings and practices associated with community and spirituality are varied, contested, and change over time. In Chapters 4 and 5, I use the above research as a framework for understanding the spiritual and communal lives of the nonreligious. In contrast to the characterizations of shallow secularists and amoral atheists that are pervasive in social science research, I find that atheists and agnostics at the Sunday Assembly are testing out new ways to create meaningful rituals, transcendent experiences, and engaged communities based in secular, scientific, and often individualistic, worldviews.

Substantive Nonreligion

The final set of conceptual tools I draw on in the subsequent analyses comes out of the growing field of nonreligious studies and its emphasis on practice-oriented approaches to understanding nonreligious cultures and communities. An interest in both increased nonreligion in areas that were previously highly religious, as well as increased religion in areas that were once highly secular, has led to a growing number of scholars investigating the growing demographic of nonreligious people and the values and practices that shape their beliefs and identities. This field of research rejects the idea that secularization results in meaningless and shallow secular identities, instead providing evidence of “colorful and creative” nonreligious identities and cultures that are created in

relation to religious, political, and social contexts (Lee 2015).

For example, Baker and Smith (2015) argue for a cultural understanding of secularity and nonreligion, one that moves away from rational choice and secularization theories. Instead of positing secularity and religion as opposites, Baker and Smith argue that these perspectives should be seen as on a continuum – every individual is in a constant process of meaning making, and each individual varies in terms of how much use they make of religion in order to make that meaning. The authors deploy the concept of “cosmic belief systems” as a way to understand how both secularity and religion are philosophical positions on this continuum, with substantive values and beliefs. Similarly, Taves, Asprey and Ihm (2018) suggest that religion and nonreligion both be studied under the umbrella of “worldviews,” along with other ideologies like humanism, nationalism, and neoliberalism. They argue that atheism and theism offer competing answers to “big questions” about what exists, how we know what is true, and where we come from, but that both are frameworks for understanding these big questions and making meaningful beliefs and identities.

Lee (2012, 2015) has played an important role in shaping understandings of nonreligion as more than just simply the *lack* of religious beliefs and identities. As a way of “seeing” the substance of nonreligious cultures, Lee proposed that social scientists separate the term “secular” from the term “nonreligious.” For Lee, “nonreligion” should be an umbrella concept for the beliefs, behaviors, and identities that are defined in relation to religion, whereas the “secular” is reserved for something for which religion is not the primary reference point. She explains,

My argument is that separating non-religion from other aspects of the secular might provide a solution and lead to more advanced research questions and methodologies. By using the two terms to describe the two distinct phenomena at hand, respectively, it becomes much easier to treat them as independent variables and discuss the multiple empirical relationships between the two in more precise terms ... Non-religion is primarily defined here in reference to religion, whereas the secular is primarily defined by something other than religion. Non-religion is a relational concept; the secular is purely relative. Non-religion is ‘stuff’; the secular means only the demotion or absence of some other ‘stuff’” (Lee 2012: 135-136).

For Lee, this way forward carves out a space for the study of substantive nonreligious beliefs and practices. This relational approach to nonreligion can also be found in Quack’s (2012) Bourdieusian approach to the study of nonreligion. Quack uses the concept of “religion-related fields” to theorize how there are multiple modes of nonreligion in any given context that relate to religion differently. As a result, Quack emphasizes a bottom-up, inductive approach to the study of nonreligion, tasking nonreligious scholars with the challenge of specifying “where there are possible landmarks, boundaries, and borderlands by researching specific kinds and ranges of relationships between a religious field and nonreligious phenomena” (450). In doing so, we might establish categories that “run transversely to the prevailing ways of ordering the field of nonreligion” (463).

These new understandings of substantive nonreligiosity have produced a range of quantitative and qualitative studies that start to parse out the meanings, practices, and identities that people associate with their nonreligiosity. Like practice-oriented approaches to “lived religion” that I described earlier in the chapter, practice-oriented approaches to nonreligion investigate how nonreligious cultures are continuously created and negotiated in everyday interactions and mundane routines. Lee’s (2015) ethnographic

work starts to really flesh out what a “lived nonreligion” might look like, and she discusses concept like “material nonreligion,” “embodied nonreligion,” and “banal nonreligion.” Like the emphasis on mundane, everyday practices among those who exemplify the practice-oriented approach to religion, Lee’s practice-oriented approach to *nonreligion* focuses on the “banal” and mundane aspects of nonreligious materiality and experience. She examines materials and images in the homes of the nonreligious that do not necessarily make overt ideological statements but are more “light-hearted” jabs at religion that often go unnoticed. For example, she found a greeting card in which Jesus was being presented with loaves and fishes and the caption read, “No, mine was the herb-crusted cod.” These more “banal” forms of nonreligion and ways of relating to religion often go unnoticed when the focus is on beliefs and intellectual reasoning, but Lee argues they are no less important.

Numerous scholars have also started to detail the communal and ritualistic lives of the nonreligious. Cimino and Smith (2014) find that rituals play an important role in organized humanist and atheist groups, including secular weddings and holidays, meditation, humor, and even “debaptisms,” which they describe as the practice of “renouncing baptisms, usually with the help of a hair dryer” (120). They found that the nonreligious celebrate certain discourses, symbols, and prominent figures as being representative of their beliefs, including rationality and science, the Darwin fish, and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Through these various practices, the nonreligious are imbuing secular beliefs, rituals, and symbols with sacred meanings, or what Smith (2017) calls “sacralizing the secular” (see also Knott 2013). They are also building communities of practice through these rituals and attempting to offer substantive alternatives to religious

communities. In atheist churches like the Sunday Assembly, for example, atheists and agnostics are engaging in what Smith (2017) calls “communal secularity” that enables an expression of group emotions and values, an embodiment of group ideologies and beliefs, and a sense of belonging and purpose.

This emerging practice-oriented approach to the study of nonreligiosity reveals that, rather than a shallow and meaningless secularity characterized by “cool, disengaged reason,” nonreligious individuals are constructing new rituals, meanings, and communities in the absence of religious ones. In the following chapters, I draw on this approach in my ethnographic case study of the Sunday Assembly, showing how nonreligious discourses of uncertainty, spirituality, and community often run counter to the dominant narrative of disengagement, loss, and meaninglessness in modernity.

Chapter 3

The Meaning of Uncertainty

I remember thinking it was like I had a line of dominos and I hit one. And I just remember this feeling, like all of the sudden it was like [makes dominos falling noises], “Oh my.” And I was just like, “This doesn’t actually make any sense. Oh my gosh.” And then it was freedom.

Julie, atheist, Sunday Assembler

While it is certainly the case that people can be and are “raised nonreligious,” never thinking seriously about religious belief systems or engaging with religious institutions, the highly religious nature of American culture means that most nonreligious people in the United States have *become* nonreligious after “deconverting” from some form of religion. While this is changing, and younger cohorts are leaving religion at higher rates and are thus more likely to raise their children without religion than older generations (Baker and Smith 2015; Voas and Chaves 2016), it is still the case that a majority of American adults today have had some encounter with religion in their life. And as Sunday Assembler Julie describes in the above quote, losing one’s belief in a god often comes with a newfound sense of freedom. Unlike the dominant assumptions in our academic and public discourse that leaving religion is a largely negative experience that comes with a detrimental sense of meaninglessness and uncertainty, many of the nonreligious people that I encountered in my fieldwork described having positive and enriching experiences on their journeys away from religion. For many, it was their *religious* beliefs that caused them anxiety and isolation, and it was in the letting go of those beliefs that they found stability and peace.

This type of deconversion narrative is exemplified in an email entitled “Now that I’m an Atheist” that was shared on the Sunday Assembly Everywhere forum by Sunday Assembler Pamela¹. It was common for assemblers to write about their deconversion experiences in the email forum as a way to affirm the positive aspects of nonreligion that they were celebrating at the Sunday Assembly, and below I quote Pamela’s email at length because it is representative of a widely shared discourse I found in the nonreligious field about the “freedom” that comes with leaving religion. Pamela wrote,

Now that I am an atheist, I am much less afraid. My entire life has been one huge journey to find the one “right” kind of Christianity to keep me out of hell, coupled with tremendous anxiety and fear about loved ones and friends who were “wrong” and wouldn't make it. Now I know there is no “right” or “wrong” answer ... Now that I am an atheist, I am a little more willing to see how things go. I've always been controlling – out of fear. I didn't know if God's plan for my life was going to be good or bad. Now I know it's not preordained. I can change it ... Now that I am an atheist, I have higher self-esteem. I really have had to deal with a higher-than-average number of losses and traumas. Now I understand it's not me. I am not a personal target. It's because shit happens. That's the great “meaning” ... Now that I am an atheist, I feel stronger. A toddler who is never allowed to fall and stand up never learns he is capable of doing this. He waits for someone bigger to fix things for him, and he never gains confidence by standing on his own feet. It's been the same for me. As I waited and waited for God to answer my prayers and help me, I felt more and more powerless. Now I know it's up to me ... Now that I am an atheist, I don't spend my time puzzling over why something happened, what it means, and if it is a sign. I prescribe my own meaning to events and I can decide what they mean to me and what I will learn from them. It was of great comfort over the years to believe that I was being protected, that somebody out there had my back. That belief was one of the hardest things to let go. But now I understand the protection was never there in the first place. I've lost nothing.

Pamela described numerous positive changes that resulted from her religious deconversion, including feeling less afraid, having more confidence and higher self-

¹ Other than the names of Sunday Assembly’s founders, all of the names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

esteem, and feeling more agency about prescribing her own meaning to her life. For Pamela, being religious came with high levels of guilt, fear, and a sense that she was constantly letting God down, and leaving religion meant leaving behind all of those negative emotions. And a dominant theme that runs throughout the email is Pamela's sense that she now experiences more uncertainty around the meanings she ascribes to her life. She says that she now "knows there is no right or wrong answer," that she is now less controlling and "a little more willing to see how things go," and she is now okay with the idea that there is no larger force out there that "has her back." Importantly, however, Pamela sees the positive changes in her life as happening *because* of this increased uncertainty, not in spite of it. This is not to say that all people experience religion as negatively as Pamela did, but her narrative highlights the ways that leaving religion is not always a loss, and nostalgic conceptions of religious certainty as inherently comforting often neglect to account for the anxiety-inducing aspects of religion itself.

In this chapter, I examine the deconversion narratives of nonreligious people like Pamela that I encountered in my fieldwork, showing how the discourses surrounding certainty and uncertainty in these narratives run counter to dominant assumptions that certainty is lost in modernity and that uncertainty is always negative. While it is of course not always the case that people have positive experiences leaving religion, as I will describe in more detail below, the uncertainty and ambiguity that often comes with leaving religion can be meaningful and positive rather than always negative and anxiety-inducing. However, in the context of the nonreligious identity politics that I described in Chapter 1, certainty has also become readily available for the nonreligious as part of a politicized narrative that constructs and promotes bounded, "certainty-filled"

nonreligious identities. I encountered several nonreligious individuals who described their own nonreligious identities and beliefs in ways that resonate with these certainty-filled discourses, but I also met people who developed counter-narratives of intentional uncertainty, often as a means of resisting these more certainty-filled discourses. And I show how the tension between these discourses of certainty and uncertainty in the nonreligious field shaped perceptions of and participation in nonreligious groups like the Sunday Assembly.

Conferences, not Campfires: The Politics of Nonreligion

Reading atheist literature has not really worked for me. These books just haven't, well, I wanted them to be a thing, but they just haven't been the thing. And I've struggled with shame about that. Like, I'm not a very good atheist because I haven't finished an entire [Richard] Dawkins book before. But, like, you know, it just doesn't appeal to me. Just because I'm an atheist doesn't mean I need to be a book head or, like, know the ins and outs of science.

Natalie, atheist, former assembler

It is not unreasonable to assume that taking on an atheistic, agnostic, or otherwise nonreligious identity would result in a more uncertain or open perspective towards existential questions. To question or reject a religious belief does involve various levels of existential reflection, especially when living in a culture like the U.S. where being religious is still the norm (e.g. Williams 2013). However, nonreligious identities can be just as dogmatic and certainty-filled as religious ones (see Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006). As studies of the more political atheist groups that I described in Chapter 1 reveal, there are politicized forms of atheism and secularism being promoted by nonreligious organizations that shape how individuals define and enact their nonreligion (Kettell

2014). And as the above quote from Natalie starts to unpack, there was a pervasive sense among people I interviewed that there are a bounded set of characteristics and values wrapped up in what it means to be an atheist, and many talked about their nonreligious identities in relation to this image.

As many of my interviewees explained, and as previous studies on atheist identity politics have confirmed (see LeDrew 2015), the prototypical image of the “good atheist” that Natalie is defining herself against is an intellectual, politically active, and dogmatic anti-theist who is generally against accommodating any kind of religious tradition or ritual. And Natalie was not the only one to admit to feeling like an inadequate atheist for failing to live up to this identity standard. Trista, an active member of a more politically active atheist group in the area, laughed as she confessed to never having read any of the popular New Atheist texts from the mid-2000s, saying, “I once got half-way through *The God Delusion*. I haven't even read the whole thing! I'm an awful atheist.” This intellectualized version of atheism is also assumed to reject any kind of ritualistic or emotional engagement, and Sunday Assemblers are very aware that the collective singing and emotionally charged environment that they are trying to cultivate at their services contradicts this version of the “good atheist.” MSP assembler and atheist Delilah explained that group singing was one of the things that really drew her to Sunday Assembly, but she was worried her atheist friends would judge her if she told them. She explained,

I love group singing. I absolutely love it. I mean, that's the ticket for me. I've always remembered camping with friends one summer and some people started singing and I just sang along! I just love being around a campfire and singing songs. And I was kind of ashamed to say that! I didn't tell my atheist friends because atheists don't do that. Like, they have

conferences and it's all about learning.

A common thread throughout my data was the level of certainty that my interviewees associated with committed atheism. For example, I interviewed numerous people who identify as “agnostic-atheists” because of the ways they associate atheism with certainty. MSP assembler Blake explained that they worried identifying solely as an atheist would make them “come off as too certain,” when they in fact felt more ambivalence than certainty about their beliefs. They said, “I'm not like an *atheist*-atheist because I'm still open to possibility. And I'm not ardently against religion. So I guess I throw the agnostic in because I don't want to come off as too certain.” Similarly, non-assembler Myah described her atheism as “soft” because she did not believe you could prove a god's nonexistence and she felt she had more open-mindedness towards spiritual practices than she'd seen in other “hard” atheists. And non-assembler Veronica, who identifies as “nothing in particular,” associates atheism with “staunchly saying there isn't a god.” She explains, “I find that for most atheist groups, they're so certain that nothing is out there. And we don't know that. There could be.”

In these ways, there are perceptions of what it means to be a “good” or “committed” atheist within the nonreligious field, and even my interviewees who had little to no interaction with organized atheist groups often described versions of this stereotype. Importantly, these perceptions are tied to politicized narratives circulating within the nonreligious field about the meaning of certainty and uncertainty. The stereotypes of a more singular and certainty-filled atheism are often associated with an anti-religious and intellectualized set of beliefs and values. As a result, many of my interviewees defined their nonreligion as more or less “certain” and dogmatic in relation

to this stereotype, which was often related to how tolerant or open-minded they considered themselves to be. And this context has cultivated a wide spectrum of certainty and uncertainty surrounding individual nonreligious identities and beliefs.

Nonreligious Certainties

Some nonreligious people do see their nonreligion as certain and stable, however, whether or not that certainty motivates their actions is shaped by how salient their nonreligion is to them. For some of my interviewees, nonreligion was central to their sense of self and they actively cultivated nonreligious certainty through regularly engaging in discussions about their beliefs and joining nonreligious groups. Others I interviewed felt that they had come to certain conclusions about their nonreligion, but they did not engage with or join groups based on that certainty. They were certain, but because their nonreligion was less salient to their everyday lives, it was not a certainty that often motivated their thoughts or actions (c.f. Clarkson et al. 2009). Thus, in contrast to dominant depictions of nonreligious experience as being filled with anxiety-inducing uncertainty, a stabilizing and motivating certainty characterizes numerous nonreligious narratives I encountered.

One example of a more salient and certain nonreligion comes from MSP assembler Beth's narrative about her transition from devoted Catholic to convinced atheist. Beth and her husband were active participants in their Catholic church for over 30 years when Beth started questioning her beliefs. She explained that she and her family were very involved in the church community, and they raised their children to be “very Catholic.” But after some major changes in the leadership at her church, Beth started

questioning some of the more conservative messages that were coming from her new leaders. A colleague at work suggested she check out some literature to get a better sense of her position, and that led her down a rapid path of religious disaffiliation. She explained,

I started reading skeptic magazines and then I read *The God Delusion* and it was like game over. I jumped straight to atheist. I looked at it all and I said, "Yeah, there's just no way." And agnostics, I kind of chuckle with that because, like, any atheist, if you actually showed us absolute, positive proof there was a god, we would all go, "Okay." But really, I'm like, no, not going to happen. So yeah, I jumped and said, "No, I am an atheist." I do not believe there is any universe, god, spirit, anything.

Since taking on this atheist identity, Beth has convinced the rest of her family to do the same and they are now all active in numerous atheist and secular groups in their community, including Sunday Assembly. She expressed high levels of certainty in her atheism and described how she actively resisted "softer" nonreligious labels that signaled any openness to questioning or uncertainty. She said, "I guess I think terms like freethinker or humanist are just softer ways that open up the door a little bit for something more that I don't believe exists." She described how she often struggled to be accepting of these more open nonreligious beliefs she often encountered at Sunday Assembly events, saying, "Sunday Assembly is stretching my capacity for tolerance. Sometimes I just can't hold my tongue and respect other people's beliefs in a space I feel should be focused on promoting atheist worldviews."

Trista, introduced in the previous section, described a similar narrative of certainty in which she transitioned from being an active participant in her religious community to becoming an even stronger advocate for atheism. She described having an unquestioning attitude towards religious certainties when she was a young adult and

remembered feeling disappointed when she realized most of the people around her were not “walking the walk.” She said,

I was like, I'm all in. I mean, why would you question what your priest asks you to do? But then I realized that nobody else was getting into this or wanting to get into this as much as me. I felt that people were apathetically going to mass. They go to mass because they have to. And I found cognitive dissonance in it. I was like, okay, I'm either going to be all in or all out. I can't be this, like, half-in.

For Trista, existing in an uncertain space where you claim to have beliefs but are not living them wholeheartedly is unthinkable, and this cognitive dissonance led her to question her religious beliefs and ultimately leave Catholicism altogether. She now enacts her nonreligion with the same kind of fervor and certainty. Trista has a strong belief that people need to shed all religious and spiritual viewpoints, just like she did, in order to “get to the truth about what is right and what is wrong.” She said that she proudly wears her “atheist badge” by being active in an atheist organization and doing things in public as an atheist in the hopes of “getting people to think more realistically.” And she admitted that Sunday Assembly did not interest her because of its tolerance for more open and uncertain nonreligious perspectives. As such, she and Beth could be seen as examples of people with certainty-oriented personalities (e.g. Szeto and Sorrentino 2010) that are regularly reaffirmed and defended in nonreligious spaces.

In contrast to Beth and Trista’s stories of motivating nonreligious certainties, non-assembler Amy has settled into a more or less certainty-filled nonreligion since leaving the all-consuming evangelical Christian culture in which she was raised, but one that is much less salient than Beth’s or Trista’s. Whereas Christianity had permeated almost every aspect of Amy's life, she does not experience atheism in the same way. She

explained that after a period of questioning and trying on different labels like “agnostic,” she ultimately came to atheism as a stable identity and belief system. However, she has little interest in engaging with that identity in the ways that Beth and Trista do. Amy said that if I had asked her a year ago, she might be interested in joining nonreligious groups and reflecting on what it means to be an atheist, but now, she explains, “Now I know enough to feel very confident in my view and I don't want to sound dismissive of additional learning, but it's just not on the table at the moment.” Unlike the Christian identity that she had actively engaged in on a daily basis, her atheist identity resides more in the background. She said,

I don't identify atheist the way that I ever identified as Christian. I don't wake up in the morning going, “Because I'm an atheist, I'm going to live my life better today” or “How do I live my life as a bold atheist?” I just go, well, if you want to put a label on it, fine, I'm an atheist. It's never going to be that kind of identity for me. And I think there are probably people that think, “Atheism is my identity and that's why I do everything.” But for me it will never be like that. To me, atheist just means without god, and that's how I'm living my life.

For many, like Amy, certainty does not come in the form of an actively defended and politicized set of beliefs; instead, certainty means the ability to move on from those discussions and focus on other things. A similar sentiment was expressed by MSP Assembler and atheist Zack who said, “The debate about whether there's a god or not is a meaningless one. Personally, the debate bores me now and I've heard it all before. I already know all the ways religion is bad, can we talk about the destructive potential of other types of false consciousness now?” Importantly, Zack's boredom with these debates does not make him indifferent to or uncertain about his position in relation to them. Instead, he felt that he has been engaged with these discussions enough to come to a

conclusion about where he stands, and he now uses that certainty as a grounding for taking stances on other social problems like global poverty, the future of work, and global warming, to name just a few of the issues he mentioned. Unlike Beth and Trista who seek out ways to reaffirm their certainty and question uncertainty in others, Zack and Amy are just as certain, but their orientations to that certainty motivate them to enact their nonreligion in distinct ways.

Being Comfortable with Uncertainty

For me, I definitely like to think that there's something after death. I like to think that it's not just we all go to dust. The thing that I did take away from organized religion that I appreciate is the idea that there's grand mysteries about the universe that humans don't have the capacity to understand. I find that very comforting because, at least for me, it's a lot less pressure to try and figure things out. Like, humans don't have to know it all.

Wren, agnostic, non-assembler

I encountered various forms of certainty among the nonreligious people in my case study, but I also discovered narratives that emphasized uncertainty and questioning as more than just a bridge between religious and nonreligious certainties. In contrast to atheists like Beth, Trista, and Amy, who experienced a period of uncertainty as a stop on the path away from religious certainties and towards nonreligious certainties, others experienced a more consistently uncertain nonreligion and it often shaped the levels of certainty and boundedness they brought to other aspects of their lives. Like agnostic Wren, who is quoted above and who finds the uncertainty that comes with her agnosticism comforting, many of my interviewees detailed an uncertainty-filled nonreligion that was intentionally chosen and deeply meaningful.

For a substantial proportion of my interviewees, the uncertainty that came with nonreligion was “freeing,” and many of the narratives I encountered emphasized an unwillingness to give up that freedom by coming to any final conclusions. Kurt, a former MSP assembler, described his nonreligion as grounded in uncertainty and he prided himself on his commitment to skepticism and an unwillingness to ever come to one final answer or framework. For him, uncertainty was itself a motivating framework. He explained,

I would argue that when people find atheism, they can get stuck in the honeymoon phase where they believe that just because they figured out there isn't a god, they're done. They don't examine any of their other beliefs and they stop there. It makes for a particularly toxic combo. They think they're speaking on behalf of all rationality and yet are nowhere near it. And it's helped me realize that one of the big problems in life is certainty. When you get into specific things – self-defense, euthanasia, all these other things – you can't go to a book and say, “Check one or two.” You have to think about it. And I think that's what atheism encourages for me – being comfortable with uncertainty. And just modifying as you go and constantly re-evaluating. It almost feels like coming to a conclusion and saying, “Yes, this is what my framework is based on,” it's almost like you've given up. Like, you found it, that's the answer, and you're done. So just constantly accruing more data points. If that's a framework, then I suppose that's mine.

Kurt described his childhood as “nominally Catholic,” and while his parents were not strong believers themselves, they believed that exposure to Catholicism's moral culture was an important part of raising a child. However, he does not remember ever believing any of the religious teachings he encountered and claims to have been “at least agnostic” by the time he was twelve years old. And he describes not only his nonreligion, but also his general orientation towards life, as being one of intentional skepticism and cultivated uncertainty. He was drawn to Sunday Assembly because of its potential to keep things open and allow for more questioning, but he ultimately felt that boundaries

were being drawn in ways he did not agree with. When I asked him why he stopped attending, he said, “I admire the idea that they want to be, well, they want to be positive. Not just say what they’re against, but what they are for. It’s just the more you get into the details, the harder it is to stay on board with everything.” For Kurt, Sunday Assembly's attempts to define and cultivate a more positive nonreligious community were starting to limit his goals of never being constrained by one single framework.

A similar narrative of uncertainty comes from non-assembler Patrick who described himself as “agnostic by nature.” Similar to Kurt, Patrick was raised in a passively religious home and his family attended a Catholic church semi-regularly. However, while he had enjoyed the ritual of church-going, he started to question the teachings early on. In high school he sought out texts to help him work through these questions, but he explained that he was not searching for an ultimate truth or to be convinced of either theism *or* atheism by reading these texts. He said, “I wasn't actively trying to make myself go one way or the other, but I was trying to convince myself to be more agnostic. I'm the kind of person who is by nature, I won't say moderate but, I guess, yeah, I always leave room for doubt and for changing my mind. So I don't think I could ever firmly go one way or the other.” Like Kurt, Patrick also sees his comfort with uncertainty as central to other aspects of his identity and character. He described how his “moderate nature” means that he also identifies as politically independent, that he is not likely to ever join any one group or cause, and that he “gravitates toward people who are more tolerant” of difference and contradiction.

In an important contrast to the above narratives that detail positive experiences with uncertainty, former assembler Natalie has had a very different experience. Natalie,

who was introduced earlier as feeling like “not a very good atheist” because she was not interested in reading up on the intellectual arguments for atheism, was raised in a conservative evangelical religion. Natalie was highly involved in her church and participated in multi-year missions through her church to share her convinced Christian beliefs with others. But after a long and painful journey away from Christianity, Natalie has come upon an atheist identity filled with uncertainty. Unlike Kurt and Patrick, Natalie has struggled to navigate the uncertainty of this new perspective and has sought out counseling to help her work through the anxiety that it often induces in her. She explained that far from feeling “freed” by her nonreligion, like many of my other interviewees did, the uncertainty surrounding her nonreligion gives her frequent panic attacks. Our conversation, below, illustrates how she relates her anxiety to her existential uncertainty.

Natalie: All I remember for sure is that I probably was fully de-converted by 2007 or so. Because then the panic attacks started real hard-core the next year.

Jacqui: Okay, and you think those were related?

Natalie: One hundred percent.

Jacqui: Just because of all the uncertainty involved?

Natalie: Yeah. “Hey, guess what? We're going to die now and there is no heaven or hell. And guess what, you're all alone now. And guess what? Every pain and everything that happens to you, you have no control over that and no one's going to help you.” So there's a lot of stuff to deal with there.

Despite these negative experiences with uncertainty, however, Natalie is determined to come to terms with them and to avoid falling into another “binding” ideology. She said that after coming out of such a “black and white world where you just took the bullet list that was given to you,” certainty was no longer appealing to her. While

she had at first sought out nonreligious communities like the Sunday Assembly to cultivate a replacement for the religious certainties she lost, she explains, “Then I realized that's not at all what I want, I don't ever want that again. I don't ever want this just, like, constructed community that's this arbitrary, binding thing.” While Natalie continues to experience her uncertainty as stressful and disorienting, it's an uncertainty that she sees as hard won through years of being consumed by anxiety-filled existential doubt and experiencing painful cleavages from her religious friends and family. And she now uses her increasing comfort with uncertainty to question boundedness in other areas of her life. For example, she and her husband recently decided to open their marriage and are now in a polyamorous relationship, a move that she describes as positive and enriching. She said that the mindset that brought her to atheism also brought her to question other “arbitrary constructs” in her life. She explained, “The same thing happened with monogamy. Like about a year ago, we just started asking, ““Wait, why?””

And it is here that Natalie's narrative begins to look similar to the narratives of uncertainty detailed by Kurt and Patrick. For all three, an uncertain and questioning nonreligion is an active choice made in the context of numerous other, more certain, options. While uncertainty comes “naturally” for some, and for others uncertainty is understood as a necessary discomfort, these narratives illustrate how uncertainty can be more than just a means to a more certain end – it can be a meaningful end in itself. And while for some, like Natalie, this uncertainty can lead to mental anxiety and physical distress, as our dominant social sciences narratives have predicted, it is important not to assume that Natalie's only available solution is to come to a more certain religious or nonreligious set of beliefs. By finding ways of “being comfortable with uncertainty,”

Natalie, Kurt, and Patrick exemplify an intentional uncertainty that is central to the expression of their nonreligion, that is actively chosen, and that is experienced as a meaningful framework for orienting their beliefs and actions. In contrast to our theoretical narratives that so often conflate meaningfulness with certainty, I find that “meaningful” does not always mean “easy” and “lacking anxiety.” Meaning can just as easily be derived from uncertain and questioning approaches to existential questions as it can from certainty-filled answers to those questions.

These narratives also illustrate interesting combinations of identity certainty/uncertainty and belief certainty/uncertainty, and the relationships between the two. For example, Natalie and Kurt both felt confident in their identity as atheists, but they defined that atheism as being grounded in questioning and uncertainty about their existential beliefs and moral commitments. In contrast, Beth, Trista, and Amy, who were also certain about both their nonreligious identities, attributed much more certainty to their atheist beliefs. And often times, certainty or uncertainty in one domain influenced certainty and uncertainty in other domains. In other narratives, like the ones detailed below, nonreligious people describe both their nonreligious identities *and* their nonreligious beliefs as being uncertain.

Living in the Gray Zone: States, Not Traits

The narratives described so far come from nonreligious individuals who, at the time of our interview, felt they had come to a fairly consistent orientation to certainty or uncertainty surrounding their nonreligion. This does not mean that these orientations will never change, but their current narratives are centered on certainty or uncertainty as more

stable and trait-like orientations, which often informs their orientation to other identities and attitudes. In contrast, others talked about being in what some people called “gray zones” in which they experience certainty and uncertainty more like transitory states that they expect to change in the foreseeable future. There has been some evidence of this already in the analysis. Trista, Amy, and Beth all detailed states of questioning and uncertainty as they transitioned between more trait-like orientations to certainty-filled theism and atheism, and Natalie described how she sought out a more bounded and certain nonreligious belief system for a few years before becoming disillusioned by “binding” systems of any kind. Thus, orientations to uncertainty and certainty can change over time, and can be experienced as both transitory states and as stable traits. It is also the case that whether people find uncertainty comforting or anxiety-inducing can change over time or fluctuate depending on the situation. This was evident narratives like Natalie’s and Pamela’s, but it was also perfectly captured by agnostic Wren who said, “I’m uncertain, and sometimes it causes me anxiety, but sometimes I find it comforting. Both, depending on the situation or mood I’m in.”

Terrance is an illustrative example of someone who had a more state-like experience with certainty and uncertainty at the time I spoke with him. Terrance described his nonreligious identity as being very much in flux, though he *does* believe there is some “ultimate truth” out there to find. In this way, he differs from people like Kurt, Patrick, and Natalie who are not seeking out one final answer or framework. And Terrance, a non-assembler who hesitates to put a label around his nonreligious identity, is willing to get creative and experiment with new ideas in what he calls this “quest for the truth.” He describes his various experiences with religion and phases of questioning as

periods of “moving upwards and outwards.” While at times he feels as if he is working towards a single truth, or moving “upwards,” at other times he feels the need to expand by moving “outward.” He explained,

So I think I'm moving upwards, but at times in life, if I'm stagnant, then I feel like I have to move outwards a little bit. You know, sometimes I feel like I've found the answer, and I'll stay there for a bit, but then something shifts, and I go out questing again ... I think it's like a day to day experience with me. Because like, some days it's just like nothing happens, you know, I might not leave the house or something, and it's just such like a blank day that like it doesn't even come into question, you know what I mean? I don't even think about it. And then some days, you know, something really good or really bad happens and then it comes into question, like, “What's going on? Is this a greater plan or is it just random?”

Terrance believes that if he moves upward too fast, he'll risk coming to an incomplete truth, and as a result his “quest” is an intentionally slow and oftentimes haphazard search for truth and certainty. He described periods throughout his life where he would explore new philosophies, like Buddhism or agnosticism, or a month-long stint where he seriously considered joining the Mormon church. And he sees each of these branches in his journey as necessary detours to reaching his final conclusions. He said, “I'm not afraid of failure and taking new risks. And I think that's a big part of my spiritual experiences, it's just like diving in ... My path isn't set in stone.”

Many of my interviewees experienced a version of what Terrance is describing. Some, like Terrance, are still questing for answers, while others have largely ended their quest but describe it as a formative part of their nonreligious identity and a necessary step for everyone to take. For example, non-assembler and atheist Josh said that being in a “gray zone” of curiosity and uncertainty was an essential step for him and he joked that he had taken the easy way out by coming to atheism and ending that phase. He said,

So, yeah, that's an essential step. I spent several years of my life in that area, in what I want to say was a gray zone. I think that my having gotten to the point at which I claim to be an atheist is a result of all those years of curiosity and my inability to place a framework around it. So, and maybe that was an easy way out, saying, "Well, I'm an atheist because I don't want to spend the next 70 years of my life being agnostic. Like, I'm fine with this!" I don't know, I guess I've not gone to that level of self-reflection. But I think that's an absolutely essential area for people to explore.

While Terrance and Josh narrativize these "gray zones" as extended periods of actively "questing" for a more certain framework, and Terrance described how he continues to move between certainty and uncertainty frequently, Veronica is currently standing more in a zone of indifference. Veronica, a non-assembler who describes herself as "nothing in particular," explained that she never found a nonreligious label that fit because, as she puts it, "I'm really just nothing." She does not engage with any religious or nonreligious groups and she rarely thinks about her perspective on existential questions related to religion or the afterlife. She said that she is open to the possibility of anything, but when her friends tell her that makes her an agnostic, she disagrees. She said, "I find that most agnostics, or at least the ones I know, they are searching and I'm not really searching or hoping to find anything." Like atheism, agnosticism also comes with identity standards that nonreligious people define their identities in relation to. However, when I asked her if that meant she would always be "nothing," she expressed an openness to the possibility of becoming more actively engaged or certain, either religiously or nonreligiously, at some point in the future. She explained,

I'm definitely nothing right now, but I wouldn't say that I'm stuck there because I'm always looking at different possibilities of things ... You know, I just think until I stumble down the path of where I think I belong, I'm going to be in that box. And whether or not I come out of it is yet to be seen. It could be that I hear something that sparks an interest and I might

say, “This fits for me.” But I haven't found it yet. I feel like I'm kind of in this gray zone. There's all this stuff swirling around me, but nothing's really grabbing me.

However, not everyone is as comfortable as Terrance or Veronica living in the gray zone. Agnostic and non-assembler Corinne, for example, found it much more difficult to cope with her loss of religion and the uncertainty surrounding her agnosticism. Corinne was a devoted Catholic for much of her life, but the child abuse scandals that came to light in the 1990s shook Corinne's faith substantially. She felt she could not reconcile her beliefs about what Catholicism represented to her and the horrific actions of its leaders. So, over time, Corinne left Catholicism and had come to an uneasy agnosticism at the time of our interview. She explained,

I've labeled myself an agnostic because I think that represents, to me, my struggle. I would be really happy to know, but I think that's kind of the whole concept of faith is you have to make a leap of faith to believe. And I'm in the middle. I see clearly that it's a possibility, but I also see that it's also equally a possibility that it's not. But I just can't land in the middle. For me, I can't reconcile it. And it's just a constant struggle.

Similar to Terrance and Veronica, Corinne currently sees herself as being in a liminal space, but with the potential of moving out of that liminal space in the future. However, unlike Terrance and Veronica who have no clear end in mind, Corinne hopes that she will come out religious on the other side. She said, “I could go either way, but I really hope it goes more towards faith.” However, Corinne did not see herself as actively pursuing these questions until sometime in the distant future. While she was not comfortable in the gray zone, she was also not in a hurry to leave it. She said, “If I was to look down the path another five years, I can see myself devoting more time to really thinking about this more deeply and maybe not shuttling it to the side. Spending more time, concentrated

time, thinking about it, talking about it.”

These narratives start to reveal the ways that nonreligious individuals often move in and out of states of certainty and uncertainty regarding their nonreligious beliefs and identities (e.g. Wright 2010). Some have argued that people have relatively stable, trait-like orientations to certainty and uncertainty (e.g. Szeto and Sorrentino 2010), suggesting that people are either comfortable with uncertainty or they are not. I find that not only do people operate on a spectrum of orientations toward uncertainty, but that those orientations can and do change over time. And as people's orientations to certainty and uncertainty change, so too do the various negative and positive effects they experience as a result. While some nonreligious people feel certainty is on the horizon and expect they will come to a more stable and certain perspective after a temporal phase of uncertainty, for others, uncertainty was a way of life that they achieved after rejecting a more “bounded” approach to religion and/or nonreligion. And for others still, orientations to uncertainty and “ultimate truths” shifted on an almost day-to-day basis. I also find that whether or not certainty or uncertainty motivated nonreligious people’s actions was shaped by how salient their nonreligion was in their lives (e.g. Snow and McAdam 2000; Stryker and Serpe 1994). While certainty or uncertainty was central to and actively cultivated in some nonreligious narratives, the levels of certainty surrounding one’s nonreligious identity was less of a concern to others. In line with research finding that day-to-day contexts matter for if and how existential questions are engaged (see Kucinkas et al. 2017), these narratives highlight the often-fluid nature of certainty and uncertainty and the ways that many people narrate their lives as moving between meaningful states of both over time.

Uncertainty at the Sunday Assembly

While I have largely focused on individual deconversion narratives in this chapter in order to flesh out the meanings that nonreligious people attribute to uncertainty, the above analysis also highlights the ways that nonreligious identities like atheism and agnosticism, and the certainty or uncertainty that people attribute to them, are contested and politicized in the nonreligious field. As I explained in Chapter 1, organizations like the Sunday Assembly were constructed to be an alternative to the more certainty-filled identity politics that dominate the nonreligious field. The Sunday Assembly explicitly affirms more uncertain nonreligious orientations by encouraging its members to “wonder more,” be “radically inclusive,” and “become something more” than a rejection of religion. And while Sunday Assembly organizers promoted explicitly secular values and worldviews, they also strived to be less dogmatic and more accepting of “softer” forms of nonreligion.

However, as is evident in many of the narratives I described in this chapter, there was not one, universally shared understanding of how open Sunday Assembly was to uncertainty and whether or not that was a good thing. For example, Beth, who was more certainty-oriented, described how she was turned-off by how open Sunday Assembly was to less committed atheists than herself. In contrast, Kurt and Natalie, who were uncertainty-oriented, explained that they stopped participating in the Sunday Assembly because it was starting to draw too many strict boundaries. This was a tension that permeated the organization, and as I will describe in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, there were numerous debates on the international email forum, in local MSP organizing meetings, and at the conference I attended regarding how “radically inclusive” the

Sunday Assembly should really be. Some felt that it should be an organization devoted to promoting an explicitly atheistic worldview, while others felt that it should be more open to agnostic, spiritual, and even religious worldviews. While this was a tension that was present in almost all of the chapters of the Sunday Assembly, it resulted in an actual schism in the New York City chapter in which the more anti-religious, pro-atheist members broke off to start their own group called the Godless Revival.

In short, people's orientations toward certainty and uncertainty shaped their perceptions of and participation in nonreligious groups like the Sunday Assembly, which in turn shaped the boundaries that Sunday Assemblers drew around the kinds of people, practices, and politics that were included in their community. I did not find that people who joined the Sunday Assembly had distinct orientations to certainty or uncertainty. Some people who joined were searching for certainty and found it or not enough of it, others joined for its openness to uncertainty and its discourses of inclusivity and becoming, though some of these more uncertainty-oriented types found too much certainty at the Sunday Assembly and left. And while many of the non-assemblers I interviewed expressed an openness to uncertainty and attributed their lack of participation in groups like the Sunday Assembly to that uncertainty, this was not always the case, and some chose not to join nonreligious groups either because they were indifferent to their nonreligion or because they had already come to certain conclusions about their beliefs and moved on. Thus, in contrast to our dominant social scientific narratives that suggest that modern individuals are in a constant search for certainty and that they join identity- and belief-affirming groups in order to find it, I did not find that uncertainty always drove group membership. In fact, it often precluded it. And it was sometimes the already certain

who joined groups like the Sunday Assembly in order to affirm that certainty and encourage it in others.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I draw more heavily on my ethnographic data to flesh out these tensions in the nonreligious field and the unique ways that Sunday Assembly is trying to negotiate them. At the Sunday Assembly, nonreligious people are attempting to be “radically inclusive” while simultaneously maintaining a non-religious and non-theistic orientation as an organization, they are attempting to cultivate and ritualize a “scientific spirituality” that is devoid of supernatural rhetoric or beliefs, and they are attempting to selectively appropriate the institutional form of a Protestant church in ways that replicate their ritualized, emotionally engaged communality but eschew the hierarchy and dogma found in many Protestant religions. In other words, even though Sunday Assemblers often find meaning in uncertainty and the process of “becoming something more” than the rejection of religion, the meanings that nonreligious people are constructing are diverse and contested. This means that what it is the Sunday Assembly should “become” is still very much up for debate.

Chapter 4

Scientific Spirituality

The first workshop I attended at the Sunday Assembly Conference Called Wonder was titled “Secular Spirituality” and it was run by Sunday Assembly co-founder Sanderson Jones. It was by far the most well-attended workshop I attended over the weekend, and I had to squeeze through several tightly packed rows of chairs filled with other conference attendees in order to find a seat. The chairs were organized into five concentric circles, all facing Jones, who was standing in the center of the circle. Once a majority of us had settled in, Jones kicked off the workshop with a characteristically high-energy and humor-filled introduction to the idea of “secular spirituality” and what he was hoping to accomplish in the workshop. Jones started by defining the word “spiritual” as a Greek word that means “breath,” arguing that the root of the word is not inherently religious. He explained that despite secular people’s aversion to the word spiritual and the belief that feelings of awe, wonder, and transcendence could only be experienced by religious people, he was hoping that Sunday Assembly could work toward developing a language for and practices surrounding a “secular spirituality” that was devoid of any reference to the supernatural. He explained,

There must have been a moment where a caveman saw a waterfall for the first time that probably brought a sense of, “Whooooa. I’m not hungry, I’m not horny, what is this?” ... And I’ve found that the way people speak about how much they love god, I was like, that is how I feel about life! But not in a supernatural way, in a totally materialistic way. But I didn’t have the words to describe those feelings that I had. There is not language for how that can happen if you aren’t religious. I believe we need to reclaim this powerful, healing feeling, but do it in a way that everyone – no matter what their existential beliefs – can practice in the same room at the same time. It’s a very exporting experience and it would be a shame if

someone couldn't get into it because there was too much hot sauce on the vegetables ... Maybe we need spirituality without the word "spirituality".

The goal of the workshop, Jones explained, was to work as a group to start fleshing out what a secular spirituality might look like and to develop some practices that local Sunday Assembly chapters could use to elicit secular spiritual experiences at their assemblies. Jones believed that ritual practices and transcendent experiences were essential to the human experience, and he even attributed humanity's very survival to our impulse to seek out transcendent experiences. He said, "I think it's pretty clear that our ancestors survived because we have this reward system in our brains. When we do something that is bigger than ourselves, when we ditch our selflessness to be a part of something bigger." And he emphasized that this was not just an intellectual appreciation for science, either. While that was an important aspect of secular spirituality in Jones' mind, he was hoping to expand beyond the intellect to incorporate more emotionality and "feeling" into the ways Sunday Assembly talked about and practiced secular spirituality. He said, "Looking at science's butt as it walks by is not the only way to wonder. The operating word here is 'feeling'. So hopefully we can do some 'feeling' in here, but not of each other [eruption of laughter around the room]."

To accomplish these goals, our first task was to break into groups and talk about experiences we had in our lives that we might classify as spiritual and to come up with words we would use to describe those experiences. I turned to two people on my left who were already chatting and asked if I could be part of their discussion group. They turned out to be the founders of another atheist church called The Houston Oasis that had started around the same time as Sunday Assembly, but at the time only had two chapters – one in Houston and one in Kansas City. They had been invited to give a plenary talk about

their experience starting and maintaining an atheist church that was scheduled for later that day. Two others in our vicinity joined our group, and we began by talking about some potential alternate words to spirituality. One of the Houston Oasis founders mentioned “secular serendipity” and the ways that these kinds of experiences often happen by chance rather than intentionally. Others in the group mentioned “awe,” “wonder,” and “wow” to describe experiences they had in nature, at a concert, or thinking about existential questions. “Transcendence,” “focus,” and “consciousness” were also brought up as being central to experiences of secular spirituality. However, my group also talked a lot about how this was a difficult conversation because many of us were getting hung up on our notions about the relationship between religion and spirituality and our aversion to anything supernatural.

After about ten minutes of small-group discussion, Jones brought the room back together and we all reported back to the larger group. As we went around the room, Jones wrote our ideas on a giant sheet of white paper he had brought in. Some groups talked about secular spirituality in a strictly biological sense, mentioning things like oxytocin, hormones, and serotonin. Some groups emphasized “giving up” and “surrendering” to feelings that are out of your control, while others countered with understandings of spirituality as being about “grounding” and feeling “connected to the whole.” People also talked about words like “love,” “trust,” and “tolerance,” and the need for these things in order to have a truly meaningful spiritual experience. A few people even brought up collective effervescence and cited Durkheim explicitly. One assembler defined it this way, “It captures a sort of bubbling up. It sort of takes you over. It feels like it happens to you. Effervescence captures the fact that you can cultivate it but also that it kind of

happens to you.”

Once every group had reported back, Jones attempted to synthesize everything that was just discussed by pointing to the almost binary definitions that came out of the groups. Some focused on losing yourself, others focused on finding yourself. Some focused on grounding, others focused on transcending. Some focused on intentional cultivation, others focused on serendipity and chance. Some focused on individual experiences, others focused on communal experiences. However, Jones emphasized that these contradictions are what make these experiences meaningful. He said, “It’s clearly a hard one to pin down, it contains these contradictions. But in pinning it down to a specific thing, you lose its ineffable nature. The vagueness is useful.”

Picking up on the thread that secular spiritual experiences can be cultivated, Jones explained that the second major task for the workshop was to try to come up with and test out some rituals that might help elicit the feelings of wonder, connectedness, and transcendence that were just discussed. An older male participant who identified himself as a former Mormon suggested that we try a sort of “secular testimony” in which people who felt compelled could share something with the group. Jones liked this idea and suggested we all hum at a low volume while we waited for individuals to speak out to provide more “charge” to ritual. We all started humming, and a few people giggled. After about 30 seconds, a man stood up and said that participating in the Sunday Assembly was the first time he had “felt at home.” After about 10 more seconds of humming another male participant stood up and said that the idea of secularism did not even exist 200 years ago, so the thing that excited him most about Sunday Assembly was the “pioneer spirit” of it all. A few more people “testified,” and then Jones stopped the humming and

suggested that we try a different practice. He asked us all to stand up, clap our hands in unison, and intentionally look at other people in the eye. He said, “Research shows that by looking at people in the eye, we can trick ourselves into releasing oxytocin.” So, we all stood up and started clapping, but most of us found it difficult to look each other in the eyes for any extending period of time without laughing. We all clapped for about a minute before the activity devolved into sporadic, asynchronous clapping and people started to give up and sit down.

To wrap up the workshop, Jones asked that we do some collective reflection on what worked and what did not work with the rituals we had just attempted. Many people expressed that they enjoyed the rituals, but some expressed a feeling of discomfort or confusion. One of the participants from my group said, “I was just really uncomfortable. This stuff has to be organic. Sure, we can set the stage in our lives to have these experiences, but this just felt so gimmicky and contrived.” Another participant, who identified themselves as an organizer of a local Sunday Assembly in the U.S., said she agreed, but that it was all about striking a balance. She said, “Those of us that are community builders, we try to set up the chemistry so that the thing can emerge and bubble up. We’re going to struggle with the language, and there has to be a lot of trust before I want to get swept up like that, but I think it’s important that we try.”

Manufacturing Ascent

The discussions and practices I encountered at the Secular Spirituality workshop illustrate the complex and contested meanings that the nonreligious attribute to what they call “secular spiritual” experiences and the ways that Sunday Assemblers are trying to cultivate those experiences in their services. In contrast to the dominant understanding of

nonreligious worldviews as being meaningless and incapable of producing transcendent experiences or collective effervescence, the above vignette shows that atheists and other nonreligious people are actively constructing a new language and practice for spirituality that borrows from religious forms but maintains a commitment to scientific explanations for these experiences. In other words, science and spirituality are not necessarily at odds in modernity. This is in line with the literature I outlined in Chapter 2 that has found a growing cultural discourse in which modern individuals are combining commitments to both rationality and spirituality. Researchers have given this discourse and its related practices various names, including “reflexive spirituality” (Besecke 2001; Wuthnow 1998a), “spiritual atheism” (Ecklund and Long 2011), “evidence-based spirituality” (Eaton 2015), and “extra-theistic spirituality” (Ammerman 2013), but they all center around the idea that religion no longer has a monopoly on spirituality and that many nonreligious people, including atheists, are using the language of spirituality to describe their this-worldly experiences of awe, transcendence, and greater meaning.

In this chapter, I build from this literature to investigate how this increasingly common cultural discourse is negotiated in nonreligious spaces like the Sunday Assembly. As the Secular Spirituality workshop vignette begins to reveal, there are explicit attempts to construct a secular spirituality at the Sunday Assembly that draws heavily on a shared faith in scientific research about the benefits of spiritual experiences and the ability to elicit them from a secular perspective. I call this “scientific spirituality” as a way to highlight the explicit use of scientific research and methods that I found in the discourses of secular spirituality being cultivated among the nonreligious people I encountered in my fieldwork. Drawing on their scientific understandings of things like

neuroscience, psychology, and physiology, I find that many assemblers and non-assemblers talked about how they could consciously cultivate secular spiritual experiences, either on their own or in a social environment. And I will show how a “trial-and-error” approach to ritual development at the Sunday Assembly runs counter to our dominant sociological theories of ritual that characterize ritual failure as always negative and detrimental to transcendent experiences and collective cohesion. However, I also found a resistance to these more intentional and “manufactured” attempts at secular spirituality, as was evident in the Secular Spirituality workshop. Some nonreligious people are seeking out more organic and “serendipitous” spiritual experiences that are just as scientifically explainable, but that rely less on structured rituals and research into how to bring those experiences about intentionally. In this chapter, I detail these competing approaches to secular spirituality and show how Sunday Assemblers have to negotiate both approaches in their attempts to cultivate secular spiritual experiences in their services.

The Science of Spirituality

While most of the nonreligious people I interviewed expressed some form of belief that there were scientific explanations for their spiritual experiences, non-assembler and freethinker Forrest is a good example of someone who has put a lot of thought into the science behind his spirituality. As a teenager, Forrest, a white male now in his mid-20s, became interested in Native American culture and the spiritual experiences some Native Americans induce by ingesting the hallucinogenic plant ayahuasca. After trying ayahuasca and other psychedelic drugs, like mushrooms and

DMT, and having intense spiritual experiences, Forrest became increasingly interested in “figuring out what the truth is” behind his experiences. He explained,

So, I did a lot of meditation, psychedelic experiences, like ayahuasca and DMT – very extreme measures to figure out what spirituality means to me. And I think those experiences were probably the biggest wake up for me that while there are all these religious aspects to life, I never believed in any of the religious constructs, but there is an underlying fact that there is something about consciousness that's different. There's unexplored fields and I more look at it from like a scientific aspect – everything that you can state in religion or spirituality can be broken down in science. And it was from that point that I really started looking at it more as like a science of consciousness rather than a spiritual aspect. Studying, like, vibration and how things work through the universe.

Forrest went on to explain that once he realized he could scientifically explain his spiritual experiences, he soon figured out how to use that science to actively cultivate those experiences without the use of drugs. He said that drugs were just a “cheat code” that you could use for a “quick fix,” and he started to find ways to cultivate similar spiritual experiences from a sober state of mind. He began learning the techniques for “deep meditation” taught in Buddhism, as well as paying hundreds of dollars for access to a sensory deprivation tank where he could practice cultivating what he casually referred to as “OBEs,” which I learned meant “out-of-body experiences.” In these tanks, people are brought into a dark room, equipped with oxygen, and immersed into a pool of saltwater that enables flotation. The lack of sight and sound, combined with the feeling of weightlessness provided by the saltwater, is said to induce deep meditative states. Forrest said that he approaches these kinds of practices with an attitude of exploration, saying, “Let's see how much further we can go with this. What's the closest thing that I can bring myself too? How can I do that safely and respectfully to try to understand?”

Forrest is in many ways a more extreme example of the scientific spirituality that I found in my fieldwork, and most of the nonreligious people I talked to were not taking psychedelic drugs regularly or paying for sensory deprivation tanks, but the idea that one could use science rather than religion to explain and create spiritual experiences was a widely shared discourse among my participants. Clark, a non-assembler who identified as “nothing in particular,” also talked about having out-of-body experiences that he tried to re-create through ritual practices. He said, “I do believe in out-of-body experiences because I’ve had them. Multiple times. But I’ve had them during basketball. I’ll reach a certain level where I’m watching myself play. And I’m like, how am I doing this? What’s going on? Things are slowing down. It’s different than the normal world.” And Clark has recently begun meditating in an attempt to have these out-of-body experiences off the basketball court. He said, “I’ve been trying with meditation. Because I heard it can be done. I read that Buddhists, they hum, and it releases a toxin from their nose to their brain. And I’ve tried it, but so far it hasn’t worked.” Like Forrest, Clark understands his out-of-body experiences as being attributable to chemical reactions or “toxins” rather than some supernatural force, and he believes he can actively induce those chemical reactions with the right practices.

In contrast to Forrest and Clark, who were actively seeking out ritualistic practices to intentionally cultivate spiritual experiences, atheist and assembler Delilah explained that she no longer needed ritualistic practices to have those experiences. Her very biological understanding of spirituality allowed her to recognize when those states were induced even during her everyday activities, and she came to appreciate those experiences more than the structured ritualistic ones. She said,

I used to try to be more intentional about it. I paid for tai chi instructors. I tried to do as much meditating as possible after having read about several different types of processes and elevated spirituality and so on and so forth. But I was trying to pursue it from a godless perspective. And I found great benefits in all those things. However, they weren't benefits that were any more powerful than the feelings I got just doing my daily routines like going on a walk or mowing the lawn. I got the same high and it felt like the same physiological response. I could tell when the oxygen in my blood was increasing because I was feeling elation, I could tell when my neurotransmitters were firing at a higher rate. And if I were comparing meditation to a long walk in a forest, I felt as though I received the same relaxation and emotional clarity, and I actually prefer the walk. So yes, I was certainly seeking out those ritual practices for a while, but in those adventures, I ultimately came back to, well, I have the capacity to do this myself. And for me, that doesn't require any specific activity.

Delilah went through a phase similar to the one Forrest described, a phase of searching for practices that have been scientifically proven to help people cultivate secular spiritual experiences. However, Delilah ultimately found that her scientific understandings of the physiology behind these experiences allowed her to be aware of them outside of more heightened and structured ritual experiences. In all three of the narratives I've described, however, there is an explicit attempt to draw on scientific research and methods to cultivate secular spiritual experiences, and I found that this discourse of "scientific spirituality" heavily influenced the ritual practices that Sunday Assemblers are attempting to cultivate in their services.

Constructing Rituals and Spirituality at the Sunday Assembly

As was evident in the opening vignette about the Secular Spirituality workshop I attended, Sunday Assemblers are actively drawing on scientific research and methods to create rituals and secular spiritual experiences in their services. Many of the assemblers at the workshop, and in particular Sunday Assembly co-founder Sanderson Jones, used scientific language to describe experiences they had deemed spiritual, and they looked to

science as a means of re-creating those experiences through ritual practices. For example, Jones pointed to scientific research that suggests looking at other people in the eyes will release oxytocin, a chemical that will enable a greater sense of elation and connectedness. And this was the basis for his suggestion that we all try out a ritual in which we look each other in the eye and clap synchronously. This workshop later spawned what was called a “Ritual Lab” in the New York City chapter. In a Sunday Assembly Everywhere email thread devoted to talking about secular rituals, New York assembler Clive wrote, “After that workshop, we started holding a small group called Ritual Lab where about eight of us meet to experiment with rational ritual. We've tried some things that work in a small, intimate group, and we're thinking about what we could do that would scale up.” This idea that a ritual, something assumed to be irrational and religious, could be created in a lab, a space imbued with rationality and science, is a perfect example of how the nonreligious often combine religious and scientific language to create what I’m calling a “scientific spirituality.”

The science behind clapping synchronously as a means of cultivating secular spirituality and community, as well as other collective ritual activities like communal singing or dancing, was a common topic of conversation among Sunday Assemblers. One of the key components of a Sunday Assembly service is the pop song sing-alongs, which were intentionally included because scientific research has shown collective singing to be effective at producing heightened emotions and bonding people into communities. For example, assembler Judy cited a book she had read by religious studies scholar Jonathan Friedmann about Durkheimian approaches to synagogue songs to provide further

evidence to the Sunday Assembly Everywhere email forum that collective singing was proven to be scientifically beneficial. She wrote,

Apart from having a musical function, collective singing has, undoubtedly, a social function. Humans are essentially social animals; music is essentially a social activity. The very structure and nature of the communal singing activity makes it a social phenomenon. Songs trigger all manner of emotional reactions, unleashing all the stresses and strains of the week, letting you lose yourself in the “collective effervescence” that Durkheim said was such a key part of religion.

Assemblers also drew on social scientific research to determine the ideal size for individual chapters, as many were concerned that chapters that were too small or too big would fail to produce effective rituals and communal experiences. When talking with MSP assembler Jeff about his ideal size for the MSP chapter, he cited social psychological research to pinpoint the exact number of people needed for creating collective effervescence and communal bonds. He cited researchers by name without my prompting, saying, “Various numbers have been put forth about the feasible size of communities for maintaining emotional connections. Robin Dunbar put it around 150, Bernard and Killworth say it’s somewhere between 230 and 290.”

Like Judy, many Sunday Assemblers believed that collective singing, and ritual more generally, were “universal human experiences” and that the desire to ritualize things was a “natural” human impulse. MSP assembler and atheist Eric made a similar point when he told me, “I think there is a very good reason why rituals have appeared and endured throughout human history. Spirituality aside, I think what most rituals get at is an attempt to describe the enormity of the human experience and what it means to be alive.” And similar to the discussions around collective singing, there were discussions about the potential of more collective dancing at the services. For example, an assembler named

Tim from the Atlanta chapter explained how he had been exploring different types of dance rituals to include in the Atlanta assemblies. After attending an “ecstatic dance” event, he pitched the idea of doing something similar at Sunday Assembly to the email forum. He wrote,

Has anyone tried out dancing at Sunday Assembly events? I’ve been exploring various ritual-y stuff, exploring things we might be able to incorporate. The other day I went to an ecstatic dance, which is essentially just a bunch of people gathering to listen to great music and letting their bodies move however feels right in the moment. It starts off slow, then gets really intense and upbeat, and then becomes more tranquil again. Types of dance are many and varied, but dance of some form is a human universal, and it seems like we may want to explore it in some fashion.

While there were numerous debates and disagreements about the types and amount of ritualized activities that Sunday Assembly should incorporate, debates I will describe in more detail later in this chapter, there was a widely shared belief among assemblers that ritual practices were beneficial for both individual and collective well-being. And one of the things Sunday Assembly is known for is its explicit attempt to borrow explicitly from religious rituals, a move that they justify by citing scientific evidence regarding the effectiveness of the congregational model and the rituals surrounding it. In my interview with agnostic and MSP assembler Amanda, she told me, “I think patterning the assembly off of this church service framework makes sense because there's a reason that framework exists. I mean, it likely would not have persisted as a formula for thousands of years if it didn't work on some level.” MSP assembler and atheist Eric said something similar in a comment he made at an MSP chapter organizing meeting. He said, “Religion is a very human creation. So why not take from the best parts of religion? The things that actually work that are making us better people and just ditch

the rest, ditch what doesn't work, ditch what has been hurting us.” For assemblers like Eric and Amanda, religion offers useful “formulas” that can be used to effectively create nonreligious rituals and communities.

In addition to collective singing and Sunday services, another example of religious ritual that Sunday Assemblers are attempting to replicate is the religious liturgical calendar. The idea for what came to be called “Secular Seasons” started at the Portland, Oregon chapter. As is illustrated in Figure 1, the idea was to map the Sunday Assembly motto of “Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More” onto the calendrical year. A Portland assembler hand-drew a version of Figure 1 for the email forum and explained,

We are working on an idea we are calling Secular Seasons. In the drawing, you can see how this pattern naturally creates the Sunday Assembly pyramid symbol. To add cultural depth, we can use this pattern to create “seasons,” much like liturgy does for churches. We can have a season of Live Better, a season of Help Often, and a season of Wonder More. During each season, all three tenants are still celebrated, but the current season receives special emphasis. And then at the end of each season, we will have a bigger-than-usual assembly to celebrate and transition into the next season.

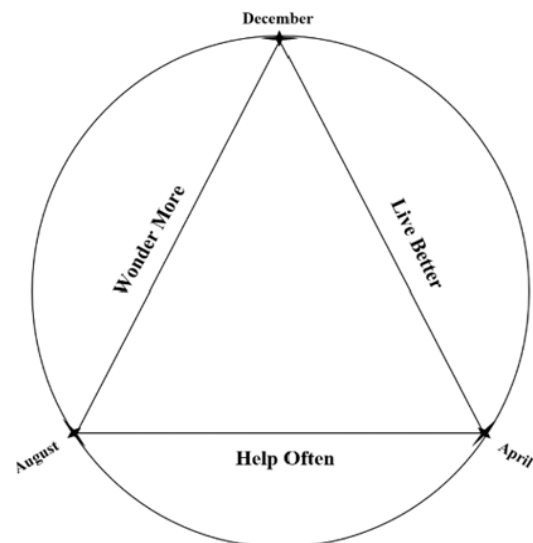


Figure 1 Secular Seasons Diagram

There was a lot of positive response to this idea, and assemblers responded to the email with ways to flesh out the idea more. A U.K. assembler said that these seasons naturally map onto the actual calendrical cycle – the season of Help Often occurs in the

summer when it is easier to get out and volunteer, the season of Wonder More aligns with the transition into fall and winter, which coincides with the start of school and more time for reflection, and the season of Live Better aligns with a time when people are making New Year's resolutions to improve their lives. Others chimed in to say that the liturgical calendar was a great idea because "... it helps people stay in touch with higher concepts we often forget about in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. But with Secular Seasons, we can celebrate the seasons without religion."

Taken together, by drawing on both religious forms and scientific research, Sunday Assemblers are attempting to cultivate secular rituals and spirituality in their services. Importantly, many assemblers believe that it is not only possible to successfully replicate religious rituals in secular ways, but that doing so results in a *more* meaningful spiritual experience. For many nonreligious people, a secular spirituality rooted in rationalism and science is more authentic and more conducive to experiences of awe and wonder than religious spirituality. MSP assembler and former Christian, Greg, explains,

I think god was necessary in some ways to codify, in sort of the pre-scientific world, to make sense of reality. But now we have much better things. We have science and rationality to explain reality. In some ways, those answers are so much more amazing and fill me with so much more wonder than the Christian explanations ever did. And, you know, I also get accused of, "Well, you've just replaced religion with science." Well, no I haven't. We have this tool by which to test our beliefs, by which to gather evidence and find what is probably the answer. That answer might get thrown out later as we get new evidence, as we gather new facts. But that's okay, that's what we do.

Trial-and-Error: The Meaning of Ritual Failure

This chapter's practice-oriented analysis of ritual creation at the Sunday Assembly disrupts long-standing assumptions about both the loss of ritual in modernity

and, as I will show in this section, the presumed outcomes of ritual failure. As I described in Chapter 1, there are pervasive narratives in social science that theorize ritual as receding in modernity because it is irrational and because the taken-for-granted nature of ritualized activities makes it difficult to create new rituals from scratch (Habermas 1985; Giddens 1991). Bell (1997) explains, “Until very recently, most people’s commonsense notion of ritual meant that someone could not simply dream up a rite that would work the way traditional ritual has worked ... the invisibility of ritual’s origins and its inventors is what ritual is all about” (223). In contrast, in this chapter I’ve shown how nonreligious people have commitments to both rationality and ritual, and they are attempting to create new “rational rituals” with an explicit awareness of their constructed nature. These are important findings in and of themselves, and they are in line with other practice-oriented analyses that point to the continued importance of ritual in modern, secular contexts (Bell 1997; Cheal 1992; Collins 2004; Driver 1991; Johnston 2017; Lynch 2012).

However, the scientific spirituality I found in my fieldwork also reveals what I call a “trial-and-error” approach to ritual creation that runs counter to our dominant sociological understandings of how rituals work and what happens when they fail. For example, in his highly influential theory of interactional ritual chains, Randall Collins (2004) draws on Durkheim to argue that a successful ritual “makes the individual participant feel strong, confident, full of impulses to take the initiative,” while a failed ritual “lowers the confidence and initiative of participants – it lowers their emotional energy” (xii). Failed rituals are also argued to hinder the creation of communal bonds, whereas successful rituals strengthen them (e.g. Durkheim 1912). And Collins (2004) argues that individuals are naturally drawn to successful rituals that increase their

emotional energy and they naturally avoid “weak” or failed rituals because they drain emotional energy. He characterizes a failed ritual this way,

There is a low level of collective effervescence, the lack of momentary buzz, no shared entrainment at all or disappointingly little ... little or no feeling of group solidarity; no sense of one’s identity as affirmed or changed; no respect for the group’s symbols; no heightened emotional energy – either a flat feeling unaffected by the ritual, or worse yet, a sense of drag, the feeling of boredom and constraint, even depression, interaction fatigue, a desire to escape ... the political crowd that mills around aimlessly, its members’ attention distracted to things happening outside the person making the speech or away from the enemy symbol to be confronted – individuals and little subgroups drifting away until those who are left are caught up in a deflationary emotion like rats leaving a sinking ship; the party remains mired in little knots of perfunctory conversations and never builds up a collective effervescence (51-52).

While I am sure most everyone has experienced a failed ritual like the one Collins (2004) describes, and failed rituals can certainly turn someone off of seeking out similar rituals in the future, I found a very different understanding of ritual failure among the nonreligious people in my study. Rather than avoiding ritual failure “like rats leaving a sinking ship,” nonreligious people often *expect* ritual failure and attribute it to their “trial-and-error” approach to ritual creation. Based in their scientific understanding of how certain kinds of rituals can induce spiritual experiences, the nonreligious people in my study often approached ritual creation like they would approach a research study. Grounded in an extensive review of the literature, and through trial-and-error, they have faith that the scientific method will guide them toward a successful set of ritual practices. We’ve already seen examples of this in this chapter, with non-assemblers like Clark trying but failing multiple times to produce the needed toxins in his brain to induce an out-of-body experience, or the largely failed attempts at the Secular Spirituality workshop to create effective rituals on the spot. In both of these cases, ritual failure did not result in

the rejection of these rituals or a sense of drained emotional energy. Instead, failure was expected, and the idea was to keep working at a ritual and continuously fine-tune it until it produced the desired outcome. Importantly, these fine-tuned rituals were not seen as any less meaningful, and they were often seen as being *more* meaningful because of the work that went into their production.

A great example of this trial-and-error approach comes out of my fieldnotes from the first official Minneapolis/St. Paul assembly and the discussions that organizers had before and after. I started observing the MSP chapter about three months before they held their first Sunday service in June 2014, so I attended a number of planning meetings and dry runs during the lead up to their first assembly. When the MSP chapter was founded, there were about 10 people involved, many of whom remained part of the organizing team for multiple years. From March to June of 2014, much of the work they did was spread the word about the MSP Sunday Assembly and prepare for their first Sunday service. The model for what that service should look like was handed down from the founding chapter in London, and MSP organizers worked through how to replicate all of the elements required, including finding a space to meet, getting a main speaker, getting people to do a short reading and a “One Thing I Know” anecdote, and putting together a band to facilitate the singing portions of the service. At one of the first planning meetings, the MSP organizers joined in on a webinar being hosted by the London chapter that was focused on how to have a successful first assembly. The London chapter suggested starting off with a small venue and not filling it with chairs. This would create an “illusion of fullness” and help produce an “excited community feeling,” even if attendance was low to start. They also emphasized multiple times that collective singing

was meant to be the glue that held the assembly together. Co-founder Jones, who was leading the webinar, said, “Singing is what makes this thing successful. When people get together to sing in groups, they always leave happy.”

After a few more planning meetings and an ice cream social to help get the word out, the MSP chapter decided they were ready to have a “soft launch” and see how things went. They had been offered a free space to hold their services in the basement of a Unitarian church, and they had put together a band that consisted of a pianist, a guitarist, and two vocalists. About two weeks before the soft launch, the organizers held a rehearsal to work out any kinks and make sure they had everything they needed in the space. When I arrived at the rehearsal to observe and help if needed, the band was getting ready to start practicing. However, they were struggling to get the song lyrics projected onto the wall due to technical issues. I sat down and talked to organizer Amanda about how she was feeling going into the first assembly. She told me that she and the other organizers were nervous and feeling under-prepared, but that it would all come together eventually. She said, “Well, we’re just getting started, and we don’t really know what we’re doing. But I think after a few trial runs we will come to something that works and we can be less anxious and just enjoy it.”

As I was talking to Amanda, one of the vocalists from the band asked if I would be willing to advance the slides with the song lyrics on them as the band practiced and to point out any errors on the slides if I saw them. I agreed and moved over to the center of the room where I could see the slides. The songs that the band were practicing included “Where Everybody Knows Your Name” (the theme song from *Cheers*), “Times Like These” by the Foo Fighters, and “I Just Want to be Okay” by Ingrid Michaelson. As they

started to play, one of the vocalists was clearly struggling to stay on time and in tune, and the band had to pause on multiple occasions because the vocalist kept stopping to apologize and explain that she was really nervous. As I progressed through the slides, I found multiple errors, including numerous typos and entire stanzas of songs missing. As the band practiced, an MSP organizer named Joseph was arguing with a member of the Unitarian church about the lack of sound equipment being made available. During one of the band's many pauses, another MSP organizer announced loudly, "Remember guys, this is a *soft* launch," to which no one responded. And while they were hoping to rehearse every aspect of the service other than the main speaker, the organizers slotted to do the short reading and the "One Thing I Know" anecdote did not show up to the rehearsal. As the band finished the final song and the organizers prepared to wrap up the rehearsal, the MSP organizers were noticeably irritated and tired, but continued to express excitement for the real thing and confidence that it would all come together eventually.

The soft launch itself was a mixture of failures and successes. About 35 people, including the organizing team, were in attendance and the order of services progressed smoothly for the most part. They kicked off the service with the theme song from *Cheers*, which elicited a collective chuckle from the attendees. However, while the band had hoped that everyone would sing along and even stand or dance, everyone stayed sitting and very few people sang. The vocalist who had struggled at rehearsal was still noticeably shaky but had definitely improved, and after the first song she asked everyone to stand up and sing along for the second song. We all stood up in silence and the band began playing the Ingrid Michelson song. A handful of people sang along, but many people did not know the lyrics and were struggling to keep up with the fast pace of the

slide progression. Someone tried to start clapping but was the only one who did, so they quickly stopped. Next up were the reading and the guest speaker, which went smoothly, and then the band sang the Foo Fighters song, which more people seemed to know and sing along to. This was followed by the “One Thing I Do Know” anecdote in which an organizer told a story about how he had been trying to build atheist community for a long time, and he had come to realize that it takes more than intellect to do it. The most successful part of the service was the “Meet Your Neighbor” activity near the end. It was a version of the game Rock, Paper, Scissors where everyone challenges someone in the room to a game and then the loser has to follow the winner around rooting for them until everyone in the room is rooting for one of two finalists. This game went over really well, and by the end of it everyone in the room was on their feet and shouting the names of the two finalists. I could feel the mood in the room shift and the organizers looked visibly relieved that some sort of collective effervescence had been produced. After the service, numerous people stuck around to get to know each other over coffee and donuts.

A few days after the soft launch, the organizing team got together to debrief and start planning for a July service. Overall, the organizers agreed that it could have gone better, but there were some good moments, like the Rock, Paper, Scissors game, that proved they were working towards success. Organizer Jeff said,

We’re learning. I believe in the failing forward concept. Failure is not a bad thing, it’s actually a good thing that can teach us lessons and we can grow from them. Sometimes we’re so afraid to get out there and try something and get involved because we might fail. But then you spend your whole life going nowhere and asking what if.

The other organizers agreed and even said that the “authenticity” of what they were doing made it all the more enriching. An organizer named Joseph said, “The genuineness and

vulnerability of the speakers and the songs is an awesome element that I don't think people get everywhere. If it's too polished, it's just a show and there is no sense of connection." The organizers talked through ways to improve upon this first attempt, including adding in another "Meet Your Neighbor" activity near the beginning of the service since it was the most successful aspect. They also talked about how they learned they have to ask people to stand up for the songs and negotiated whether that felt too much like a church service or not. They decided it would more easily produce the kinds of feelings they were trying to create if everyone was standing and more involved in the singing. They also agreed that some songs worked better than others, and that they should be open to adapting the model handed down from London as needed. One of the organizers said, "Structure is nice, and people should know what to expect. But unlike a church, if there is part of the program that's not working, or that people don't like, we can get rid of it. The idea is to experiment and see how things go."

This scientific discourse of community and ritual creation as a "trial-and-error" process or as "an experiment" was common throughout the organization. For example, in the Sunday Assembly Everywhere email forum, many organizers wrote in to discuss problems they were having with the singing portion of the service. Similar to the MSP chapter, most chapters were working with amateur musicians and their attendees were hesitant to sing along. In response, an organizer from Boston attempted to reassure everyone that failure was part of the process, and that collective effervescence was sure to come with practice. He wrote,

Let's observe that Sunday Assembly is a new form of social institution. Let's observe that we're not yet done shaking out our practices and traditions. Indeed, we're in the early stages of that process of evolution. Observing these facts, let's suppose that once things have evolved a bit

more, our Assembly organizers will have an easier time of plugging Assembly-goers into that highly desirable, utterly renewable, participation-generated form of electrical energy that Durkheim termed “collective effervescence.” If one chapter is having trouble getting songs sung along with, keep at it! We'll figure it out. If we're made to feel uncomfortable with the failure of any particular song, or method of displaying lyrics, that's something we should listen to. But let's conclude that we're still in the shake-down stage, rather than thinking there's something wrong with our commitment to song across the movement. If I were to explain in detail how uncomfortable group song in Boston has made me feel, whew, this long email would be a hell of a lot longer. But I'm going to keep on going out of my comfort zone, to help the other organizers find songs that work, and to build an atmosphere that is effervescent. To put it short, we're smart people with science on our side. We'll figure out how to make it work.

Taken together, there was a dominant discourse among both Sunday Assemblers and non-assemblers that secular spiritual experiences could be intentionally cultivated with the help of science, and that doing this successfully required practice. Whether it be individual rituals like meditation or collective rituals like group singing, nonreligious people are drawing on their commitments to rationality and the scientific method to recreate religious rituals in order to produce experiences of transcendence, wonder, and collective effervescence in secular settings. And rather than avoiding ritual failure, as much of the sociological literature on rituals predicts, nonreligious people often approach ritual creation with a “trial-and-error” mentality that expects and plans for failure but has faith that success will come if the right “formula” is followed. However, as was evident in this chapter’s opening vignette, I also encountered resistance to this dominant discourse. As I describe below, some nonreligious people are seeking out more “organic” experiences of spirituality and are turned off by rituals that they see as being too structured or intentional. And Sunday Assemblers had to negotiate these conflicting

approaches to secular spirituality in their attempt to attract a wide range of nonreligious participants.

Experiences *Before* Explanations

I feel like every time I've had a spiritual experience it's just been an out of the blue, like, not something I was seeking out but something that I happened upon, which makes it even more...I don't know, when I think about things like that, I don't want it to be manufactured or tried for. I want it to happen organically and because it just was.

Isabelle, atheist, non-assembler

In contrast to the intentional cultivation of spiritual experiences that I have described so far in this chapter, I encountered numerous nonreligious people like Isabelle, quoted above, who sought out more organic and less “manufactured” experiences of secular spirituality or transcendence. Whether it be happening upon a beautiful sunset or getting caught up in a song unexpectedly, many nonreligious people described “serendipitous” and unpredictable events as being more conducive to spiritual experiences than manufactured rituals. Similar to Isabelle, agnostic and non-assembler Mary told me, “I think trying to have those experiences on purpose sounds a little weird to me. I like it to happen naturally, rather than forcing something.” Importantly, however, the majority of nonreligious people I talked to in this camp still believed that their spiritual experiences could be explained with science, they were just less interested in actively seeking out those explanations. A great example is atheist and non-assembler Josh who talked a lot about his interests in both poetry and astrophysics and how he believes that his academic training in both allows him to have spiritual experiences without necessarily trying to explain them. He explained,

I sort of bounce back and forth between poetry and astrophysics. I'm very well-trained over here [poetry], this is more of an exploration [astrophysics]. Now, I was a math minor as an undergraduate, but I never went to the graduate level. I think I have the benefit of not being fully trained to the doctorate level over here [physics], and I think that gives me the opportunity to sort of take the very scientifically rooted items there and sort of allow them to swing over here [poetry]. Now were I well-educated enough over here [physics], I think I would at least potentially provide a scientific explanation for my spiritual experiences, but right now my explanation is probably a bit more poetic. And I think right now it's more essential for me to be able to experience it before I try to explain it.

For Josh, who was a committed atheist and believed in nothing supernatural, the knowledge that his experiences *could* be scientifically explained helped him stay committed to his rationalist worldview, but that grounding allowed him to let go of trying to rationalize every aspect of his spiritual experiences. By allowing for a more “poetic” understanding of his experiences, Josh felt that his spirituality was more enriching than a strictly manufactured spirituality that relies too heavily on the science side of things. Atheist and assembler Sarah had a similar perspective. She said, “Sometimes I don’t seek out scientific answers I know are there because I like that sense of the unknown. It can kind of make you feel, I don’t know, like there’s something more to life or something.” This is in line with my findings from Chapter 3 regarding the meaning that nonreligious people often ascribe to uncertainty. Rather than seeking out certainty-filled scientific explanations for their spiritual experiences, some nonreligious people find meaning in the unknown and want to experience something spiritual *before* they try to explain it.

Not only did many of the nonreligious people in my study seek out organic experiences of spirituality over manufactured ones, many found solitary rituals more meaningful than communal rituals. These types of nonreligious people were often non-assemblers, but not always, and I found a fairly common discourse in my interviews

regarding the different kinds of spirituality offered by communal rituals versus solitary rituals. Agnostic and non-assembler Dustin is a good example of someone who prefers solitary rituals over communal rituals, and he in fact avoids communal rituals because they make him uncomfortable. He said,

To feel spiritual, I have to be alone. It's usually out in nature for me. Going on long hikes, swimming out on lakes. I guess certain drugs, occasionally. Taking mushrooms by myself out in the wilderness is always a spiritual experience. I don't need the drugs to do it, that just intensifies the feeling. But I can't get into these states of mind if other people are around. I get too self-conscious and concerned about how they are feeling. So, for me, spirituality is very personal.

Atheist and non-assembler Janelle had a similar outlook. While she did intentionally seek out secular spiritual experiences, though for Janelle they had more to do with music than nature, she explained how she could only have a spiritual experience if she was alone. She said, "I can't get there with other people. It takes me out of the experience because then I'm thinking about them and their experience and what they're thinking rather than on my own experience."

Others described how they could feel spiritual either by themselves or in groups, but that those experiences were distinct, and they often preferred the spirituality they cultivated by themselves. Isabelle, introduced at the beginning of the section, explained that she saw solitary rituals as "grounding" and collective rituals as "transcending." Her solitary ritual of meditating and burning incense every night before she goes to bed helps ground her but participating in collective rituals like a good concert were more transcendent experiences. Importantly, however, Isabelle believed that you could only cultivate a grounding experience, not a transcendent experience. She said, "I can intentionally ground myself, but transcendence has to come organically." Agnostic and

assembler Katie also made a distinction between solitary and group rituals and the type of spirituality they induced in her. She said,

I feel like nature, for me, the transcendence is closeness and a feeling of awe about the world, but it's something I want to do by myself. I don't want to go with other people. However, when I go to concerts, I always want to go with at least a couple of people to feel that sense of connectedness. And we all hang out before and after, so then everyone's like really close and talking about everything.

These distinctions that nonreligious people are making between solitary and communal rituals, and the fact that many find solitary rituals as meaningful or *more* meaningful than communal rituals, runs counter to our dominant sociological theories of ritual practice. In much of the research on ritual in sociology, ritual is defined as an inherently communal activity, particularly among Durkheimians and symbolic interactions (see Reynolds and Erikson 2017). For example, going back to Collins's (2004) theory of ritual, he draws on Durkheim and Goffman to define ritual as “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (7). Collins argues that effective rituals can only happen in groups, and that even when individuals might ritualize something on their own, they do so because of the “real” emotional charge they got in a previous group encounter. He says, “Yes, human individuals also sometimes act when they are alone, although they generally do so because their minds and bodies are charged with results of past situational encounters, and their solitary action is social insofar as it aims at and comes from communicating with other persons ... The sociology of ritual is thus a sociology of gatherings” (6, 34).

However, Reynolds and Erikson (2017) explain that while sociologists typically define ritual as a collective activity, research in psychology offers avenues for understanding the ways that people find meaning in solitary rituals. They define rituals as “activities composed of ordered sequences of acts or utterances that carry, encode, or generate meaningful experience for participants” (2). And they argue that individuals can produce “feelings of agency and expressions of identity” in routinized parts of their solitary lives, which means that ritual significance can also emerge at the level of individual experience (see also Seligman et al. 2008). The findings I detail in this chapter are in line with this more nuanced understanding of how rituals work and they highlight some of the ways that nonreligious individuals think about and practice solitary rituals in order to experience feelings of awe, transcendence, and connectedness.

Relatedly, many nonreligious people I encountered were averse to rituals of any kind. In contrast to dominant sociological understandings of ritual as being a “natural” human impulse (Collins 2004, Driver 1991; Durkheim 1912; Quack 2010), some nonreligious people are not naturally drawn to ritual activities or transcendent experiences. As I detailed earlier in this chapter, there was a dominant discourse among Sunday Assemblers that ritual and transcendence were universal human experiences that both religious and secular people could access. This is in line with much of the research on ritual in social science. For example, Driver (1991) suggests that “humans are naturally ritualistic...the human choice is not *whether* to ritualize, but when, how, where, and why. Rituals are deeply rooted in our animal natures” (6, 14). Similarly, Quack (2010) builds from Bourdieu and Wittgenstein to argue that humans are “ceremonial animals” that have a biological “ritual sense.” And scholars building from Durkheim’s

(1912) theories of ritual, like Collins (2004), argue that not only are humans naturally ritualistic, but that humans are constantly seeking out intense collective rituals because that is where they are most happy. Collins (2004) says,

Individuals are attracted to the most intense ritual charges they can get, indifferent to lesser rituals, and repelled by others ... Perhaps the strongest human pleasures come from being fully and bodily absorbed in deeply synchronized social interaction ... It exemplifies that more general pattern of collective effervescence, and explains why people are attracted to high-intensity interaction rituals, and why they generate feelings of solidarity (51, 66).

In contrast, I talked to numerous nonreligious people who not only do not seek out rituals, but some who actively avoid them. Atheist and non-assembler Emma explained that her lack of interest in ritual and spirituality in some ways drove her to major in religious studies as an undergraduate. She said,

I don't hold any value in those types of things. I'm not sure why. To me the beauty in nonreligion is just the freedom of not having a label or a ritual. It's being able to do absolutely nothing. This is why I ended up majoring in religious studies, too, because I saw that something's clearly going on for some people, I feel like I can see it in their facial expressions that something is happening for them. They're having some sort of experience that I was not having. And so I was really intrigued by that. But it was never something I personally experienced or really related to.

Similarly, atheist and non-assembler Trista, who was introduced in Chapter 3 as being a more certainty-filled atheist, said, "I don't like rituals. I guess there is value in, like, paying tribute or kind of acknowledging maybe life events. But to me, like, 'ritual' is putting significance where there is no significance. It just kinda seems silly to me." And non-assembler Amy said, "Some people really thrive upon rituals and ceremonies, and I think that's a resource in which people can confide, meet with like-minded folks, feel as though they're not being judged. I just, I've never been a very ritualistic person."

While all of the examples I just described come from non-assemblers, whose aversion to ritual meant they were not interested in participating in something like the Sunday Assembly, there were also debates among Sunday Assemblers about whether or not ritual and secular spirituality should be central to Sunday Assembly services. As I've detailed throughout this chapter, many assemblers were enthusiastic about ritual creation and scientific spirituality, but others, like Angela and John, eventually left the organization because of their distaste for ritualized aspects of the services. Angela initially joined the Sunday Assembly because she wanted a more explicit focus on community that she was not finding in other atheist groups in the area. She was a member of some more political atheist groups, but she was looking for something that was more “fun” and community-focused. However, after a few months of attending the MSP assembly, she was starting to get uncomfortable with the amount of spiritual language and ritual in the services. She said, “The idea of secular spirituality makes me uncomfortable. I appreciate having a common goal or tradition, but I would hope that we don't assign meanings to them. I don't attend assemblies for spiritual growth. I prefer the assembly to be a fun party that people learn stuff at, not a growing space or zen center, because those already exist.” John expressed similar feelings about his discomfort with the direction Sunday Assembly was going, saying,

Secular spirituality is not for me. Any sort of spirituality or ritual doesn't appeal to me. It makes me cringe. And I think it's gonna be a tough line to walk for Sunday Assembly. Because it's not an atheist community, it's a secular community. And so how do you enforce the belief of rationality and truth and fact-based belief without being dogmatic about it? Because we don't want to be exclusive, but we don't want to bring in shakras and raiki. Because, at least for me, I don't think that has any place in a secular space. And I don't want Sunday Assembly to be focused on rituals. It feels like an artificial manipulation of the situation.

Not only did I talk to a number of nonreligious people who were turned off by rituals and attempts to cultivate secular spiritual experiences, some even described rituals and collective effervescence as being potentially dangerous. Atheist and non-assembler Sunny said that she was not a ritualistic person because groups of people doing rituals “freaked her out.” She said, “I kind of get freaked out by that kind of stuff. I feel like there’s a mob mentality here in America where if you get enough idiots together, they’re going to do something stupid. So, I try to avoid the ritualistic because it seems dangerous to me.” Atheist and assembler Molly had a similar fear of rituals that stemmed from her upbringing in an evangelical Christian home. She said that religious rituals had always made her feel uncomfortable and that she saw attempts to create collective effervescence as “manipulative.” She said, “When I was religious, when I would feel, what did you call it, collective effervescence, it always made me feel uncomfortable. It always felt manipulative and fake. So, I think Sunday Assembly *could* create rituals, but I don’t necessarily think it *should*.” For nonreligious people like Sunny and Molly, religious rituals create heightened group boundaries and encourage people into a “mob mentality” that they found at best fake and at worst harmful.

These findings reveal that not everyone is in a constant search for “high-intensity interaction rituals” like much of our sociological theories assume, and many actively avoid them. Importantly, the nonreligious people who were averse to ritual and transcendence did not typically see their lives as any less meaningful, in contrast to the dominant narratives I described in Chapter 1 that assume ritual and collective effervescence are the only real ways to create meaning. Instead, many nonreligious people are finding meaning in more solitary rituals or avoiding ritual altogether.

Scientifically Spiritual, Rationally Ritualistic

Taken together, the findings in this chapter disrupt the presumed dichotomies between ritual and rationality, science and spirituality, and atheism and transcendent experiences. In my fieldwork, I encountered what I call a “scientific spirituality” in which nonreligious people draw explicitly on scientific research and methods to intentionally cultivate feelings of awe, wonder, transcendence, and collective effervescence. While some nonreligious people find meaning in solitary rituals and organic experiences of transcendence, and others are seeking out ways to intentionally create rituals and spiritual experiences, the majority of nonreligious people I encountered in my fieldwork used scientific discourses and methods to explain and find meaning in their spiritual experiences. I also showed how a “trial-and-error” approach to ritual development at the Sunday Assembly runs counter to our dominant sociological theories of ritual that characterize ritual failure as always negative and detrimental to transcendent experiences and collective cohesion. However, many nonreligious people are averse to any kind of ritual or experience of transcendence, either because they find them inauthentic or uncomfortable, or because they see them as potentially dangerous and manipulative. And these competing approaches to and understandings of ritual and spirituality shaped the ways that Sunday Assemblers incorporated ritual practices into their services. In the final empirical chapter, I detail similar debates about the meaning and practice of community among the nonreligious, drawing on my practice-oriented approach to disrupt our dominant assumptions about the nonreligious as being anti-communal and individualistic.

Chapter 5

The Becoming of Community

Making your way in the world today
Takes everything you got
Taking a break from all your worries
It sure would help a lot
Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name
And they're always glad you came
You want to be where you can see
Our troubles are all the same
You want to be where everybody knows your name

You want to go where people know
People are all the same
You want to go where everybody knows your name

*Selected lyrics from "Where Everybody Knows Your Name,"
written by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo*

The organizers of the Minneapolis/St. Paul chapter of the Sunday Assembly saw the theme song from *Cheers*, "Where Everybody Knows Your Name," as perfectly encapsulating the purpose of the Sunday Assembly. It was the first song that the MSP chapter sang at their first assembly, it was the song that came up most frequently each Sunday service after, and the organizers often talked about it as being the chapter's official theme song. The song is about a desire to find a sense of community, a place "where everybody knows your name," and a place where you can find people with similar troubles who are glad to help you through them. When reading through the song's lyrics through the lens of modernization theory and the assumed loss of community that results, many of the lyrics stand out as being in line with this dominant paradigm. From

the very first lines of the song, “Making your way in the world today takes everything you got,” one gets a sense that making your way in the world *today* is harder than it was in the past and is full of more “worries” than before. This is in line with the social science narratives I outlined in Chapter 1 that posit a loss of community and an increased sense of anxiety resulting from society becoming more modern. Later in the song, there seems to be a yearning for homogeneity, or a community with a Durkheimian mechanical solidarity, with lyrics like, “You want to go where you can see our troubles are all the same” and “You want to go where people know that people are all the same.” In many ways, the song is reminiscent of modernization narratives that presume a nostalgia for communal forms that have been lost with modernity, along with a hope that these forms of community can still be found.

In this chapter, I show how nonreligious people often express nostalgic conceptions of community that presume nonreligious people, or American society more generally, are lacking in community. And many Sunday Assemblers saw the Sunday Assembly as a much-needed replacement for that loss. However, similar to the contested conceptions of spirituality I described in Chapter 4, conceptions of community are also contested in the nonreligious field, and not all nonreligious people think that community has been lost or that replicating the church form is the best way to find it again. Many nonreligious people find traditional communal forms, particularly churches, to be inauthentic and exclusionary in ways that conflict with their more organic and porous conceptions of community. Importantly, in contrast to the seeming consensus in social science that the nonreligious are anti-social and uninterested in community, almost all of the nonreligious people I encountered in my fieldwork talked about community as a good

thing and many were active participants in multiple forms of community. However, I will also show that community takes work to construct, and many nonreligious people are in the process of creating new communities in the wake of leaving their religious communities. Thus, I argue that the largely quantitative literature on nonreligious volunteerism and community engagement has failed to capture the in-process nature of community construction, and I show how a practice-oriented approach to the “becoming” of community sheds new light on questions of commitment and engagement in modernity.

Nonreligious Nostalgia

The founders of Sunday Assembly in many ways bought into the widely shared cultural narrative that community has been lost in modernity, and they saw the creation of an atheist church like the Sunday Assembly as a way to recover what has been lost. Co-founder Sanderson Jones often drew on this discourse when talking about the need for Sunday Assembly in the organization’s promotional materials. In a blog post published on the organization’s website,² Jones references this discourse explicitly as his motivation for founding the Sunday Assembly. He wrote,

Rebuilding social connection has never been more important in an age where community and social support are collapsing. When old systems of values and meaning are being undermined. Where there seems to be no positive hopeful narrative for the future, other than tech utopias where we are either uploaded into the cloud or strapped into virtual reality with sex-robots for company. There’s a lot of talk about the budget deficit and not enough about the deficit of hope, belonging, and meaning.

² www.sundayassembly.com

Jones went on to argue that the congregational form has been scientifically proven to be conducive to community building, citing scholars like Jonathan Haidt who have shown how congregations help solve the need for humans to “cooperate without kinship.” In contrast to the more political atheist groups in the nonreligious field who were anti-organized religion and anti-congregation, Jones argued that “...the organisation is one of the best parts of religion! ... Organisations allow positive vibes to put on their boots, institutions allow philosophy to get its hands dirty.” Like many theorists of modernization, Jones believes that social support is collapsing and that we need to revive traditional forms of community and organization in order to save it.

Like Jones, I encountered many nonreligious people, both assemblers and non-assemblers, who believed there to be a deficit of community in contemporary society. In my interviews, I often asked people if they felt there is “more or less community than there was in the past” as a way of getting at their conceptions of community and how they might have changed over time. And a substantial portion of my interviewees believed there to be less community today than there was in the past. Atheist and non-assembler Sunny is an example of this mindset, and she attributed the loss of community to increased fear of others and less face-to-face interaction caused by increased technology. Our conversation, below, highlights this discourse of community lost.

Jacqui: Do you think there is more or less community than there used to be?

Sunny: Less. Because everybody's afraid. I think there's far less community. People call the cops on seeing a kid walking by themselves. That it just crazy to me. We used to be able to go outside and run around and we knew that, okay somebody's parent is down at that end of the block and, you know. And now it's like, “oh, where's this kid's parents?” It's very extreme and people just want to manage other people's lives, which isn't community.

Jacqui: So, we feel both less responsible for others but we also want to manage others more?

Sunny: It's kind of like, you know, "it takes a village" to raise a child, and now everybody's like, "I don't want to be the village, I'm gonna call this person and they'll tell you how to do it" [laughs].

Jacqui: And do you think technology plays a role in this?

Sunny: I think less people go outside and more people are freaked out by the things that they are able to access on technology. And so it makes human interaction less, they communicate less with their neighbors. They're more afraid of other people and what the possibilities could be. And I think that if we had more human interaction, I think that we would be doing a lot better. You know, if people were looking out for each other's kids or belongings or whatever it might be, I don't think we would have so much crime or bad stuff happening.

I had a similar conversation with non-assembler Brett who identifies as "nothing in particular." Like Sunny, Brett was concerned about what he perceived as a loss of community in the United States, which he attributed to the highly mobile nature of modern life. And while he thought the idea of a slower-paced life with a more stable sense of community sounded great, he was skeptical that he would ever find it.

Brett: Like, you know, you have something like the United States, with so many people coming in and out and everything's different. And there is no, nothing is connected, there is no community. It's all, you know, I don't know. All the people I know, we're all over the place. Not necessarily because we want to be, but because we have to be. We have to go out and make a living and that's how it is now. And when you're moving every couple years, how do you ever form a community?

Jacqui: Does this concern you?

Brett: I mean, the grass is always greener, right? But in my mind, the idea of living somewhere with people who are sort of like you in some ways, where there's some sense of security, where you feel you can relate to people. It sounds good to me. I haven't really had it, but it sounds good ... I think I've adapted. I try to stay liquid, financially. I'm not tied to much here because why take that risk? It doesn't scare me, I just think that I don't see any change on the horizon. I think it's too late now, you know, I'm 39 and just the way this country, the culture has changed, I see it getting less and less that way. I don't know if joining a church would help

relieve those concerns. I don't know how it could.

While Brett and Sunny expressed concern about a loss of community and had nostalgic conceptions of there being more community in the past that was filled with more homogeneity, trust, and social obligation, neither of them was actively seeking out ways to solve this lack of community. Atheist and non-assembler Emma, however, had similar nostalgic conceptions of community, but she was using that nostalgia to try to create more community in her life. Emma had deconverted from an extremely conservative evangelical Christianity in her early 20s, and she talked about how she was trying, but struggling, to replace the community that she had lost. Emma had never heard of Sunday Assembly, but after I explained the concept to her, she immediately identified with the impulse to create a “village mentality.” Like Sunny, she expressed a desire to revert back to a time where entire neighborhoods of people felt responsible for each other's children. She said,

I think the only challenge leaving my church has just been the lack of community. And not that I would want religious community again, but especially out of college it is so hard to find that. It's so hard. And there are times when I miss, you know, you have a small group and you just all get together and there's this level of intimacy and you can confide and just show up at the door and have a meal together. And I don't have that. I haven't had that. That's why it's so fascinating to hear about the Sunday Assembly. I'd never even heard of that or thought of that. But it makes total sense. There's such a, I think people at large, I mean, this is probably never gonna happen, but I just wish that we could get back to kind of the village mentality of tribes, you know. Where it's not about the neighborhood you live in or the school your kids go to but just kind of communities of people who, you know, are raising each other's kids. You know, like, and that's such a fantasy [laughs]. So, I think I'll always long for that sense of community and I haven't necessarily figured out how to fill it.

Emma had yet to “figure out how to fill” her loss of community, but she was engaging in a variety of activities in attempts to do so. She and her partner often talked about leaving Minneapolis for a small town as a way to gain a greater sense of community and a “village mentality.” Emma also said that she had recently applied to graduate school, largely because she thought it would be a community-oriented experience. She said, “Probably the most recent example of trying to find community was I applied to grad school. And I was about to take out the loans and I was trying to evaluate why. And the biggest reason was I want classmates. And I was like, okay, maybe that’s not the best use of \$50,000.” Emma tried numerous other things, including joining Meetup groups, going to singer-songwriter showcases, and going out of her way to befriend her neighbors. However, in all of these attempts, Emma never felt a sense of community or that the people she was encountering shared her desire for community. For example, in an attempt to meet her neighbors, Emma made cookies for them one day, but never heard from any of them again. She said, “I’ve tried! I would make cookies and stuff. I thought that’s what you were supposed to do. And they didn’t bring my Tupperware back! Like, who does that, you’re supposed to return it with things in it, but at least return it!” For Emma, and many other nonreligious people I interviewed, there was a sense that community is declining and their efforts to find it were often unsuccessful.

One of the more popular methods for trying to find community among the nonreligious is to join an explicitly nonreligious group. Through websites like Meetup.com, one can find a plethora of nonreligious groups to join, including hobby groups like Godless Gamers or political groups like the Center for Inquiry. And one of

the main reasons that many MSP assemblers got interested in Sunday Assembly was because they were not finding a real sense of community in these other kinds of nonreligious groups. Atheist and assembler John explained that he and his wife had been members of a more politically focused atheist group in the Twin Cities for a few years, but they had not felt a real sense of community there and that was why Sunday Assembly appealed to them. John felt that the political groups were important, and they paved the way for community groups like the Sunday Assembly to exist, but he believed that the nonreligious field was lacking in community-focused groups. When I asked him why he thought Sunday Assembly was important, he said,

Sunday Assembly is important to have in addition to the other nonreligious community groups because those other groups are more advocacy-based groups. You know, [local political atheist group] does a lot of work with the legislature trying to pass laws that are church/state separation. But they're not really designed to be a community group. They are an advocacy group that has a large community and they do stuff. They are not community focused. And through their work they have created this space for nonbelievers to be open and to be not hiding their beliefs. But what they're not providing is a lot of what the church provided that wasn't tied to religion. So, when somebody gets sick, [local political atheist group] doesn't send them a casserole. But I think they have created this space where we can have that. And so, I think that's what Sunday Assembly is, what I hope it is or will become at least. Because I think what they're doing is good and I want it to grow and I want it to become a community for nonreligious people to be a part of because, despite being almost fifteen percent of the population, we're kind of aimless in terms of having community groups.

I heard a similar narrative from numerous Sunday Assemblers – that they had looked for community in nonreligious groups for a number of years but did not find it, and they liked the idea of Sunday Assembly because its main focus was building community. Former assembler Kurt expressed this sentiment as well, saying, “At [local political atheist group], I liked the speakers, but I wasn't getting a lot of community from

it. I tried, and I would introduce myself to people every month, but it wasn't really built for that. So, I was excited when I heard about Sunday Assembly." Many of the assemblers who expressed this sentiment were formerly religious and were drawn to Sunday Assembly because of its more "church-like" structure. For assemblers like Eric, leaving religion was a painful and lonely process, and he struggled to find a replacement for what he had lost in the more political atheist groups. And he explained that it was largely his discontent with the atheist groups he belonged to that got him and some of his friends, many of whom later became the core organizers of the MSP assembly, to start thinking about new ways of doing nonreligious community. Eric explained,

Leaving Christianity was really hard for me. I was basically cut off from everything and everyone that I had ever known. At one point, in like 2011 before Sunday Assembly started, I googled, "Is there an atheist church?" Like, do atheists go somewhere? So, I googled it and I found [local political atheist group] and I started going, but it just wasn't the same. I think we met up twice a month, met up for coffee at places, and the entire meeting was basically rehashing how we left religion and the horrible things religion had done to us. And after a month or two of that, it felt empty. It was like, is this it? Is this all that we do outside of the church? Because I had been taught growing up that there was nothing outside of the church. That there was no hope, there was no community. That once you leave, it's just this whole idea of leaving the garden of Eden and going out into this wilderness and there's nothing out there and you'll just find despair and unhappiness. And to an extent, I found that to be true. It was very lonely. I left this immensely rich community. And I think especially those of us who had grown up in the church, we really missed that aspect of our lives, of having a place where there are more people like us who really, who wanted that sense of community, of belonging. And so that's about when some of us in that group started talking about doing something like Sunday Assembly.

Similarly, Beth, who was highly involved in her Catholic church for over 30 years, said she liked the idea of Sunday Assembly because it promised to offer a church-like feel that she felt was missing in the other atheist groups she had tried. She said, "I

love [local political atheist group], but you don't get a sense of community with it. Kind of my thing is, if I dropped out, nobody would care. And that was one of my things was I wanted a community where if I dropped off, somebody would notice.” She explained that her favorite part of church was the “coffee and donuts” after the service because that was when community was actually built, and she was excited that this was a core feature of the Sunday Assembly services.

Taken together, the dominant cultural narrative that community is on the decline in contemporary society is shared by many nonreligious people, and a nostalgia for more traditional forms of community was a common motivation for involvement in the Sunday Assembly. Many of the nonreligious people I interviewed talked about increased fear, isolation, and mobility as causing a decrease in social trust and community obligation, much like our social scientific theories of modernization have predicted. And many expressed a belief that the nonreligious were particularly vulnerable to this loss, as it is harder to find community if the most dominant form of community, which is religious community in the U.S. context (Lichterman 1995; Warner 1994; Williams 2007), is no longer available. While the nonreligious field is full of groups and organizations to join, many nonreligious people fail to find community in the more intellectual and political groups that dominate the field. The Sunday Assembly is in many ways capitalizing on this perceived lack, promising to provide a communal space for the nonreligious that helps create more social trust and communal obligation than other nonreligious groups. However, not all nonreligious people think that community has been lost or that copying religious forms is the best way to find it. I also encountered a counter discourse to this nostalgia, where there is a desire for more porous, organic forms of community and a

belief that these more “modern” communal forms are more conducive to collective well-being than traditional forms of community like churches.

Expanding Conceptions of Community

I wouldn't call it a loss of community. I think it's just different. One avenue – church – has been shut off pretty much, by me. But there are lots of other opportunities. You just have to look for them and explore them and see what feels right and what fits for you. I'm involved in my neighborhood association and I volunteer. I meet people that way. I'm close to my family. I spend a good amount of time with them. You know, so I do have that community and support. And I know that if I want to seek it out, I could find lots of other ways to get involved outside of religious groups. I actually think there is more community than there used to be because of the internet and you can join a group for literally any interest you have.

Janelle, atheist, non-assembler

In contrast to the community lost discourse that I detailed in the previous section, I also encountered numerous nonreligious people who did not share this sense of loss and who believed, like Janelle quoted above, that there were plenty of ways for the nonreligious to find and cultivate community. In addition, many nonreligious people believe that traditional communities like churches, even atheist churches, rely on creating boundaries and exclusionary restrictions in ways that were antithetical to their conceptions of community. Much like the discourse of “community liberated” that I described in Chapter 2 (see Delanty 2000; Fischer 1995; Ryle and Robinson 2006; Wellman 1979; Wuthnow 1998b), many nonreligious people seek out more porous and “loosely bounded” community networks that are less tied to one specific place or organization.

One of the most common reasons I heard among non-assemblers for not being interested in something like the Sunday Assembly was that traditional forms of

community like church were too exclusionary and dogma driven. For many nonreligious people, a bounded community group based in one shared identity and set of values is antithetical to their conceptions of community as more expansive and inclusive. After talking with atheist and non-assembler Myah about the Sunday Assembly and describing the goals and purpose of the organization, I asked her what the word “community” meant to her. She responded,

I can tell you what I wish community meant. I wish community meant that we didn't need to be like-minded in order to get together and to share compassion and empathy and have a meal. I wish it had nothing to do with classism or racism. I wish that community meant if there is a power-outage, you roll your grill out into the middle of the street and provide food for folks. I wish it didn't mean, “I'm going to stay inside because I'm fearful of crime.” I just think that there is such, um, there is so much societal, class, and political tension wrapped up in what most people think of when they think community. So, a counter argument to the Sunday Assembly would be that it's no different than a conservative Christian church. It is exclusionary in terms of philosophical perceptions and only a certain type of person can join.

For Myah, groups built solely around one worldview, even a worldview she identified with, were too exclusionary and she had a conception of community that was more about breaking those kinds of barriers down and extending empathy to people who do not necessarily share her worldview. Agnostic and non-assembler Wren made a similar point but focused on the power inequalities that come with the traditional community models. She said, “I guess something like the Sunday Assembly doesn't really appeal to me. I guess I'd just be curious more as to why. I mean, it makes sense, the idea of finding community. But why are you trying to imitate religion? That always comes with a power system and I left religion to get away from that.”

Rather than plugging into an already existing community filled with social boundaries, many nonreligious people seek out more organic and porous forms of community. This is similar to the distinction I found between manufactured and organic experiences of spirituality in Chapter 4 – some nonreligious people seek out “ready-made” communities like the Sunday Assembly, while others would rather community construction happen in a more organic and “serendipitous” way. For example, atheist and non-assembler Hannah described churches as insular “bubbles,” and she said that instead of just creating another bubble, she wanted to create a community that looked more like a “spider web.” She said,

I think I’ve created my own community. I think of church communities kind of like a circle where everyone’s in it, it’s kind of maybe a bubble. And it’s kind of its own thing. But I think I’ve developed more of like a spider-web where I have some connections that have connections to other people. It’s more spread out, it’s less defined, but I have people that bring me joy and happiness and I bring them joy and happiness and we support each other, but it isn’t as defined of a community. The more defined communities that exist in this world, I’m not really a part of. But I have stepped foot into those communities and taken people with me that I liked. I haven’t taken them out of the communities, but I’ve become friends with them and added them to my own community.

Hannah describes her conception of community as a loose network of people that she builds on her own in a more organic way, rather than through joining what she called a “more defined” community. Like Myah and Wren, Hannah also believed that more traditional communities like churches were too insular, and her metaphor of churches being like a “bubble” conveys a sense of insularity and fragility. Importantly, she sees her “less defined” community as being just as meaningful as more defined communities like a church, and she said that her organic community network brings her joy, happiness, and a sense of social support.

Hannah's practice of building her community out of people she picks and chooses out of other communities was a common discourse that I encountered in my fieldwork. Many nonreligious people want to "grow into" a community rather than join a ready-made one. Agnostic and non-assembler Dustin made this point as well, saying, "Maybe that's why it's hard for me to get into a, like, already made community. It's a bunch of people I don't know. I think I'd rather have it start as something that's not institutionalized and something I can grow into. I think it's important for me to have community, but for me that can be really small." Many nonreligious people I talked to have an aversion to large, "non-organic" communities because they believed that with size comes hierarchy and inequality. Atheist and non-assembler Melinda also made this point in our interview, and she explained how she sought out a more organic form of community as a result. She said,

I think the larger a community, the more room there is for human, like, what's the word I'm looking for, negativity, I guess. It can be a good thing, but I feel like the bigger you get, the more opportunity there is to have that, just, us versus them mentality. Maybe hierarchies and things making it complicated. And to me community means being accepting of anyone and judging them based on what they say once they're already there, not before they come in the door. I think, ideally, I would hope to keep growing on my path based on individuals I would be meeting and kind of creating an organic sense of community rather than entering into an existing one.

These findings are in line with the practice-oriented approaches to community I outlined in Chapter 2. This work reveals the constructed and contextual nature of community ideologies and the ways that "post-traditional" forms of community can be just as enriching as traditional forms (Delanty 2000; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Hoop 2012; Lichterman 1995; Pirkey 2015). In line with scholarship that critiques

nostalgic conceptions of community for ignoring the often exclusionary and hierarchical nature of traditional communal forms (Collins 2010; Joseph 2002; Kaufman 2002), many of the nonreligious people in my fieldwork saw traditional communities like churches as being “bubbles” that produced boundaries rather than bridges. As a result, many drew on an expanded conception of community as a loosely bound network or “spider web” that was built more organically and centered around an individual person rather than an organization. As I explained in Chapter 1, many social scientists have expressed concerns that these more “porous” and individualistic communal forms will be detrimental to society, suggesting that they result in a disconnected “plug-in style” of volunteering and the siloing off of individuals into “lifestyle enclaves” that engage only people who share very narrow and self-serving lifestyle preferences (Bellah et al. 1985; Giddens 1991; Putnam 2000; Wuthnow 1998b). However, I found that many nonreligious people construct more porous and organic conceptions of community as a way to be *more* inclusive and communal rather than less. In other words, constructing “post-traditional” conceptions of community is often seen as a moral choice *against* what many nonreligious people see as the exclusionary and hierarchical nature of traditional conceptions of community. Building on work from other scholars who find that ethics of individualism and personalism can be conducive to moral and communal obligations (Hoop 2012; Lichterman 1995), my findings disrupt the paradigm of community lost that permeates our sociological narratives and show how modern, nonreligious individuals are finding and creating new forms of community.

The Becoming of Community

Throughout this chapter, and this dissertation more generally, the dominant theme has been that of construction and “becoming.” In Chapter 1, I framed my case study as an investigation of the “becoming” of not just Sunday Assembly, but of nonreligious cultures and communities more broadly. And in Chapter 2, I outlined a practice-oriented approach that would allow me to analyze the cultural work that goes into constructing these cultures and communities. As I’ve shown throughout my empirical chapters, the nonreligious have to navigate a complex and contested nonreligious field concerning the meanings related to certainty, spirituality, ritual, and community, and these meanings are constantly being renegotiated and reconstructed in new ways over time. And as has been apparent already in this chapter, this theme of “becoming” and evolution is just as applicable to nonreligious conceptions of community as it was to understandings of certainty and uncertainty in Chapter 3 and practices of ritual and spirituality in Chapter 4. The nonreligious people I encountered in my fieldwork, both those who were nostalgic for traditional forms of community and those who advocated for post-traditional forms of community, were working to find and construct community in their lives. And the communities that they were building, including the Sunday Assembly, were in a constant process of change and revision. In contrast to much of our sociological literature that characterizes community as a universal, free-floating meaning system that can be lost or found, my case study reveals how community is *constructed* in relation to an ever-changing and contested set of discourses, values, and practices (see Collins 2010; Jackson 2019; Studdert 2006).

So far in this chapter, I have largely focused on individual narratives related to the becoming of community, including narratives about nonreligious people seeking out new communities after leaving religion and narratives about the rejection of “ready-made” traditional communal forms for more organic forms that are constructed slowly over time. However, the creation of the Sunday Assembly itself also offers useful insights into how nonreligious community is often made rather than found. A common discourse I found in my fieldwork was that creating community takes effort, and that you could not become a community just by starting a Sunday Assembly chapter. Instead, the consensus seemed to be that communities develop slowly, and many assemblers talked about the ways that their chapters had or would become more communal over time. And for many of the assemblers I encountered, it remained to be seen whether their chapter would ever fully become a community. Debates about ideology, inclusivity, and resources dominated the organizing meetings and email forums, and many chapters struggled to reconcile their differences or garner enough sustained commitment to keep their doors open. While the organization rocketed to over 70 chapters just two years after the first assembly was held in London, many of these chapters failed to get off the ground or ran successfully for a few years but ultimately dwindled due to lack of interest, resources, or both. In short, constructing community takes work, but the case of the Sunday Assembly shows that, in contrast to dominant stereotypes about anti-social and anomic atheists, many nonreligious people *are* putting in the work to cultivate community in ways that are often missed in studies of community engagement and volunteerism.

I started interviewing MSP assemblers about three months after their first assembly, and almost everyone I talked to at that time felt that the MSP chapter of

Sunday Assembly was still “becoming” a community. And many people compared the slow formation of community to other processes that take time, including developing a friendship, building a fire, or the formation of a star. MSP organizer Jeff likened the construction of community to developing a friendship and felt that Sunday Assembly MSP was in the early stages of that process at the time of our interview. He said,

I think we are growing into becoming a community. I think it's like with anything, like a friendship. It starts out, like, maybe you grab drinks a couple times with the same people, but then you did it six or seven times and all the sudden you're going to each other's birthdays and all that. So, it's gotta be organic. You can't force this stuff. And I think some of us are kind of impatient and we want it to happen right away because we are maybe Type A or it's just human nature, or at least in America we are very, like, microwave oven, want things to happen. But relationships take time and it's organic. I've seen it, you know, I've made some friends already and we can go get coffee and have pizza together and we talk about things. So, we are starting to connect.

Even though Jeff was hoping that Sunday Assembly would eventually become a sort of “ready-made” community for nonreligious people to plug into, he also drew on the discourse of community as organic and the need for the MSP chapter to “grow into” being a community over time. He critiqued what he saw as an increasing impatience in modern societies and the demand for immediate outcomes, much like a “microwave oven,” and he believed that this mindset was not conducive to community. Instead, for Jeff, creating a community takes patience and effort. He went on to say, “It is a lot of work. There are days where I'm like, I could just not believe in god and just hang out with my friends [laughs]. But research shows there is a value to strong community that's intentional. And when you put the work in, you tend to get the most benefit from something.” In these ways, Jeff is drawing on both discourses of community that I found in my fieldwork – the desire for an intentional, ready-made community for nonreligious

people to plug into, as well as a conception of community as something that should be organic and grown into. Thus, these discourses are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and nonreligious people often draw on both to make meaning out of the communities they are creating.

MSP Assembler Jessie compared the slow process of creating a community to the process of a star forming, and she expressed uncertainty about whether or not the MSP chapter would ever “explode” and become a community. However, Jessie also believed that a community is *always* in the process of becoming because communities are always evolving as members come and go. Jessie said,

I don't think we are a community yet. But I also don't think we will ever stop becoming a community. A community is always in the process of becoming. Because community is always shifting, it's always changing, as new people come in, as people leave, as always happens in communities. But it's the moment that it takes on that sort of organic spark, of things happening on their own, that I think a community really forms. Almost like the formation of a star. That you have, over this period of time, you have all these gases forming and you have all this energy building up, building up, and building up, until finally this explosion happens and you have a star. And I think to an extent that happens in community building. You have leadership trying to bring people together, of trying to create this interest, and eventually, something happens where things just take off and people start asking, “What more can we do to really invest in this community?” And I don't know at what point that will happen. I don't know if that will happen here in Minneapolis. It's a challenge and a risk trying to create something like that.

The metaphor of a “spark” of community that slowly becomes bigger over time was common among Sunday Assemblers, and not just in my interviews. In the opening and closing comments at many of the MSP Sunday services, the MSP organizers often drew on this language as a way to frame the varied success of the services as all being part of the process of becoming a community. For example, after a particularly unsuccessful

assembly a few months after the soft launch, in which one of the speakers failed to show, the band struggled to engage the attendees, and the group activities were filled with confusion and awkward silences, MSP organizer Joseph reassured everyone in his closing comments that this was all part of the process. He said,

As you can see, this is all still very much in process. So far there have been wonderful moments, awkward moments, and tense moments, but that's good because that's part of building community. We all want community but many of us aren't sure how to get it, so we will work the kinks out until we get it ... I see a little spark of community every Sunday and I hope we can gently fan that spark into a flame so we can start a community of our own and begin a journey together. Now, let's all eat some cookies and enjoy the rest of the day!

Similar to the trail-and-error discourse surrounding secular rituals and spirituality that I detailed in Chapter 4, many Sunday Assemblers believed that failure was part of the process of building a community, but that feelings of community would come given the right formula. The nostalgic conceptions of community that dominate our sociological narratives often gloss over the work that it takes to become the “warm, trusting, and comfortable place” that is often assumed when the word “community” is invoked (Bauman 2001). For many nonreligious people in the United States who are attempting to create new communities in the wake of rapidly rising rates of religious disaffiliation, the becoming of community is not all that comfortable. Many of the assemblers I talked to had moments where they struggled to stay committed to the Sunday Assembly, particularly after events or services that were not well attended or that were more awkward than effervescent. As a result, many talked about how community often meant being uncomfortable and putting in the work in the beginning in order to reap the rewards of community later down the road. When I spoke with MSP assembler Blake about their

experiences at the first few assemblies, they talked mostly about how awkward they felt. However, they said they were committed to finding community and they would continue to try to work through their discomfort. Blake said, “I think that’s just part of building community. Kind of forcing yourself to have some shared experiences so you have a shared background and you are kind of on the same page.” MSP organizer Amanda made a similar point, saying that building community often meant “mucking through the angst” and awkward moments. She said,

I think we’re on our way to being a community. I think we have pieces of it. But what I’m hoping we’ll have we still have to get to. And I think time is going to be the biggest piece of it. That whole piece, it still baffles me, you take a group of strangers, with a shared belief but no doctrine, no dogma, and just say, “We’re gonna be friends” [laughs]. In my mind, I’m like, that’s kind of a crazy idea. I’m gonna go out and pick out a hundred random people in the Cities who are atheists and say, “We’re all gonna be good.” So, I think we’re moving, I think it’ll probably take another year to get that real sense of community. Just because it’s gonna take time. Even in the organizing team we’ve had angst and, you know, it’s just mucking through some of that.

I think it is important to pause for a moment and reflect on the fact that Amanda foresees “mucking through the angst” for at least another *year* before she thinks Sunday Assembly will become the community she was looking for when she joined. This is in stark contrast to stereotypes about the nonreligious as lacking in commitments to community. Far from retreating from community once she left religion, Amanda is putting in more work to build community than ever before in her life. She talked about how when she was religious, a community was already built for her and she had put very little into the actual building or sustaining of that community. Now, Amanda was on the ground floor of creating a new community, and she came to learn that community did not just “naturally happen” if a bunch of people with the same worldview got together in the

same place – it takes effort, commitment, and negotiating numerous conflicts and misunderstandings along the way.

In short, many nonreligious people are as committed, if not more committed, to community than they were when they were religious. However, the fact that many nonreligious communities are still in the stages of “becoming” means it is important that we continue to investigate conceptions and practices of community among the nonreligious qualitatively. As I will discuss more in my conclusions in Chapter 6, social science research often captures nonreligious communal engagement at one point in time with quantitative surveys that ask about recent rates of volunteerism or current feelings of connectedness. And this research often finds the nonreligious lacking in terms of engagement and interest in communal forms. However, my qualitative, practice-oriented investigation reveals that we need to take a more longitudinal approach to conceptions and practices of community, particularly among the nonreligious. Many nonreligious people have only recently left their religious communities and they are still in the process of redefining their understandings of community and slowly building new communities. Similarly, many nonreligious organizations, like the Sunday Assembly, are still in the very early stages of development, as the nonreligious demographic in the U.S. has only recently grown large enough to accommodate something like a network of engaging and enriching atheist churches. Finally, it is also the case that the nonreligious often hold multiple conceptions of community in their minds at once, and these often conflict as nonreligious people attempt to find and build community. As I have shown in this chapter, some nonreligious people are nostalgic for traditional communities in which people who share a similar set of values meet together regularly to reaffirm those values,

while others are critical of this type of community and seek out more organic and inclusive forms of community. However, I've also shown that many Sunday Assemblers draw on both of these discourses as they work toward becoming a community. In the final section of this chapter, below, I flesh out these negotiations between exclusivity and inclusivity in more detail, using the example of an ongoing debate among Sunday Assemblers about how they can be a "radically inclusive" organization that is simultaneously committed to a specific set of secular worldviews.

Negotiating Inclusive Boundaries

Personally, I have a little trouble navigating the balance between "radically inclusive" and my own atheism. It seems that in our group we are going out of our way not to talk about religion, atheism, agnosticism, etc. But I don't know how I feel about this because if not believing in god is what we all have in common, why should be not talk about it? I got involved with Sunday Assembly because I thought it would be a place where I would feel safe talking about my beliefs, or lack thereof. Now I am getting the impression that this is not the case because it does not fit with the idea of "radical inclusiveness."

Jenny, atheist, Sunday Assembler

The Sunday Assembly charter, which was written by Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans shortly after the organization was founded, states, "The Sunday Assembly is radically inclusive – everyone is welcome, regardless of their beliefs. This is a place of love that is open and accepting."³ This one statement led to numerous debates and fallout among the different Sunday Assemblies and their members. It spawned an infamously long and heated exchange on the Sunday Assembly Everywhere email forum in which organizers from across the globe weighed in on how they were navigating the call to be

3 See full charter at www.sundayassembly.com/our-mission/

radically inclusive, which caused enough of a stir in the community to merit an entire workshop devoted to the topic at the Conference Called Wonder in Atlanta. During this workshop, over 30 of the conference attendees gathered in a small room to hash out what being radically inclusive meant for them as a nonreligious organization. While a majority of those in attendance agreed that Sunday Assembly should welcome anyone who is interested, as long as they did not push their beliefs on anyone, some expressed that they felt it was a paradox to say you are radically inclusive while at the same time requiring that the ethos of the organization and its services remain non-theistic in spirit and in content. Others, similar to Jenny quoted above, said they were in search of a *secular* community and did not want to compromise their secular commitments to be inclusive of religious beliefs. One person in attendance said, “I will feel cheated if Sunday Assembly becomes an organization that aspires to welcome the religious and the nonreligious equally. The religious have plenty of opportunities to voice their concerns and their agenda. Nonbelievers do not.”

In general, most assemblers rejected the anti-religious rhetoric coming out of the more political atheist groups in the nonreligious field, or at the very least agreed that Sunday Assembly was not a space for “religion bashing” and should be focused on “living better, helping often, and wondering more.” However, a substantial minority of assemblers were uncomfortable with the fact that the call to be radically inclusive meant that they also were discouraged from explicitly promoting their atheistic worldviews at Sunday Assembly events. For nonreligious people like Jenny and some of the Radical Inclusivity workshop attendees, this was disheartening because they were looking for a safe space to talk about their nonreligion, a space in which they did not think religious

people necessarily needed to feel welcome. In one of many discussions about radical inclusivity on the Sunday Assembly Everywhere email forum, an organizer from the Charlotte chapter argued that it was not actually possible to be radically inclusive of all worldviews in a truly secular space, and he believed that Sunday Assembly was just paying “lip service” to this impossible ideal at the cost of alienating many of the more “hardline” atheists like himself. He wrote,

Watching this conversation, it seems to me that we are seeing the proverbial “canary in the coal mine” swooning in its cage. This is an issue that strikes at the heart of the Sunday Assembly movement. We pay lip service to the idea of “radical inclusiveness.” On paper, we agree that we don’t want to tell people how to live their lives. However, I don’t think this is entirely genuine. This lack of conviction is both a blessing and a curse. It seems to me that there are many of us (myself among them) who would prefer we take a slightly more hardline stand on certain core values. I am all for diversity, but “radical inclusiveness” increasingly seems to be a pipe dream. Is it REALLY reasonable to believe that we can be a welcome place to every person who walks through the door?

These debates about how explicitly atheist the Sunday Assembly should be caused numerous arguments and rifts among the assemblers. This drove many members to stop attending, and as I mentioned back in Chapter 3, there was an actual schism in the New York City chapter in which the more “hardline” atheists, who were fed up with the discourse of radical inclusivity, started their own organization called the Godless Revival that is much more explicitly atheist and anti-religious. Not only did the discourse of radical inclusivity alienate atheists interested in promoting atheism more explicitly, many also felt that too much inclusivity resulted in a lack of clear boundaries around the organization itself. An organizer from the Lancaster, U.K. chapter expressed this in an email that said,

I am worried that the fact that we play down the atheism means we have a rather indistinct identity – like a salesman who isn't quite sure what he is selling. Don't get me wrong, I fully get the community element and buy into the living better etc., but I feel it would possibly focus us better if we were narrower. Again, I am speaking for myself here, but in Lancaster the themes have seemed rather random, because there isn't anything that intellectually binds them together like a doctrine of sorts does for a church.

The idea that, without a more explicit focus on secular beliefs and values, Sunday Assembly lacked the needed “doctrine” or dogma to sustain commitment and interest was common among assemblers. Similar to Krull’s (2020) recent findings regarding the limits of inclusivity rhetoric among liberal religious congregations, many Sunday Assemblers are concerned that an emphasis on inclusivity will result in a watered-down secular identity with nothing substantive to center a shared sense of belonging and community around.

However, a dominant counterargument to this call for less inclusivity was an argument for finding a balance between exclusivity and inclusivity. Most assemblers agreed that too much inclusivity would ultimately result in an organization with no clear purpose or boundaries, but many believed that diversity and openness were more conducive to community than doctrine and dogma. In response to the Charlotte assembler who said radical inclusivity was just “lip service,” an assembler from the Pittsburgh chapter argued that she saw the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity as “healthy” because it meant coming together around shared values without devolving into what she called “group think.” She said,

I think this tension or paradox is a healthy thing. Too much inclusivity can lead to a lack of clarity; if it means all views are held to be of equal value, it doesn't feel like it makes much sense. Or, alternatively, if no views are ever expressed, it perhaps doesn't really satisfy anyone. On the other hand,

if the “doctrine” was to be defined and controlled and even preached to some extent, then we would be no more inclusive than the average church. I see Sunday Assembly as primarily catering for the needs of those who have no truck with spiritual, religious or “woo” ideas, but I see the radically inclusive part as being there to curb the extent of groupthink and prompt us to strive for compassion and understanding rather than judgement of those who see things differently. Overall, my point is that I see this as an aspirational goal that we are always striving toward and keeping in mind rather than dogma that we have to somehow carry out perfectly, especially since I really don’t think radical inclusivity is something that CAN ever be done perfectly. So, does that mean it’s “lip service”? For me it’s not, since that would mean I say it but don’t mean it. Instead, I say it, but realize at the same time that it’s not always possible.

Thus, rather than paying “lip service” to an unrealistic ideal, many assemblers believed that striving to be more inclusive than “the average church” was a worthy pursuit, even if full inclusivity was never achieved. While many assemblers were in fact more atheistic and said they would be fine if the services more explicitly promoted secular worldviews, they also acknowledged that doing so risked creating too many boundaries in ways that were not in line with their conceptions of community as inclusive and diverse. An assembler from the Sacramento chapter also expressed this view in the email forum, explaining how he was at first in favor of a more “hardline” atheist group, but he ultimately concluded that an “open” community was more “powerful” than a “closed” one. He wrote,

It is a tricky one. I don’t need much encouragement to turn up the atheistic volume, and there is a part of me that still would like an avenue for doing this. However, I am aware that one of the strengths of Sunday Assembly is that it is doctrine free, and a hardline atheistic agenda would probably start to solidify into a new doctrine. When I started coming to Sunday Assembly, I was more concerned with creating a space that was for me, full of “my people,” non-believers, hopefully of the sci-fi nerd variety. But then I realized that my goal had been self-centered, and as an organizer it was now my purpose to help create an assembly space that would be true to the charter’s mission of inclusiveness. A community that is open (rather than closed) is necessarily a more powerful thing. It’s the balance that, I

think, will create a robust and diverse community.

In sum, as Sunday Assembly chapters work to “become” a community, they have to navigate competing discourses in the nonreligious field about what community is and how to create it. For some, exclusivity and a narrow set of shared beliefs and values are needed to create community, but for others, inclusivity and porous boundaries create more “powerful and robust” communal forms. However, these discourses are not mutually exclusive, and many assemblers saw the merits in both and attempted to strike a balance between being radically inclusive and being overly exclusive and dogmatic. These findings shed new light on the ways that modern, secular people think and talk about community and the ways that they are actively trying to construct it in their everyday lives.

Contested Conceptions of Community

In this chapter, I used the creation of the Sunday Assembly as a case for exploring nonreligious conceptions of community and the ways that nonreligious people understand and engage with communal forms. I found there to be two dominant discourses or conceptions of community in my fieldwork, one of nostalgia for a more exclusive and “ready-made” communal form and one that rejected this nostalgia in favor of more porous, inclusive, and organically built communal forms. The dominant cultural narrative that community is on the decline in contemporary society is shared by many nonreligious people, and a nostalgia for more traditional forms of community was a common motivation for involvement in the Sunday Assembly. However, not all nonreligious people think that community has been lost or that copying religious forms is the best way

to find it. I also encountered a counter discourse to this nostalgia, where there is a desire for more porous, organic forms of community and a belief that these more “modern” communal forms are more conducive to community than traditional forms like churches. I detailed how Sunday Assemblers had to find a balance between these two conceptions of community, and debates about the organization’s goals to be “radically inclusive” while remaining committed to secular people and values revealed the complex and contested nature of community in the nonreligious field.

My analysis of these debates and negotiations also reveals that community takes work to construct, which runs counter to our dominant sociological conceptions of community that are often nostalgic or idealistic and that gloss over the fact that it takes time and work to create the type of community for which many are nostalgic. I found that many nonreligious people are in the process of creating new communities, either individually or collectively, in the wake of leaving their religious communities, but that these efforts take time and they are not always successful. Importantly, however, in contrast to dominant stereotypes about anti-social and anomic atheists, many nonreligious people *are* putting in the work to cultivate community. In many cases, nonreligious people believe that their inclusive and individualistic conceptions of community are *more* conducive to social trust and communal obligations than the traditional communal forms that are so often praised in our social science narratives. And even when an attempt at community fails, which happened to many Sunday Assembler chapters, the important takeaway is that all has not been lost with modernity – modern, secular people are still finding ways to connect with others and build communal obligations.

This language of continued progress and “becoming” is represented perfectly in a statement written by the MSP Sunday Assembly chapter organizers after they decided to dissolve the MSP chapter in September 2019. A little over two years after I ended my fieldwork with them, the MSP chapter had to shut their doors due to a lack of resources and participation. After a successful beginning and Sunday services that sometimes boasted over 50 attendees, participation started to fall off over time and the organizers ultimately decided they could no longer sustain the financial or time commitments needed to keep the chapter going. This happened to numerous Sunday Assembly chapters and is a risk that comes with creating a non-profit organization from scratch based solely on volunteer labor, but the MSP organizers emphasized in their dissolution statement that the failure of the chapter did not mean that it failed to produce community. Instead, they saw it more as the beginnings of community that “bore fruit in friendship and connection” that will outlast the organization itself. They wrote,

Today is a hard day, a day of much frustration, but also a day in which we recognize and name this reality. As of today, Sunday Assembly Minneapolis/Saint Paul is no longer an active community organization. It is nevertheless an organization to which we and our much-appreciated volunteers have put a great volume of effort. Those efforts persisted under the motto “Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More.” Effort spent in pursuit of those ideals produced meaningful results for many members of the community even if they are not here to speak to it today, and in many cases, initial contact in Sunday Assembly bore fruit in friendship and connection which survives beyond the first cause. That is the legacy we can embrace and the message we’d like you to remember.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Modern but Not Meaningless

We are currently seeing an unprecedented growth in the number of nonreligious people in the United States. The percentage of Americans who claim “no religion” has grown dramatically over the last 40 years, from just under 7% in the 1980s, to 15% in the mid-2000s, to around 25% today (Pew 2015). Baker and Smith (2015) have deemed this phenomenon “The Great Abdicating” in their recent demographic analysis, and they argue that these trends in religious disaffiliation signal a significant historical shift with cultural implications for various institutional spheres, from politics, to family, to civic life. However, our sociological understandings of this growing demographic have been limited by dominant cultural and social science narratives that presume the loss of religion comes with a detrimental loss of certainty, meaning, and community. Much of the social scientific theorizing about the consequences of modernization and secularization is based in what Taylor (2007) calls a “subtraction story” – a story of moving *away* from stable social identities, communities, and religious beliefs, and moving *toward* a hollow and meaningless secular modernity that leaves individuals feeling uncertain, anomic, and socially isolated. In this narrative, atheists and other nonreligious people are assumed to be amoral, anti-social, and lacking in the meaningful belief systems and communal obligations that come with religion. These assumptions have led to the continued stigmatization of nonreligious people and have limited our understandings of how “modern,” secular individuals and societies operate.

In this dissertation, I draw on three years of ethnographic research with a network of atheist churches called The Sunday Assembly to disrupt this narrative of loss, revealing the meaningful cultures and communities that nonreligious people are constructing without religion. Rather than simply the *absence* of religious beliefs and practices, atheist churches signal the *presence* of substantive nonreligious beliefs and practices. And I show how practice-oriented investigations of these nonreligious cultures and communities can shed new light on core sociological questions about social change and meaning-making in contemporary social life. Instead of a demographic burdened by a detrimental loss of certainty, community, and meaning, I found a rich nonreligious field full of politicized certainty and meaningful uncertainty, contested conceptions and practices of community, and a meaning-filled discourse of “scientific spirituality” that combines the language of spirituality and transcendence with commitments to secular worldviews and scientific rationalism. I use the case of the Sunday Assembly to show how these nonreligious meaning systems are constructed, contextual, and contested.

Across my empirical chapters on the meaning of uncertainty, the practice of scientific spirituality, and the contested conceptions of community among the nonreligious, the themes of “balancing” and “becoming” dominated the discourses I found in the nonreligious field. Rather than assuming a static and meaningless modern world full of secular people with no commitment to or language for talking about certainty, transcendence, or shared moral values, I drew on a practice-oriented approach to culture that enabled me to investigate the processes and everyday cultural work that go into constructing identities, rituals, and communities without religion. While it is certainly the case that many nonreligious people *are* rejecting some of the more

traditional pathways for constructing identity and community, including certainty-filled supernatural beliefs and insular communal forms, they are not always rejecting them wholesale and the case of the Sunday Assembly illustrates how nonreligious people often attempt to find a meaningful mixture of and balance between “traditional” and “modern” forms. In their attempts to balance certainty and uncertainty, science and spirituality, and inclusivity and exclusivity, the nonreligious are creatively combining what are typically theorized as dichotomous discourses of religion and science, individualism and community, and secularity and spirituality. And much of the discourse around this balancing act is a sense of continuous “becoming” and a belief that the *process* of constructing identities, rituals, and communities is just as meaningful, if not more meaningful, than the ultimate product of that process.

In terms of the theme of “becoming,” each of my empirical chapters detail the in-process nature of the construction of nonreligious cultures and communities. In Chapter 3, I described how nonreligious people often move between uncertain and certain orientations toward their nonreligious identities and beliefs over time. While some nonreligious people are consistently certain or uncertain about existential questions for long periods of time, others describe a more context-dependent and fluid engagement with certainty and uncertainty. Thus, rather than permanent “trait-like” orientations toward existential uncertainty, many nonreligious people exhibit a more “state-like” orientation in which experiences of uncertainty carry different meanings across different contexts. In Chapter 4, I described what I called a “trial-and-error” approach to spirituality and ritual creation in which both Sunday Assemblers and non-assemblers believed that secular spiritual experiences could be intentionally cultivated with the help

of science, but that doing this successfully required practice. Instead of expecting to feel transcendent or to collectively effervesce immediately upon creating a new ritual, the nonreligious often *expect* ritual failure, and the idea is to keep working at a ritual and continuously fine-tune it until it produces the desired outcome. And in Chapter 5, I show how community takes work to construct and how many nonreligious people are in the process of creating new communities in the wake of leaving their religious communities. At the Sunday Assembly, assemblers drew on a discourse of “becoming” to talk about their conceptions of community as needing to be organic and slowly built over a long period of time. In contrast to much of our sociological literature that characterizes community as a universal, free-floating meaning system that can be lost or found, my case study of the nonreligious reveals how community is continuously constructed in relation to an ever-changing and contested set of discourses, values, and practices.

In their process of “becoming,” I also found that the nonreligious people I encountered in my fieldwork were attempting to balance a nostalgia for traditional cultural forms, like churches in the case of the Sunday Assembly, with a commitment to “modern” or “post-traditional” cultural forms, like scientific rationalism and individualism, to create meaningful identities, rituals, and communities. For many, this is a balancing act that requires continuous negotiation and compromise. In Chapter 3, I describe how nonreligious people have to navigate a complex nonreligious field full of politicized values and identities, which shapes their orientations to certainty and uncertainty. In the context of nonreligious identity politics, certainty has become part of a politicized narrative that constructs and promotes bounded, “certainty-filled” nonreligious identities that are associated with a specific set of politics and values. I

encountered several nonreligious individuals who described their own nonreligious identities and beliefs in ways that resonate with these certainty-filled discourses, but I also met people who developed counter-narratives of intentional uncertainty, often as a means of resisting or tempering these more certainty-filled orientations and identities. In Chapter 4, I detailed the ways that nonreligious people are trying to balance a desire for “secular spiritual” experiences with their commitments to scientific rationality and naturalism. Drawing on a discourse I call “scientific spirituality,” I found that nonreligious people draw explicitly on scientific research and methods to intentionally cultivate feelings of awe, wonder, transcendence, and collective effervescence. While some nonreligious people find meaning in solitary rituals and organic experiences of transcendence, and others are seeking out ways to intentionally create collective rituals and spiritual experiences, the majority of nonreligious people I encountered in my fieldwork used science and scientific discourses to explain and find meaning in their secular spiritual experiences. And in Chapter 5, I show how nonreligious communities like the Sunday Assembly have to find a balance between exclusive and inclusive conceptions of community. As Sunday Assembly chapters work to “become” a community, they have to navigate competing discourses in the nonreligious field about what community is and how to create it. For some, exclusivity and a narrow set of shared beliefs and values are needed to create community, but for others, inclusivity and porous boundaries create more “powerful and robust” communal forms. However, these discourses are not mutually exclusive, and many assemblers saw the merits in both and attempted to strike a balance between being “radically inclusive” and being overly exclusive.

These findings have several important implications for our dominant understandings of identity, community, and meaning in modernity. First, this study contributes to long-standing questions regarding the personal and social effects of modernization and secularization. As I explained in Chapter 1, there is pervasive paradigm in social science that presumes modern, secular people are filled with uncertainty and anxiety and that they are socially isolated and lacking in communal connections. It is often assumed that traditional meaning systems were more meaningful than modern ones, and that modern individuals are in a constant search for certainty, meaning, and community that is never fully satisfied (e.g. Reed and Adams 2011; Taylor 2007). However, my case study of the Sunday Assembly reveals that the nonreligious are not any less meaning-filled than are the religious, and that modern forms of identity and community can be just as conducive to meaning, individual well-being, and communal connections as can traditional forms. Rather than the universal search for certainty-filled beliefs, transcendent collective rituals, and ready-made communities full of like-minded people that our theoretical narratives often assume, many nonreligious people find meaning in uncertainty, solitary experiences of secular spirituality, and a more porous and organic conception of community.

As religious involvement has long been associated with higher levels of pro-social activities like volunteerism and community activism, as well as positive mental and physical health benefits (e.g. Lewis et al. 2013; May 2018; Putnam 2000), concerns about the health of our citizens and our social institutions is a common frame for research on the causes and consequences of religious disaffiliation. While recent quantitative research has found that more committed forms of nonreligion, like atheism, can motivate civic

engagement and positive mental health outcomes in the same ways that committed religious identities can, it is largely a consensus in social science that the nonreligious are often less involved in civic life and more likely to experience anxiety and depression (Baker et al. 2018; Frost and Edgell 2018; May 2018). However, my case study details the complex and contested meanings that nonreligious people associate with uncertainty, community, and well-being. Social isolation and anxiety did characterize some of the nonreligious narratives in my study, but there were many more narratives of nonreligion as a *freedom from* former anxieties and isolation. In Chapter 3, I found that rather than a constant search for certainty, some nonreligious people find meaning in uncertainty and describe it as a motivating framework for their nonreligious beliefs and identities. In Chapter 4, I describe how nonreligious people find meaning in a “scientific spirituality” that produces experiences of transcendence, greater meaning, and collective effervescence without any reference to religion or the supernatural. And in Chapter 5, I show how many nonreligious people are as committed, if not more committed, to community than they were when they were religious. However, some nonreligious people have found meaning in a more organic and porous conception of community that they believe is *more* inclusive and communal than what they see as the exclusionary and hierarchical nature of traditional conceptions of community.

In short, the loss of religion has not led to a loss of meaning, ritual, or community. Instead, it has led to the creation of new meanings, new rituals, and new conceptions of community. While many of these creations are still in the early stages of “becoming,” in contrast to our theoretical narratives that so often conflate meaningfulness with comfort, certainty, and success, I find that “meaningful” does not always mean “easy” or “lacking

in anxiety.” Many nonreligious people describe finding meaning in the awkward, uncomfortable, and often failed attempts at constructing new beliefs, practices, and communities. Whether through overcoming anxiety about the uncertainty of a nonreligious identity, struggling through failed attempts to create collective effervescence in conference workshops, or doing the work of creating an atheist church from scratch in an attempt to create community, the nonreligious people in my fieldwork often talked about the construction process as being just as meaningful as the ultimate product. And for some, there was a sense that this process of “becoming” was never ending, which meant that meaning had to be found in the journey rather than in anticipation for its end.

My findings also contribute to the growing literature on identity politics and the ways people “sort out and combine” contested sources of collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001). As other scholars have found, identity movements often promote narrowly focused movement identities that spur the development of more critical identities deployed in opposition (Bernstein 2005; Butler 1997). This has also been the case among the nonreligious, and I found that the discourses surrounding certainty, spirituality, and community are contested in the nonreligious field. Scholarship on identity politics often suggests that identity movements succeed, at least in part, because they provide a kind of certainty and community that is attractive to late-modern subjects (see Snow and McAdam 2000), but I have shown how discourses of certainty, spirituality, and community are not universal – they are shaped by social and political contexts. Whether someone calls themselves an environmentalist (e.g. Tesch and Kempton 2004) or a feminist (e.g. Reger 2015), for example, and whether one engages in political action on the basis of those identities, has as much to do with their current orientations toward

certainty and community as it has to do with their politics or values. In the same way, whether or not a nonreligious person seeks out a certainty-filled atheist identity or a “ready-made” community group full of people who share the same identity is shaped by their location in the nonreligious field specifically and in the social world more generally. The lack of racial and economic diversity in my sample is an important limitation when considering such questions, as power and privilege shape the meaning and distribution of community and uncertainty (Butler 1990; Sandoval 2000). The narratives included in this study come largely from white, middle-class, and formerly Christian U.S. citizens, and so they cannot speak to the intersections of racism, classism, and xenophobia that so often shape people’s orientations to certainty, spirituality, and community.

Another major implication stemming from my findings involves the measurement of nonreligious cultures and communities and the construction of quantitative surveys to more accurately capture these shifts in beliefs, practices, and identities that “The Great Abdicating” is said to signal (Baker and Smith 2015). In most of the quantitative research attempting to measure things like well-being, social connectedness, volunteerism, and a sense of meaning and purpose, the nonreligious are assumed to be a homogenous category with which to compare to the religious. Most surveys group all nonreligious people into one category – the “none” category – and then researchers make predictions about what nonreligious people do and believe based on this catch-all category.

Combined with the seeming consensus among social scientists that nonreligion is simply a *lack* of beliefs and practices, this operationalization strategy has resulted in a slew of research that associates nonreligion with weak social ties, loads of unhealthy existential uncertainty, and a lack of any real language for talking about meaning, transcendence, or

shared moral values. My case study disrupts these assumptions that all nonreligious people can be placed into one catch-all category – their discourses and practices surrounding identity construction, secular spirituality, and community engagement are contextual and contested, which means that we learn very little by throwing them all into one category in our surveys.

I found numerous examples of this in my work as a research fellow with the Boundaries in the American Mosaic survey project at the University of Minnesota. For example, in one analysis, I used the project’s expanded categories for nonreligious identity to expand on previous studies of nonreligious volunteerism that relied only on one measure of nonreligious identity (Frost and Edgell 2018). I found that atheists and the “spiritual but not religious” are just as likely to volunteer than are the religious, but that low participation among agnostics and “nothing in particulars” often drives the negative relationships found when these nonreligious groups are combined into a single measure. As people who claim “nothing in particular” make up about 15% of the nonreligious population in the U.S. (see Pew 2015), their practices and values often overshadow those in much smaller groups, like atheists and agnostics who make up only 3% and 5%, respectively. In a similar study, my co-authors and I analyzed gender differences in nonreligiosity (Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017). We found that women were not less likely to identify as nonreligious more generally, but that they were less likely to identify as atheist, even when they reported having no belief in a god or universal spirit. In addition, women reported that they had experienced discrimination for their nonreligious beliefs at higher rates than men. These examples show how even slightly expanded categories for nonreligious respondents that rely on understandings of

nonreligion as meaningful and diverse can result in new understandings of what the recent trends toward disaffiliation mean for individuals and the communities of which they are a part.

However, it is not just expanded identity categories that are needed. While there are numerous survey questions that measure diversity among religious beliefs and practices – from frequency of prayer, to types of religious service involvement, to subtle differences in theology – there are no parallel measures for getting at these nuances in nonreligious beliefs and practices. For example, there are essentially no widely used social scientific surveys that capture participation in a group like the Sunday Assembly. While there are almost always questions about church attendance, surveys rarely ask about explicitly nonreligious values-based communities. So, there is no way to make broader comparisons between the effects of participating in traditional religious communities and of participating in emerging religious-like secular communities like the Sunday Assembly. Similarly, many of the rituals and practices that I detailed in this dissertation are not captured in our surveys in the same ways as religious practices like prayer, fasting, or meditation are captured. The nonreligious are starting churches, having secular sing-alongs, developing liturgical calendars, paying for sensory deprivation tanks, building ritual laboratories, and conducting secular spirituality workshops, but these kinds of nonreligious practices are not captured in our social surveys, and so it is difficult to make real comparisons across religious and nonreligious people and there are numerous remaining questions about the new sources of connection, meaning, and purpose being created in our changing religious landscape. One of my first postdoctoral projects is going to be to build from my qualitative case study to start building better

survey measures of nonreligious identity and practice, as it is often our quantitative research that makes it into the public sphere and shapes public understandings, and better measures can help to reduce stereotypes about nonreligious disengagement and disenchantment that continue to pervade our American discourses.

In addition, my findings illustrate the need for more longitudinal studies of nonreligious cultures and communities. Given that one of the dominant themes in my fieldwork was that of the “becoming” of identity, spirituality, and community, quantitative surveys that ask about engagement and well-being at one point in time fail to capture the in-process nature of identity and community construction. For example, with a more longitudinal approach, in Chapter 3 I was able to examine questions regarding when states of uncertainty were exciting and motivating, when and why uncertainty resulted in anxiety and depression, and whether uncertainty was a newfound state or a more permanent trait-like aspect of someone’s approach to meaning. I also found that not only do people operate on a spectrum of orientations toward uncertainty, but that those orientations can and do change over time. And as people's orientations to certainty and uncertainty change, so too do the various negative and positive effects they experience as a result. So, if someone is feeling anxiety about the uncertainty surrounding their agnosticism at one point in time, it is very possible that they will become more comfortable with that uncertainty over time. Similarly, the in-process nature of community construction that I found in my fieldwork means that nonreligious people’s community engagement might not be fully captured with point-in-time measures of volunteerism and organizational membership. Many nonreligious people have only recently left their religious communities and they are still in the process of redefining

their understandings of community and slowly building new communities. Similarly, many nonreligious organizations, like the Sunday Assembly, are still in the very early stages of development, as the nonreligious demographic in the U.S. has only recently grown large enough to accommodate something like a network of well-attended and enriching atheist churches. Thus, it will be important to continue investigating the evolving discourses surrounding certainty, spirituality, and community among the nonreligious rather than assuming a homogenous, static, and unfulfilling secularity that is predetermined by the forces of modernization.

In conclusion, atheist churches like the Sunday Assembly are not a paradox. Instead, they are an example of the new and creative cultures that secular individuals are constructing in the absence of religion. In other words, they are modern, but not meaningless. In contrast to our dominant narratives about rising rates of religious disaffiliation in the U.S. causing negative outcomes like social isolation, a devaluing of community and civic engagement, and an increasing sense of meaninglessness, I find that many nonreligious people are constructing new communities and cultivating new meanings in their lives. All has not been lost with modernization, and much can be found with a practice-oriented approach that is attuned to the processes, contexts, and “becoming” of meaning in modernity.

Chapter 7

Research Methods

This methodological appendix details the choices I made in conducting the research for this project. I collected the data through participant observation of Sunday Assembly services, events, and conferences, semi-structured interviews with Sunday Assemblers and nonreligious non-assemblers, and content analysis of emails and other organization materials produced by members of the Sunday Assembly. This data was collected over three-and-a-half years, from starting participant observation with the Minneapolis/St. Paul chapter of the Sunday Assembly in March 2014 to conducting my last interview with a nonreligious non-assembler in November 2017. During this time, I conducted approximately 300 hours of participant observation and 50 in-depth interviews. I also analyzed more than 5,000 emails written by Sunday Assemblers from chapters across the globe that were shared through the Sunday Assembly Everywhere email forum. Together, my observational field notes and interview transcripts, along with the Sunday Assembly Everywhere email forum and other organizational documents, constitute the sources for the analysis and arguments in the previous chapters.

Case Selection

My initial interest in nonreligious groups like the Sunday Assembly started back in 2011 when I was working on my master's thesis at Portland State University. For my thesis project, I was investigating whether the discourses coming from dominant atheist organizations and spokespersons – organizations like the American Atheists and the Freedom From Religion Foundation and spokespersons like “new atheists” Richard

Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens – were resonating with actual atheists (Frost 2012). In the mid-2000s, there was a noticeable increase in activism surrounding nonreligious identities in the United States, particularly atheism, that was being spearheaded by organizations like the American Atheists. At the same time, a spate of popular non-fiction books by scientists and journalists like Dawkins (2006), Hitchens (2007), and Sam Harris (2005) were published that were highly critical of all religions and that argued that only actions grounded in science and rationality were moral (see Cimino and Smith 2014; Kettall 2014; LeDrew 2015). As someone who was questioning their own religious path during this same time period, I had encountered a lot of these books and discourses in my quest to figure out what I believed and who I wanted to become. And once I started graduate school and began to better understand religion and identity from a sociological perspective, I wanted to use that knowledge to investigate how other nonreligious people were finding and responding to these dominant discourses and the politicization of atheism as a moral identity.

In my interviews with individual atheists about their own atheist identities and their reactions to these dominant discourses in the nonreligious field, I found that while most were grateful for organizations like the American Atheists who are fighting for the rights of nonreligious people, many were hesitant to participate in these kind of organizations because they saw them as too anti-religious. Many of my interviewees supported issues like the separation of church and state and agreed that religion could be harmful in certain cases, but few wanted to organize a protest or write to their legislator about these issues. Instead, a dominant theme in my interviews was a desire to find more communal spaces for nonreligious people that enabled more long-term connections,

emotionality, ritual, and engagement with the larger community. Based on these findings, I applied to PhD programs to investigate what these nonreligious cultures and communities might look like and how they might shed new light on long-standing sociological theories about identity, community, and meaning among the nonreligious.

Sunday Assembly was founded two years later in 2013, the year I started the PhD program at University of Minnesota. I first heard about the organization from a news story I came across, and I quickly looked to see if there were any chapters near me. I found a Meetup.com page for people interested in starting a Sunday Assembly chapter in Minneapolis and attended one of the first organizing meetings to determine if it was a viable option for a case study. I will talk more about access and positionality below, but here I want to focus on why Sunday Assembly is a good case for investigating questions of identity and community among the nonreligious. To start, the fact that the Sunday Assembly was a nascent organization when I started my fieldwork allowed me to investigate how the boundaries and identities within the organization were constructed and negotiated over time. This enabled a more practice-oriented, process-based analysis, which was missing from the largely quantitative investigations of nonreligious populations being conducted at the time. The Sunday Assembly is also one of the larger nonreligious community-focused groups in the nonreligious field, particularly at the height of its popularity in 2015 when over 70 cities across the globe had a chapter. While there are other nonreligious community groups with similar structures, including the Houston Oasis, the Seattle Atheist Church, and the North Texas Church of Freethought, these groups only have one or two chapters. Thus, the size and global reach of the Sunday Assembly offered a particularly productive site for investigating how nonreligious

cultures are negotiated across different cultural contexts. This made for a richer analysis and more generalizable findings than if I had just studied one singular group in one specific place. Finally, the Sunday Assembly's explicit attempts to be community focused, radically inclusive, and anti-political are in stark contrast to the political and anti-religious discourses that dominate the nonreligious field. Thus, the case of the Sunday Assembly allowed me to investigate how nonreligious people's beliefs and identities shape, and are shaped by, these contestations in the field.

Access and Positionality

At the very first organizing meeting I attended in March 2014, I introduced myself to everyone as an atheist and as a sociologist who studies atheists. I made it clear from the beginning that I was interested in doing my dissertation project on the Sunday Assembly and that I had come to the organizing meeting to see if they MSP organizers would be open to me using their chapter as my primary case. I explained that I was interested in disrupting understandings of the nonreligious as anti-social and anti-communal, and that I wanted to participate in any and all aspects of the organization that I could in order to tell a rich ethnographic story about the creation of nonreligious community. The MSP organizers were all very open to the idea, and I quickly obtained IRB approval to start formally observing the group and interviewing its members. As part of this process, I posted a Social Consent statement on the MSP chapter's website to inform all members of my role as a researcher and their rights as research participants. I soon learned that I was not the only one studying the Sunday Assembly, and numerous academic investigations, documentary features, and newspaper stories have since been published about the organization. This makes sense, as this is a nascent group looking for

publicity, but it also makes sense because nonreligious people in general, and atheists in particular, are more likely to be college educated and pro-science than the general population in the United States (Baker and Smith 2015). Thus, most of the assemblers I encountered viewed my research positively and encouraged further research into nonreligious populations.

In addition to positive attitudes towards academia and science among the nonreligious more generally, my insider status as an atheist made it easier for me to access the organization and gain the trust of my participants. Not only did my atheism come up in almost every conversation I had with Sunday Assemblers about my project, as assemblers often asked about my religious identity and the motivations for my study, I am also often *visibly* nonreligious thanks to a large Darwin fish tattoo I have on my forearm. The Darwin fish is a popular symbol among atheists, as it signals a belief in evolution and is a humorous jab at religion,⁴ and it provided visible proof that I was not religious. This, combined with my stated intentions of reducing the stigma of atheists by showing how they are creating new communities and rituals rather than retreating from meaning and community, helped me to gain access and build trust. I was also raised in an extremely religious family, and so I had many shared experiences with my participants who had deconverted and were using Sunday Assembly as a replacement for religion.

I also quickly became part of the organizing team of the MSP chapter, which shaped my access to and interactions with other Sunday Assemblers. When I started my ethnographic observations, I made it clear that I was willing and wanted to help the

⁴ The Darwin fish is an image of feet growing out of the ichthys symbol, or “Jesus fish,” often used to proclaim an affiliation with Christianity. The addition of the feet symbolizes a belief in evolution over creationism.

organizers when I could rather than just sit in the corner taking notes. This was a fledgling organization run on volunteer work, so I helped set up and take down the tables and decorations for the Sunday services, I showed up at volunteering events to ensure enough people were there to get the task done, and I eventually become the secretary and minutes taker at the organizing meetings for the MSP chapter. The organizers agreed to let me sit in and observe their meetings so I could see how decisions were made, but they asked if I would be willing to type up my fieldnotes into meeting minutes as well. I took on this role for the full three years I observed the MSP chapter. Soon, I was looked at by many of the members as one of the organizers and as someone who was knowledgeable about the organization. As part of my role as an organizer, I was added to the Sunday Assembly Everywhere email forum, which I later gained IRB permission to include in my analysis. Thus, I was very much an insider at the Sunday Assembly – as an atheist, as a formerly religious person, and as an organizer of the MSP chapter. I am also a white, middle-class, college-educated American, which is the modal identity in the nonreligious field (see Baker and Smith 2015). Almost everyone I encountered at the Sunday Assembly had a similar racial, class, and religious background as me, which further entrenched my insider status.

However, I was also an outsider in some ways, largely due to my role as a researcher and my explicit attempts to distance myself from the relationships being built at the Sunday Assembly. While I got to know many of the MSP assemblers well over my three years with the organization, especially the organizers that I saw multiple times a month at events, meetings, and services, I never developed any friendships with them or interacted with them outside of Sunday Assembly events. This was largely intentional, as

I wanted to maintain the integrity of my role as a researcher. I do not believe that any research, especially qualitative research, can be objective, and objectivity was never my goal. However, I felt that it was important to keep a boundary between my personal life and my role as a researcher. This was particularly important because Sunday Assembly is primarily focused on creating long-lasting, intensely supportive relationships, and I felt it would be unethical for me to engage in that kind of relationship building as a researcher who did not intend to continue participation once my research was complete. What this meant, though, was that while the organizers and other members of Sunday Assembly slowly developed friendships over time, and were eventually hanging out outside of assembly events, I maintained a much more professional relationship with everyone. This made me an outsider of sorts, as I was noticeably “the researcher” rather than an integrated member of the community. This almost certainly shaped my analysis and understandings of community formation at the Sunday Assembly. While I was able to participate in the pop song sing-alongs, go to the volunteering events, and listen to the inspirational talks, I did not participate in the development of long-lasting and supportive relationships, which is a key aspect of the Sunday Assembly.

Methodology

This project is grounded firmly in qualitative methods and logics. Whereas quantitative research relies on statistical inference, sample-based logics, and generalizability, qualitative research relies on logical inference, case-based logics, and saturation (Mitchell 1983; Small 2009; Weiss 1994, Yin 2002). Sample-based logics and statistical methods are best for asking descriptive questions about a population or

measuring the prevalence of a phenomenon, but questions about process and practice are better approached through ethnographic methods and case-based logics (Ragin and Becker 1992; Small 2009, Yin 2002). Participant observation is the primary method for uncovering mechanisms and tracing processes (Lofland and Lofland 1995), and ethnographic case studies are one of the best methods for obtaining emergent knowledge and revealing unknown processes (Small 2009; Yin 2002). Thus, my case study of the Sunday Assembly is not meant to generate generalizable data; instead, my goal was to uncover the processes and mechanisms through which nonreligious cultures get made and experience for myself the rituals and communities that they are trying to create (McRoberts 2004; Winchester 2008).

Case studies typically focus on a single organization, program, neighborhood, or event, and they draw on multiple sources of evidence related to the case (Ragin and Becker 1992; Yin 2002). Case studies are primarily used to answer “how” and “why” questions, relying on in-depth investigation into the contexts and boundaries of a single case (Yin 2002). However, case studies are not just a form of data; many argue that “the case study” is a method in itself (Burawoy 1998; Yin 2002). Burawoy (1998) developed an “extended case method” in which the goal of a case study is to test existing theories and analyze the broader social forces that are shaping the specific case in question. He argues that instead of trying to reach statistical significance, as quantitative scholars do, qualitative scholars should strive for “societal significance.” The single case, in Burawoy’s view, should inform theories about society as a whole. Thus, I see my case study of the Sunday Assembly as in many ways “extending” theories of modernization and secularization in ways that disrupt the subtraction stories those theories often tell.

However, Small (2009) draws on Mitchell's (1983) conception of the extended case method to argue that the value of case studies is not only that they can test existing theories, but that they offer emergent knowledge about unknown processes and practices. Small (2009) argues that the latter contribution can be made through "logical inferences" about how a case might inform other empirical cases, rather than theory in general. So, while my case study does not allow me to make conclusions like "All atheists do x," it does allow me to make statements like "When atheists do x, whether y will follow often depends on z" (Small 2009). For example, as I have shown in this dissertation, when atheists seek out community, whether or not they seek out a church-like form like the Sunday Assembly often depends on their conceptions of certainty, spirituality, and community, which are shaped by the larger nonreligious field.

While my fieldwork with the MSP chapter of the Sunday Assembly helped me get at "how" non-religious culture gets made, my interviews with Sunday Assemblers helped me get at "why" individuals seek out and create non-religious cultures and what they feel and think about it. Pugh (2013) argues that a fundamental characteristic of in-depth interviews is that they can access "different levels of information about people's motivation, beliefs, meanings, feelings and practices – in other words, the culture they use – often in the same sitting" (50). Pugh argues against "cognitive culturalists" like Haidt (2005) and Vaisey (2009) who suggest that interviews yield only surface level data about individual motivations. Scholars like Vaisey (2009) argue that interviews only elicit "after-the-fact rationalizations" of behavior, whereas properly worded survey questions force individuals to make "snap judgments" that rely on "more visceral," subconscious beliefs. The cognitive culturalist camp believes that, because people often

report contradictory motivations, goals, and commitments, they cannot be trusted to tell the truth about their own feelings and motivations.

However, Pugh (2013) argues that this incoherence is actually how culture is created and contested. Individuals will tell us not only what they've done, but they will tell us how they feel about it and how they came to feel that way. Through verbal cues like metaphors, jokes, and discursive innovations and non-verbal cues like facial expressions and bodily gestures, interviewers can not only obtain important information about individual motivations and experiences, but also ascertain emotional responses to those experiences. Pugh (2013) suggests that there are at least four kinds of information that can come from a well-executed in-depth interview: "honorable" data about how interviewees want to be perceived; "schematic" data about the language interviewees use to convey the frameworks through which they view the world; "visceral" data about interviewees' emotional responses to their situations; and "meta-feelings," or how interviewees feel about how they feel. Interviews with Sunday Assemblers and non-assemblers, then, allowed me to get at important data that I was not able to obtain with observations alone regarding why individuals might join something like the Sunday Assembly, what they get out of it, and how they framed their participation or lack of participation in relation to their nonreligious identities and values.

My logic regarding how *many* interviews to conduct was based on the case-logic described above (Small 2009; Yin 2002). Instead of trying to interview a "representative" number of Sunday Assemblers or non-assemblers, I used a case-logic to determine when I reached saturation (Weiss 1994). Yin (2002) argues that, using a case-logic, we can think of interviews as making up multiple case-studies instead of a small sample. With

this method, interviews proceed sequentially and each new interview (or case) yields an increasingly accurate understanding of the research question(s). The researcher does not set out to obtain a set number of cases, but instead continues interviewing until no new or surprising information is found. Importantly, each new interview should be informed by the last, meaning that I refined my interview guide as my interviews progressed. While I believe I did reach saturation in my interviews with Sunday Assemblers, given that I also had access to over 5,000 emails from assemblers in the email forum, I do not feel I reached saturation with the non-assemblers because people who do not join Sunday Assembly is too large and amorphous of a population to ever reach saturation. However, I treated these interviews as individual cases with which to compare to my larger case of the Sunday Assembly and my smaller cases of individuals who attend the Sunday Assembly.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participant Observation

When I started my three years of participant observation with the Sunday Assembly, I immersed myself in every aspect of the organization. I attended almost every Sunday service, organizing meeting, volunteer event, and small group social activity that the group held for the first year of my study. I wanted to investigate how a community group came together from scratch, and so I wanted to observe as much of the construction process as I could while the MSP chapter took shape. After about year of multiple observations a month at various MSP Sunday Assembly activities, the MSP chapter was running fairly smoothly and had come to a largely stable set of members and boundaries.

I continued to attend the organizing meetings regularly as the minutes taker, but attended the volunteering events and Sunday services less frequently during the second and third year, averaging about two events a month rather than the four or five I was averaging during the first year. In this way, I stayed abreast of any updates or changes to the services or activities and maintained my ethnographic presence in the group over the three years without becoming too enmeshed in the day-to-day goings on to avoid burnout.

During my observations, I rarely used a recording device and typically had to rely on shorthand notes to then flesh out in my fieldnotes after the events. At the Sunday services, I did not need to use a recorder because the services were filmed and posted on a YouTube channel by the MSP organizers themselves. This meant I was able to go back and watch the services later to fill out my fieldnotes. However, I avoided using my own recording device because I wanted to be careful not to make anyone feel uncomfortable. For one, atheists are stigmatized in the United States, and many people I encountered at the Sunday Assembly were fearful of the religious people in their lives finding out that they were atheist or that they attended an atheist event like the Sunday Assembly. Also, this was a nascent community group that was trying to build new relationships and trust among strangers, and I felt that explicitly recording these services as a researcher could hinder that relationship building. I also avoided taking too many hand-written notes during the services for similar reasons. I did not want people to feel watched because the goal of Sunday Assembly is to create highly emotional experiences, secular spirituality, and communal connections. If I were to sit in the corner and take notes about everything people were doing and saying, that would likely disrupt this process. So, for the most part, I participated fully in the services, jotting down reminders for myself once in a

while to flesh out in my write up of the event later. Then, immediately after the services, I wrote up fieldnotes about what went on at the service, how it felt and looked, and any notable conversations I had with the people there.

At the organizing meetings, it was expected of me that I be taking notes as the minutes-taker, and so it was much easier for me to take notes about what was being said and the decisions that were being made. I did not audio record these meetings, however, because I felt that it would be overly intrusive, and I had plenty of hand-written notes to work from already. I also did not use an audio recorder or employ much notetaking during the volunteering events and social activities put on by MSP chapter, as the volunteering events typically involved physical activities like packing boxes, handing out water at a marathon, or serving soup at a homeless shelter, so a recording device would not have been appropriate in these situations. And at the social events, like trivia nights or potlucks, the use of an audio recorder also felt inappropriate. Similar to the Sunday services, I simply took down detailed fieldnotes immediately after the event or activity.

The one space that I did use an audio recorder was during the Conference Called Wonder in Atlanta. I attended this three-day conference, which was only the second conference that the larger Sunday Assembly organization had held, in May of 2015. I audio recorded many of the workshops I attended and plenary talks I sat in on, and also took down detailed fieldnotes after each conference day about the look and feel of the workshops and interactions I had with people there. The Sunday Assembly also has a website with a charter, motto, bylaws, and other organizational documents, which I included in my analysis of the organization.

To analyze my fieldnotes, I compiled all of my notes from services and events,

my minutes from organizing meetings, and typed transcripts of the audio recordings from the conference and uploaded them into Atlas.ti. I coded these materials for emergent themes around topics I was interested in, including nonreligious identity formation, ritual practice among the nonreligious, and conceptions of community and social obligation. I focused on fleshing out the negotiations that Sunday Assemblers made as they constructed their identities and communities, and the ways that Sunday Assembly as an organization both enabled and constrained those negotiations.

Interviews with Sunday Assemblers

As part of my case study of the Sunday Assembly, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 MSP assemblers. I interviewed everyone who was an organizer of the chapter throughout my three years of observation, as well as numerous regular attendees and a few people who came only a few times. I also interviewed some people after they stopped attending services to get a sense of why people left. Recruitment for these interviews almost always happened in person at a Sunday Assembly event. I interviewed the organizers of the chapter first, as they were my first contacts and were already aware of my status as a researcher. Then, as the chapter started to grow and there were more regular attendees, I asked people I had seen at services or events a few times if they would be interested in talking with me about their experiences with the Sunday Assembly. I was careful to wait to ask people to be interviewed until they had come to more than one assembly event. I did not want to turn anyone off of the organization by approaching them about my study the first time they attended an event, as I was afraid I would hinder the organization's growth. This meant that I missed out on what would have been useful interviews with people who came once but never again, as it would have

been interesting to know what it is they were looking for by showing up and what it was that was missing when they got there. However, it was important for me that I do as much as I could to reduce my impact on the trajectory of the organization itself and to avoid either explicitly recruiting or repelling potential members.

In my interviews, I asked MSP assemblers to tell me about their history with religion, if any, and how they came to the nonreligious identity and beliefs they had at the time of our interview. I asked them about their understandings of “community” more generally and their organizational memberships more specifically, including if and how often they volunteered and for what causes. I also asked them about their understandings of ritual and spirituality and whether or not those were things they were interested in cultivating as nonreligious people. And, of course, I asked them about their participation at the Sunday Assembly – how they learned about it, why they started participating, what they get out of participation, and how they hoped to see the organization progress in the future. And for those who had stopped participating in the Sunday Assembly, I asked them why and inquired about whether they were seeking out similar community forms elsewhere. Interviews ranged anywhere from 40 to 120 minutes and they were audio recorded and transcribed. Similar to my fieldnotes and meeting minutes, I coded the interview transcripts for emergent themes related to nonreligious identity formation, ritual and spiritual practices, and conceptions of community and social obligation.

Content Analysis of Sunday Assembly Everywhere Email Forum

As I explained earlier in this appendix, I gained access to the Sunday Assembly Everywhere email forum in my role as an organizer for the MSP chapter. All organizers of all Sunday Assembly chapters were added to the email forum, which amounted to

hundreds of people across 70 cities globally. The email forum was extremely active, especially during the first two years of my fieldwork, as this was the time when all of these chapters were just getting started and writing in with questions, concerns, and ideas. Sometimes this was just a one-off email to share an interesting link or ask a quick question. Other times, it was a long exchange between members about a specific topic, like the email chains regarding secular rituals and radical inclusivity that I detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. Organizers from various chapters used the forum to share ideas for growing their assemblies, debate about issues related to nonreligious identity and radical inclusivity, and engage with the founders of the Sunday Assembly to get advice, ask questions, and sometimes even critique decisions made at the organizational level. At the end of my three years receiving emails from this forum, I had 953 email chains saved, which amounted to over 5,000 individual emails when I uploaded them into Atlas.ti. I never participated in the forum myself. I coded these email conversations in the same way I coded my fieldnotes and interviews, though my email analysis also focused on how boundaries around the organization were being created across the various chapters and I compared the reports from other assembly chapters with my primary case of the MSP chapter.

Interviews with Nonreligious Non-assemblers

Finally, to supplement my case study of the Sunday Assembly, in the fall of 2017 I interviewed 25 nonreligious people in the Twin Cities area who were *not* involved with the Sunday Assembly. While the congregational form that the Sunday Assembly takes is certainly a trendy new form of nonreligious community, it is far from the only form, and it is yet to be determined if it is the most “successful” at fulfilling the needs of the

nonreligious. Not only are there other nonreligious organizations and groups to join, there is an even larger population of nonreligious “non-joiners” who are not members of any religious *or* non-religious organizations (Sumerau and Cragun 2016). Thus, I conducted interviews with people I call “nonreligious non-assemblers” to broaden my analysis beyond just the Sunday Assembly and investigate how people outside of this organization think and talk about nonreligious identity, ritual, and community. These non-assembler interviewees all identified as nonreligious in some way but had never attended a Sunday Assembly service.

Through a variety of recruitment methods, including snow-ball sampling and posting flyers and ads around the Cities and online, I interviewed 25 nonreligious non-assemblers who inhabited diverse spaces within the nonreligious field and offered important contrasts to the Sunday Assemblers at the center of my study (Small 2009; Yin 2002). Some of the non-assembler interviewees had joined other nonreligious groups – some were involved in humanist or Unitarian communities and others were involved in the more political atheist groups in the area – but many had never attended or even heard of organized nonreligious groups of any kind. While I did not offer interview incentives to the Sunday Assemblers I interviewed because I was reciprocating with volunteer labor as a minutes taker and organizer, I felt that in order to recruit non-assemblers outside of the organization I would need to provide a monetary incentive. Using funds awarded through the Anna Welsch Bright Foundation, I offered all of the non-assembler interviewees a \$35 gift card in exchange for their interview.

My interview guide for non-assemblers was similar to my guide for assemblers. I asked them about their history with religion and their current existential beliefs and

nonreligious identity, I asked them about their organizational memberships, volunteerism, and conceptions of community, and I asked them about their understandings of secular spirituality and whether or not they had any spiritual or ritual practices. However, instead of asking them about their experiences with the Sunday Assembly, I explained the concept of the Sunday Assembly to them and asked for their reactions. This allowed me to investigate differences between nonreligious people interested in joining something like the Sunday Assembly and nonreligious people not interested in this kind of communal form, which provided important contrasts regarding conceptions of certainty, community, and spirituality that I fleshed out in my empirical chapters. Interviews ranged anywhere from 40 to 120 minutes and they were audio recorded and transcribed. Similar to my fieldnotes and interviews with Sunday Assemblers, I coded the interview transcripts for emergent themes related to nonreligious identity formation, ritual and spiritual practices, and conceptions of community and social obligation.

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