Sociological Perspectives on the Sunday Assembly as Religion

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Abstract

The Sunday Assembly, a non-religious group co-founded in 2013 by Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, appears to be attempting to create a church without God. However, it is not clear whether simply embracing the external trappings of religious experience qualifies this specific manifestation of atheism as a religion itself. This article explores the core doctrines of the Assembly through the lenses of three prominent sociologists, Christian Smith, Christopher Dawson, and Peter Berger, to explore to what extent it is possible for a group that does not affirm the supernatural to be defined as a religion. Each sociologist presents a definition of religion that is then compared to the Charter of the Assembly to find areas of convergence and divergence. The Assembly fails to meet the religious criteria laid out by Smith and Dawson because of the lack of belief in the supernatural, while it could possibly, with some nuances considered, be considered a religion by Berger's definition.

Keywords: The Sunday Assembly, Atheism, Religion, Peter Berger, Christian Smith, Christopher Dawson

David Zahl wrote that "Our small-r religion is the justifying story of our life" (2019:4-5). Even without belief in some kind of higher power, humans have a tendency to place something—work, relationships, food, entertainment—in a position of ultimate importance to give meaning to their existence. The much-publicized Sunday Assembly provides a lens to examine the connection between unbelief and religion sociologically, exploring a church without God that aspires to fill the religious void in the lives of those who otherwise would not find themselves attending a traditional church service.

The Sunday Assembly is a non-religious group co-founded in 2013 by Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. The group now has congregations around the world that hold gatherings, play music, and allow those who would not feel comfortable in a traditional religious community to belong to a community. Attendees often are seeking to find the benefits accompanying

religious practice without the religion. Katie Engelhart visited an Assembly and wrote, "I like the idea of a secular temple, where atheists can enjoy the benefits of an idealized, traditional church—a sense of community, a thought-provoking sermon, a scheduled period of respite, easy access to community service opportunities, group singing, an ethos of self-improvement, free food—without the stinging imposition of God Almighty" (2013). Kaya Oakes documented a similar experience from interviewing members of the Sunday Assembly. "Even after departing organized religion, many non-believers missed what was good about it … community was foremost, followed by ritual or some sort of repeated set of actions, and often a sense of social engagement" (Oakes 2015:230). The existence of the network that Engelhart and Oakes referred to appears to make be even more appealing than the content of the belief. Kevin McCafferee (2019) discovered, when compared to atheistic social networks, theistic social networks do not provide any additional benefits. Those without networks or with weaker networks experience lesser psychological benefits, but there is no evidence to believe the content of belief or unbelief makes a difference. Adam Mrdjenovich (2018) re-confirms that individuals do not need to be religious or spiritual to derive health benefits such as reflection or social connectedness from the same sources religious believers do. Sarah J. Charles et al. (2021) studied Sunday Assembly members specifically and found similar increases in social bonding to those who attended traditional Christian services. All these sources suggest having an affirming community, supportive of one's unbelief, compels individuals to attend Sunday Assembly on a conscious and perhaps even biological level (McCaffree 2019).

Belonging in the modern age is different than in prior times. Esther McIntosh considered the increase in online church attendance, and believed part of its appeal is

> that it makes it possible to engage in religious activities without having to assent to particular religious beliefs ... Membership of an online community, therefore, holds a somewhat ambiguous status; the members may be flitting from one community to another and the community's leader cannot presume that members share commitment or beliefs. (2015:154)

Religious rootlessness is possible in a secularized culture. Despite the many benefits associated with being a part of an affirming atheistic or theistic community, Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme and Joel Thiessen (2020) discovered a positive association between those who participated in non-believing activities and those who had previously experienced discrimination due to non-belief. While their data suggest social barriers to non-belief still exist, those barriers are substantially lower than they would have been in times past. As Charles Taylor claims, "If we go back a few centuries in our civilization, we see that God was present ... in a whole host of social practices—not just the political—and at all levels of society" (2007:1-2). Experiencing non-belief as a culturally acceptable alternative to belief is a consequence of the secularization of Western society. Taylor suggests a shift "from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed,

unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (2007:3). Even religious gatherings, once the sacred space of only those appealing to a higher power, can be called to worship something other than the supernatural.

The Sunday Assembly does not claim to be a group solely for atheists, but in their ten-point Charter (2013), the third item states the group "has no deity. We don't do supernatural but we also won't tell you you're wrong if you do." Even though they experienced an early schism over how dogmatically atheistic they wanted to be, the organization is nevertheless secular and functions without any type of belief in God or gods (Huffington Post 2014). They accept religious believers of all kinds attending their congregations, but in terms of pure policy, they are atheistic. The question is whether the rejection of the supernatural as necessary for full agreement with the Charter at the heart of the Sunday Assembly disqualifies this brand of atheism from being classified as a religion. Sociologists define religions differently, so the purpose of this paper is to examine the arguments of three prominent voices, Christian Smith, Christopher Dawson, and Peter Berger, and consider the cases they make for or against the Sunday Assembly as a religion.

Christian Smith

It might be easy to classify Christian Smith as one who would say atheism is not a religion. His definition of religion seems to necessitate the belief in the supernatural. Smith writes, "Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad" (2017:22). The significant question is what Smith means by "superhuman." There are many superhuman features in the natural world. Some questions concerning the nature of the universe are beyond human comprehension. For example, for both the theist and the atheist, understanding why there is something rather than nothing requires an answer from somewhere beyond humanity. Something either comes from the supernatural, or it is simply a brute fact of the universe. Superhuman is not necessarily equivalent with supernatural.

Smith contends that defining something as superhuman necessitates supernatural origin. Superhuman powers are those "believed to exist in a completely different realm of being, on another plane of existence, and reaching them requires breaking through a barrier or bridging a gap" (Smith 2017:35). According to Smith, superhuman and supernatural must be equivalent, but the Sunday Assembly would dispute that claim. Their self-proclaimed motto is, "Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More" (Charter 2013). Focusing on wonder specifically, the Assembly explains that "hearing talks, singing as one, listening to readings and even playing

games helps us to connect with each other and the awesome world we live in" (Charter 2013). Wondering implies something unknown; no one wonders what is around the next corner if they have already been there. If members are encouraged to wonder more, the ultimate goal cannot be just to discover, but to marvel in the mystery. As soon as something has a firm, understandable definition, there is no need to wonder.

The Sunday Assembly seems to be open to both kinds of exploration. They are concerned with understanding what is. The second point in their Charter states that they will pursue "wisdom from all sources" (2013). All sources would include the knowledge of what is and what has been discovered about the universe. However, including wonder implies they have a broader definition of the universe. Perhaps there are natural elements that are not reliant on the supernatural but are also beyond human comprehension. Smith would not classify natural elements existing beyond human comprehension as superhuman, but judging by the founding documents of the Sunday Assembly, they may dispute that. Simply by having atheistic assumptions in their Charter, they do not believe in the superhuman. They may take issue with Smith's definition that the only way to reach beyond humanity is to believe in something beyond nature. The inclusion of wonder as a core doctrine calls Smith's equivocation into question.

Consequently, even though Smith would conclude that the atheistic belief espoused by the Sunday Assembly disqualifies it from being a religion because it lacks superhuman elements, it seems prudent to evaluate how well the Sunday Assembly meets the remaining criteria Smith lays out for a religion. Considering the rest of Smith's definition to see if the Assembly could qualify as a religion in all other ways seems worthwhile, especially if his definition for superhuman may be too narrow as previously argued.

The first stage of Smith's definition emphasizes the importance of having rituals. Smith writes that religion is a "complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers" (2017:22). Setting aside Smith's use of superhuman, every religion needs to have practices motivated by its central beliefs. The Christian is going to pray because, according to Scripture, prayer is a good thing. Prayer is something God wants humanity to do, so people pray. The same applies to reading the Bible or going to church. These are practices one should do to be members of the Christian religion. Many Christians may fear listing what should be done because it becomes a works-based salvation, which is contrary to the traditional understanding of salvation coming by faith. However, Smith is not talking about salvation in this context. As a sociologist, he is interested in understanding what being a Christian means, and from the outside, the way to identify Christians is to identify the practices in which they participate.

While explaining how to determine what a religion is, Smith writes, "We must turn our attention away from various debated concepts of religion and focus instead on the reality of religion as it is found in actual human lives and societies" (2017:21). As a sociologist, Smith is

concerned with what can be observed and studied. As Smith continues, "We need to put on hold our interest in the ideas and beliefs of religious people, and concentrate on their religious practices, that is, on repeated, religiously meaningful behaviors" (Smith 2017:21). Again, the emphasis is on the external. The Christian may believe it is important to read the Bible, but reading the Bible is only part of the religion of Christianity if those who profess to be Christians do it. If they do not read the Bible, then no matter what they believe, they are not actually putting their ideology into practice, and again, as a sociologist, there is nothing for Smith to evaluate.

The Sunday Assembly has a variety of practices in which members actively participate. Even from the opening paragraph of their own Charter, a key objective is to build "a godless congregation in every town, city and village that wants one" (2013). Going to church, even one without a belief in the supernatural, stems from the ideology of the Assembly. For example, the Sunday Assembly emphasizes members being involved in charitable causes. Under the heading "Help Often," the members of the Assembly are expected to contribute to their communities (Charter 2013). Coming together to provide support and assistance to members of both their congregation and the area at large is indicative of a practice connected to their central beliefs.

In a news story written for National Public Radio, Mandalit Del Barco explains how the liturgy of the Sunday Assembly feels like a Sunday in traditional church. "It sometimes feels like church in the auditorium of the Professional Musicians union in Hollywood. It's a Sunday morning, and hundreds of people are gathered to meditate, sing and listen to inspirational poetry and stories" (2014). Phil Zuckerman recognizes the church-like role the Assembly fills and the non-believer's desire. Zuckerman explains the rise of atheist churches as happening because "a 'small subset' of those people who have lost their faith in a supernatural being still want the community spirit and behavioural norms that go with religious experience" (H.G. 2018). Zuckerman's language emphasizes the practice and the liturgy of the Sunday Assembly. These services fill some of the perceived holes people feel after they leave traditional Sunday services, even if they do these practices without an appeal to the supernatural (Oakes 2015).

The final dimension of Smith's definition of religion brings forward another challenge for considering the Sunday Assembly a religion because of its atheism. All the aforementioned practices "seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad" (Smith 2017:22). Gaining benefits from the superhuman makes sense only if superhuman powers are equated with supernatural power. The supernatural has some capability of affecting outcomes, so it is prudent for humanity to try to make sure they are in its favor.

There is a dimension of superhuman power the Sunday Assembly might possibly believe in because of their emphasis on wonder. Because they are willing to admit there are some things beyond human comprehension, they could fall in line with the first portion of Smith's definition. A sense of wonder cannot provide any type of supernatural favor. The first tenet of

the Assembly's Charter states it "is 100% celebration of life. We are born from nothing and go to nothing. Let's enjoy it together" (2013). There is nothing beyond life, so it is meant to be lived to the fullest.

Enjoyment is a purely human activity and is a key responsibility for good members of the Sunday Assembly. They proceed to say in their eighth statement of belief, "With your involvement, The Sunday Assembly will make the world a better place" (Charter 2013). They follow that statement with another direct appeal to the necessity of individual involvement. "We won't tell you how to live, but will try to help you do it as well as you can" (Charter 2013). While there may be additional supernatural benefits to living a good life, such as eternity in heaven or a more favorable social position in one's next reincarnation, part of Smith's definition implies people turn to a religion to help them align with what will make living the good life possible. No one wants to suffer through his or her existence on earth.

The chief difference between the Sunday Assembly and other world religions is who is directing the creation of a better life. Smith points out religions emphasize particular benefits for their own adherents. All religions have "the belief that the powers they are directed toward are not automatically or continually accessible or perhaps attentive to the religious practitioners" (Smith 2017:35). For example, to enjoy all the blessings and favor of Allah, one must have a relationship with Allah. Because of the strong relationship between a person and Allah expressed through the performance of certain practices, Allah decides to bless this person. The decision to bless is ultimately Allah's. The good life comes from the hand of the supernatural.

Without any supernatural to appeal to, the Sunday Assembly could not believe that the good life comes from the hand of the supernatural. By performing the practices prescribed by the Sunday Assembly, the world might become a better place, but the members who performed those practices would not attribute any blessing to a higher power. They would attribute all blessing to the labor of their own hands. To re-emphasize, the eighth tenet states, "The Sunday Assembly will make the world a better place" (Charter 2013). The Christian church also attempts to make the world a better place, but it does so with the recognition that these good works are not only motivated by God but also completed by God's blessing. As shown many times throughout particularly the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was successful when they followed God and ultimately made the world a better place, but they had to make sure they were in line with God's will for them. The Sunday Assembly does not allow for external influence on human affairs. Human effort alone will make the world a better place, and the only reason to make the world a better place is to increase human enjoyment. The Sunday Assembly's "wonder" is not a means to creating the good life on earth, revealing a fundamental flaw in considering the Sunday Assembly a religion by Smith's definition.

The Sunday Assembly has a collection of practices, and those practices appeal to something superhuman, if superhuman is understood etymologically as meaning beyond

human. The Sunday Assembly's commitment to wonder seems to imply there is something beyond what is comprehensible to humanity and is worthy of wonder. However, Smith defines superhuman as the functional equivalent of supernatural, so the Sunday Assembly fails to meet that qualification of a religion. Also, even taking the simple meaning of superhuman does not ultimately help the Assembly because, by Smith's definition, the performance of these practices is meant to help create the good life and avoid the bad. Consequently, it is quite clear Christian Smith would not classify the Sunday Assembly as a religion despite the external similarities.

Christopher Dawson

Christopher Dawson begins by establishing a fundamental fact about religion. "All religion is based on the recognition of the superhuman Reality of which man is somehow conscious and towards which he must in some way orientate his life" (Dawson 2013:18). At first glance, classifying the Sunday Assembly as a religious movement seems to run into the exact same problem by Dawson's definition as with Smith's because of the necessity of superhuman Reality. However, his slight re-phrasing might provide room for the wonder of the Sunday Assembly.

Dawson explains how every religion has held some type of natural theology. The gods developed from the belief there had to be something, some Reality, beyond the human mind. As he explains, the nature of humans is "limited internally by the conditions of his consciousness and externally by his dependence on non-human forces which transcend his animal existence" (Dawson 2013:21). As Dawson continues to explain, "Man is born into a world that he has not made, that he cannot understand and on which his existence is dependent" (2013:21). One of the fundamental questions anyone of any religious persuasion asks is why anything even came to exist.

The Sunday Assembly's stated motto to "Wonder More" would to this extent not be out of place in Dawson's definition (Charter 2013). All religions ask these types of questions, and they all require a type of wonder. Christians wonder about the world they believe God has made; Muslims do the same with Allah. The Sunday Assembly hosts motivational weekend seminars they call a Retreat to the Future, and one of the chief purposes of these events is to explore. As their promotional material explains, "When people come together to better themselves while building a community it will change how they look at themselves and the world" (Personal 2017). The idea of wondering at this amazing universe does not automatically disqualify the Sunday Assembly as a religion. Although wondering without the supernatural is different, they still wonder about a superhuman Reality.

Dawson then refines his definition of the superhuman and what Reality is. His narrowing seems to close the window for considering the Sunday Assembly as a religion. Dawson writes,

> Where this element [of transcendence] survives intact we have no need to look further to find a natural basis for religion … In fact, it has always been the traditional argument of Natural Theology that man has only to look out and to look up in order to see the manifest proofs of Divine power and wisdom." (2013:22)

Dawson believes in the necessity of the supernatural as foundational for all religions. He concludes, based on nothing more than common sense, that human religions came about when it became obvious that humanity did not create the world, regardless of the possibility of some type of divine revelation. Natural theology was thus born, and natural theology forms the foundation of all religious beliefs. In the third point of their Charter, the Sunday Assembly indicates "We don't do supernatural but we also won't tell you you're wrong if you do." Without recognizing a supernatural entity, there would be no natural theology, a key part of Dawson's definition of religion.

Moreover, the argument goes even deeper, because for a religion to really achieve significance, Dawson realizes there must be a level of conscious or subconscious affirmation of the superhuman Reality of natural theology. Dawson posits that "it is only when the two ways of religious experience are brought together and the transcendent power behind the world is related to the transcendent power beyond the soul, that the former realizes its full religious significance" (2013:27). There needs to be a natural longing of the soul that recognizes the Reality of something beyond humanity which provides significance to the purportedly miraculous universe occupying human perceptions of Reality.

Acknowledging the existence of a Reality beyond humanity would not only contradict the Sunday Assembly's rejection of the supernatural, it would also undermine their commitment to human empowerment as the true catalyst of change in the universe. In a post reflecting on what was gained from experiencing the Retreat to the Future, its organizers celebrated "what it taught us about building local communities, the importance of power ballads in personal growth, secular spirituality (if such a thing can exist), and how to create connection in a world that desperately needs it" (Need 2017). In Dawson's eyes, the human-centered empowerment of the Sunday Assembly which encourages individuals to find their own connection is explicitly contradictory to true religious expression. True religion will find unification between the truths of natural theology and the truths of the transcendent spirit. These two will complement each other by appealing to the supernatural. As it did for Smith, the Sunday Assembly fails to meet the criteria of a religion for Dawson because of the lack of belief in the supernatural.

As has become evident, the Sunday Assembly has many practices that appear to resemble and potentially deliver the benefits of other world religions. However, Dawson defines religion on the level of belief, contrary to Smith who was committed to looking at practices as an external manifestation of beliefs. Advancing the case for the Sunday Assembly

as a religion is more difficult when faced with Dawson's definition of religion, because his does not rely on external practices but rather internal beliefs as a first step.

Dawson saw some explanatory value in the external manifestations of religion, and the Sunday Assembly appears to meet these criteria. He defines social culture as "an organized way of life which is based on a common tradition and conditioned by a common environment" (Dawson 2013:35). The Sunday Assembly, as well as all religions, are clearly social cultures. Being a member of a community is one of the most visible external signs of religious affiliation. Although it has already been explained how Assembly members seek to go about celebrating life, they decide to celebrate life together. Their code appeals to something beyond just individual beliefs. Something special happens when groups of people who are part of the same social culture come together (Charles et al. 2021). Ideological unity is vital for any religion.

The idea of ideological conformity and developing a social culture are vital for the Sunday Assembly, just like any other religious tradition. Believing unification can form around a secular set of beliefs is a modern development (Dawson 2013, Taylor 2017). Dawson quotes a proverb to prove his point. "No man … can succeed in life alone, and he cannot get the help he needs from men" (Dawson 2013:7). The Sunday Assembly would definitively reject the need for the supernatural.

Even without a belief in any type of higher power, the Sunday Assembly does believe in a moral code. The fact they have a Charter outlining community expectations implies there is some bond bringing them together and uniting them ideologically like a religion (Mrdjenovich 2018). The vital differentiation is that, even though the Sunday Assembly would claim to be entirely free from religion, they are not independent of the religiously shaped culture of which they are a part. Dawson understood that all societies have values, and those values originated as a part of some type of religious foundation. "From the peasant in the field and the craftsman in his workshop to the priest in his temple and Pharaoh on his throne, the whole society obeys the same laws, moves with the same rhythm, breathes the same spirit" (Dawson 2013:150). The Sunday Assembly is largely a Western phenomenon, so most of its members have presumably been raised in Western culture. Therefore, even though the Sunday Assembly speaks to the importance of individuals determining their own value systems and avoiding the imposition of supernatural laws, Dawson would contend members are framed by the religious culture of the society of which they are a part. They attempt to run away from religion, and they attempt to reject anything imposing the conservatism of traditional morality, but they are still part of a culture and conditioned by its religious values.

Culture can change, and these non-believers are sincere in their disavowal of belief. As Dawson says, "The social detachment which results from a spiritual alienation from the dominant culture and the religion that is associated with it does not necessarily produce social impotence or failure" (2013:150). Even though the minority culture of the Sunday Assembly is different than the Judeo-Christian culture held in Western civilization, the difference does not

make their value system a failure, speaking in strictly sociological terms. Rather, recognizing the impact Judeo-Christian values had on the foundation of the members of the Assembly is vital (Taylor 2017). The Assembly claims to have values, but most of the values they espouse are ones they have culturally appropriated from their culture. For example, it is no surprise their movement rose in the West in a culture valuing freedom and human dignity (Taylor 2017). These values did not come from the Sunday Assembly, but the Assembly valued them, so they have brought them into their own tradition. The Sunday Assembly's failure to generate distinctive culture and their reliance on appropriation signifies another shortcoming of atheism as a religion.

For Dawson, understanding religion means recognizing natural theology, and to have some type of natural theology, the supernatural must exist. Religion is therefore tied to a belief in the supernatural. Much like Smith, Dawson would reject understanding the wonder the Sunday Assembly embraces as a connection to the supernatural, because their core ideology rejects the belief in a deity of any sort. Without a deity, Dawson could not categorize the Sunday Assembly as a religion.

There is another level to Dawson's rejection of the Sunday Assembly as a religion, because he expands his definition of religion beyond the observation of practices performed to gain the favor of supernatural forces. Because he evaluates religions at the level of belief, he claims religions need to root their value systems in the supernatural. Although it is not an exact parallel to his arguments about natural theology, the point is much the same. There needs to be a way to understand why certain things are right and wrong. Religions build frameworks of culture and provide understanding, but understanding cannot be achieved without a baseline belief in something beyond the individual preferences of different people. The Sunday Assembly puts emphasis on an individual human definition of morality, so on the level of belief as well as practice, the Sunday Assembly fails to be a religion by failing to generate a true, complete culture beyond just a social culture. Dawson would not deny the communal benefits secular organizations can provide, but because they cannot ultimately create culture and appropriate it from other sources, they cannot be understood as a religion (Charles et al. 2021, McCaffree 2019).

Peter Berger

Peter Berger's definition of religion provides a different definition of what the sacred actually is. He begins by explaining that "Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established" (Berger 2011:25). Berger goes on to explain the term sacred as "a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience. This quality may be attributed to natural or artificial objects, to animals, or to men, or to the objectivations of human culture" (2011:25). Natural

objects can be sacred, and they can still possess the mysterious power of which Berger speaks. The reason they can is because of human wonder. The Sunday Assembly places a great deal of emphasis on wondering because there is much that remains unknown in the universe, and there are realities which will never be comprehensible to humanity. Mystery can be included within a naturalistic framework.

Berger expands on his characterization of the sacred by saying that "The sacred is apprehended as 'sticking out' from the normal routines of everyday life, as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its dangers can be domesticated and its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life" (2011:26). What some people might refer to as "everyday miracles," Berger characterizes as sacred. He makes this distinction even clearer by claiming profane is the opposite of sacred, and "All phenomena are profane that do not 'stick out' as sacred" (Berger 2011:26). The sacred needs to have mysterious power and needs to be distinct from the mundane concerns of everyday life. The Sunday Assembly would not necessarily oppose the distinction between the mysterious and mundane parts of the universe.

Berger's language is like what Assembly founder Sanderson Jones said when he was interviewed by Nico Hines. "I left a Christmas carol service and thought, there's so much here that I love, it's just such a shame that there's something in the middle that I don't believe in" (2013). By Berger's definition, feeling differently made the church service sacred to Jones, but the central truth or falsity of Christianity did not make church sacred. Rather, the elevation of church to something distinct from the remainder of his life stood out to Jones. Jones tried to create the special atmosphere with his own congregation. He wanted to experience the sacred again.

In the same interview, Jones described why people come to the Sunday Assembly. "We don't have Heaven or Hell to tempt or threaten people with, so if you want to get people to come, you want them to say 'this is a good thing, which I enjoy'" (Hines 2013). Enjoyment, as also emphasized by the first point of the Assembly's Charter, is an inherent part of what makes Sunday Assembly meetings sacred (2013). Going to a service and experiencing enjoyment separates Assembly time from other times. The ordinary falls away in the face of the extraordinary enjoyment Jones originally found in church and wanted to replicate with the Sunday Assembly.

The reason Berger's definition of religion fits more closely with the potential classification of the Assembly as a religion is because he views all religion as a human byproduct rather than a human explanation. As he explains, "Religion implies that human order is projected into the totality of being. Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant" (Berger 2011:28). Based on their Charter, the Sunday Assembly is trying to create some kind of human order in the universe. They are projecting order upon the universe much in the way Berger says religions do. There is a reason members of their congregation believe, which is that "With your involvement, The

Sunday Assembly will make the world a better place" (Charter 2013). Externalization is characteristic of religions.

Berger differentiates why secular movements are different from traditionally understood religious movements, but his reasoning does not seem to take into account the particular case of the Sunday Assembly. As he explains, "Such a cosmos, as the ultimate ground and validation of human nomoi, need not necessarily be sacred. Particularly in modern times there have been thoroughly secular attempts at cosmization, among which modern science is by far the most important" (Berger 2011:27). He seems to draw a distinction between the sacred and secular. Thoroughly secular world-building exercises such as modern science seem to be classified differently than what he defines earlier as sacred.

Nevertheless, differentiating between the secular and sacred never seems to apply to the Sunday Assembly. For instance, Berger writes that "The cosmos posited by religion thus both transcends and includes man. The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order" (2011:25). In their tenth and final Charter statement, the Assembly affirms that "The Sunday Assembly is a celebration of the one life we know we have" (2013). This is a clear recognition the universe is a much bigger place than just each individual's construction of reality. The Assembly celebrates life by expanding an individual's perspective within a community. It seeks to provide the benefits of religious community without the fundamental belief in the supernatural, characteristic of all other religions (McCaffree 2019). As a result, they celebrate what they know they have, and they realize there are parts of the universe not yet understood and which may never be understood.

In a similar way, wondering can be seen in the Assembly's doctrine of having no doctrine. In their Charter, they state the group "has no doctrine. We have no set texts so we can make use of wisdom from all sources" (2013). They pursue wisdom from any source they choose, which gives rise to the potential for philosophical inconsistency, but they believe truth transcends one particular doctrine (McIntosh 2015). To get the most possible understanding, one must dabble in a little bit of everything. The Sunday Assembly's concept of transcendence seems to be present just like it is in Berger's understanding of the sacred. Assembly members understand wisdom is within each person and transcends each person. They do not make the claim all wisdom is already discovered or is even discoverable. While religion is the process of trying to put all these pieces of truth together, the Sunday Assembly endeavors to comprehend without aid from the supernatural.

Berger challenges one final assumption that could be used to dispute the classification of atheistic groups such as the Sunday Assembly as a religion. "If one grants the fundamental religious assumption that another reality somehow impinges or borders upon the empirical world, then these features of the sacred will be dignified with the status of genuine 'experience'" (Berger 2011:88). In most religions, there is a belief in interaction between the

supernatural world and the natural world. Berger does not use belief alone to define a religion, regardless of whether religious people traditionally have these experiences or beliefs. "Put differently, whatever else the constellations of the sacred may be 'ultimately,' empirically they are products of human activity and human signification — that is, they are human projections. Human beings, in the course of their externalization, project their meanings into the universe around them" (Berger 2011:89). Berger would reject Dawson's assumption of natural theology as the basis of all religions. Whereas Dawson appeals to an external reality humans recognized and from which they created a religion, Berger works in the other direction by projecting religion from within humanity out onto the world.

Berger assumes that what is sacred to one person or group of people might not involve any discussion of the supernatural. The sacred involves what comes out of a person which is different from the ordinary. Berger describes how religions serve to reinforce the beliefs of the people who developed them. "All legitimation serves to maintain reality—reality, that is, as defined in a particular human collectivity" (2011:35). Reality is again socially constructed by the members of the group who developed it, and religion provides the means to keep their vision of reality in place and respected.

Berger does not automatically disqualify an atheistic belief system from being a religion for lacking a belief in the supernatural. Because he defines religion as a human projection onto reality, the content of that belief system matters somewhat less. A religion does not need to be consistent with natural theology and does not need to include appeals to the supernatural in search of favor or avoidance of evil. Consequently, the Sunday Assembly, as a type of world-building system of beliefs created by the externalized beliefs of humans, forms the basis of a religion that is different from ones that believe in the supernatural. But it is religion nonetheless.

Conclusions

When considering whether the Sunday Assembly can be considered a religion without belief in the supernatural, there is a difference of opinion among the sociologists surveyed. Smith and Dawson's most compelling case for disqualifying any brand of atheism as a religion is the necessity of a supernatural entity. They fall back on humanity appealing to the approval of a God or gods. Their argument is strong because when considering religion, the existence of the supernatural makes all the difference. If one religion is right and the others are wrong, believing in the God of the right religion should make some kind of difference in the world, and it would be a good thing to do what the right God prescribes.

Unfortunately, there are potential shortcomings to Smith and Dawson's definitions because they are so narrow. Not only is atheism excluded as a potential religion, but Deism and Buddhism would also be excluded, at least for Smith. Praying to the giant watchmaker God, as

the God of Deism is often characterized, has no impact on favor received or evil avoided. The Deist God set the world in motion, but the world continues to operate without any additional intervention. The Buddhist attempt to overcome suffering similarly does not bring divine blessing or justice. Rather, the cycle of birth and death continues regardless of any human prayers until transcendence is achieved by human effort, not divine favor. Therefore, Deism and Buddhism would fail to be a religion by Smith's definition, but this definition is problematic if something like Deism or Buddhism has traditionally been understood as a religion, but can be excluded from being a religion through the application of Smith's definition.

To the contrary, Berger's definition may actually be too broad. Just about anything can be a religion if it involves the exercise of building a world externalized from human consciousness. Disqualifying the worship of the New York Yankees from being considered an actual religion might be impossible. A group of people could create a culture where twenty-five men in pinstripes are seen as the ultimate arbiters of what is right or wrong by imposing their will on a baseball diamond. Particularly in a culture wrestling with questions of religious freedom and the right to worship, applying Berger's definition could lead to some uncomfortable discussions. After all, religious liberty would no longer be a question for "popular" religions but also for just about anything. Consequently, Berger's classification seems to be too broad to be meaningful.

Where do these definitions ultimately leave the Sunday Assembly, and should it be considered a religion? There is no doubt they have practices designed to resemble their religious counterparts. The fact they meet on Sunday is a direct nod to many religions congregating on Sunday. The Sunday Assembly is attempting to provide all the benefits of religion without the supernatural (Oakes 2015).

However, there is no way to take advantage of all the benefits of religion without belief in the supernatural because believing in some type of objective higher power or powers puts a standard in place. Atheistic assemblies can emulate many of the external trappings of religion and reap similar health and social benefits (Mrdjenovich 2018, McCaffree 2019, Charles et al. 2021). Theistic religions provide reasons for following standards and to be mostly aligned with the right deity and belief system. People follow religions because they find truth that goes far beyond the subjective truth of the Sunday Assembly. Pursuing truth is not a matter of following an individual's path, but rather a journey to find the right path. Truth is the ultimate purpose Smith and Dawson seem to be getting at. Their goal is substantially different than Berger's hypothesis. Berger contends there is an external reality, and seekers should attempt to discover which worldview most closely aligns with reality. Berger contends that humans are in the middle of a world that seems incredibly foreign and yet comfortable at the same time. If the world never seemed either foreign or comfortable, then perhaps Berger's individually constructed realities would hold more weight. One would expect reality to fit incredibly snugly in a self-created world, but that does not seem to be the human experience. Like the Sunday

Assembly, humanity still maintains fundamental wonder, but wondering requires some type of object. Without an objective standard of glory, goodness, or beauty, wonder in and of itself falls short of defining a true religion.

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