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Exploring identities between the religious and the secular through the attendees of an ostensibly 'Atheist Church'.

Abstract

The Sunday Assembly has a complex relationship with atheism and religion. It holds events which look and feel like religious worship, but uses this format to create a 'godless congregation'. Described as an 'atheist church' by the media, members prefer to talk about inclusive communities. If the Sunday Assembly simultaneously embraces and rejects both atheism and religion, then how do attendees identify and describe themselves? We add to the growing literature exploring identities between the religious and the secular, presenting a qualitative study based on interviews with Sunday Assembly attendees. We interrogate three concepts: non-religion, the secular sacred and indifferentism to examine how the identity of Sunday Assembly attendees can be better understood. Our findings show that a significant number of attendees publicly identify as indifferent towards religion, while privately maintaining a more strongly non-religious identity, thus suggesting that for Sunday Assembly attendees, inclusivity is imperative.

Keywords

Non-religion, secular sacred, atheism, indifferentism, Sunday Assembly

*'There are so many exciting things about life. Stars, chocolate cake, love, drea*ms, tunnels, Greek mythology... Sunday Assembly is about finding these things that we can all share. Basically, we prefer to talk about the things that we do believe in, rather than the things we *don't, and by being anti-theist you exclude a lot of potential attendees who don't identif*y as atheists. Lots of explicitly atheist events exist. This is the event that your religious grandma *should come to and see that atheism isn't just about not believing in God (and they certainly don't eat babies!).'*

(The Sunday Assembly, 2017)

The Sunday Assembly describes itself as having '70 Sunday Assembly chapters in 8 different countries where people sing songs, hear inspiring talks, and create community together' (The Sunday Assembly, 2017). The charter for the organisation focusses on community, service, a lack of doctrine or deity, and inclusivity[1]. Many of the meetings look strikingly like a typical Anglican church service: a warm welcome, notices, readings, songs, a talk, silent reflection, and even ending with tea and coffee afterwards. What makes the Sunday Assembly different is that it uses this structure to create a 'godless' alternative. Popular songs are sung instead of

[1] The charter, in full as it appears on the website:
'We're not here to tell you how to live your life—we're here to help you be the best version of you you can be. The Sunday Assembly:
1.Is 100% celebration of life. We are born from nothing and go to nothing. Let's enjoy it together.
2.Has no doctrine. We have no set texts so we can make use of wisdom from all sources.
3.Has no deity. We don't do supernatural but we also won't tell you you're wrong if you do.
4.Is radically inclusive. Everyone is welcome, regardless of their beliefs—this is a place of love that is open and accepting.
5.Is free to attend, not-for-profit and volunteer run. We ask for donations to cover our costs and support our community work.
6.Has a community mission. Through our Action Heroes (you!), we will be a force for good.
7.Is independent. We do not accept sponsorship or promote outside businesses, organisations, or services.
8.Is here to stay. With your involvement, The Sunday Assembly will make the world a better place.
9.We won't tell you how to live, but will try to help you do it as well as you can.
10.And remember point 1… The Sunday Assembly is a celebration of the one life we know we have' (The Sunday Assembly 2017)

hymns[2], readings are from poetry, literature or the media, and the theme of the talk will not be religious.

Starting in London in January 2013, the Sunday Assembly received a considerable amount of initial media attention when it was frequently referred to as an 'Atheist Church' (for example, Addley, 2013; Wheeler, 2013). Despite making strategic use of the attention this label drew, the leadership of the Sunday Assembly also quickly rejected the use of it. Co-founder Pippa Evans stated: 'I'm not fighting for atheism, I'm trying to get a community together' (Reform, 2013). The Public Charter, a ten point definition to which each Assembly adheres states: 'Everyone is welcome, regardless of their beliefs – this is a place of love that is open and accepting' (Sunday Assembly, 2017). The founders describe talking about atheism as 'dull', instead focussing on the Sunday Assembly as inclusive and open to all irrespective of belief, or lack of belief (Reform, 2013). Indeed, it is clear from the Sunday Assembly's own materials that the focus of the organisation is building inclusive community. For example, the website describes assembly meetings as follows:

> The only way to understand Sunday Assembly is to experience it for yourself. There will be singalong songs, moving stories, passionate speakers—all finished with tea and cake (or coffee and doughnuts!). Just by being with us you should be energised, vitalised, restored, repaired, refreshed, and recharged. No matter what the subject of the Assembly, it will solace worries, provoke kindness and inject a touch of transcendence into the everyday. But life can be tough… It is. Sometimes bad things happen to good people, we have moments of weakness, or life just isn't fair. We want the Sunday Assembly to be a place of compassion, where, no matter what your situation, you are welcomed, accepted, and loved. You can join a choir, sing in the

[2] While choice of song varies, often to reflect the theme of each individual Assembly, Nina Simone's 'I Got Life' is regularly played. The song contains the line 'Ain't got no God' but continues to note all the things in this life that people do have. This reflects the broader approach of the Sunday Assembly.

> band, attend and facilitate self-help groups, welcome those who are socially isolated, host potluck dinners, share hobbies, and much more. Most of all, have fun, be nice and join in. (The Sunday Assembly, 2017).

This suggests that for the organisers, the sense of community is valued over the content of individual gatherings. This idea is further reinforced by the description 'radically inclusive' (The Sunday Assembly, 2017). This is a phrase used by contemporary Christian communities to emphasise the inclusion, as opposed to exclusion, that they believe is to be found in the teachings of Jesus (Borg, 2006). So, consciously or otherwise, the Sunday Assembly uses a common Christian phrase to articulate a central goal. It is this seemingly contradictory mix of rejection and acceptance of both religion and atheism, alongside the adoption of 'building inclusive community' as an objective, which provides the starting point for this study.

The Sunday Assembly has garnered a high level of publicity and a strong membership base[3] in a short space of time. In contrast to organisations such as the National Secular Society (NSS) which focus on and explicitly discuss atheism, secularism and (the end of) religion and therefore attract those who identify with this position, the Sunday Assembly publicly rejects an atheist label or concern with these themes. The Sunday Assembly thus presents a new opportunity to study a range of issues related to religion and non-religion.

The Sunday Assembly is a microcosm for exploring identities between and outside the poles of 'observant orthodoxy' and 'overt irreligion' (Voas and Day, 2010:17).[4] The three concepts of non-religion, indifferentism and the secular sacred will be used to examine how these

[3] There is no information available about the membership or attendee numbers however the Facebook pages of individual assemblies typically have hundreds of 'likes' with some having many more (e.g. London over 5000, Brighton over 1000).

[4] Throughout this study the limitations of terminology used to describe the 'not religious' is acknowledged. We use Day and Voas' terms here as they refer to the very extremes of religious and secular categorisation thus leaving maximum breadth to explore the spaces in between.

identities are understood between the religious and the secular[5], and also how they are differently and strategically used in public and private contexts. After a discussion of the use of the three key concepts and the issues which surround them, data from a small scale study of two Sunday Assembly meetings will be used to ground the terms and the debates in the complex ways in which individuals talk about their reasons for being involved in the Sunday Assembly. It will be clear throughout that this study opens up new avenues for thinking about non-religious identity. While a small number of scholars have noted the rise of the Sunday Assembly in recent work (see Dick, 2015; Lee, 2016; McIntosh, 2015; Oakes, 2015) this research opportunity is yet to be fully realised. The Sunday Assembly has emerged at a time when there is a growing focus among scholars of religion on the spaces in-between observant orthodoxy and overt irreligion (for example Day et al., 2013). Particularly since the end of the last century scholars of religion have recognised that each pole is far more extensively researched than the spaces between them (for example, Davie, 2010; Day, 2011; Lim et al., 2010). The urgency to address this research deficit is identified by Davie who notes that the 'middle ground' could make up at least 50% of the British population (2010:262). If the members of the Sunday Assembly identify with this middle ground, it can be used as a valuable case study to extend the existing literature.

Non-Religion, the Secular Sacred and Indifferentism.

In order to make sense of the experience of the Sunday Assembly it is necessary to think critically about the literature of non-religion. Since the 1960s any lack of religion was largely studied through the lens of secularisation theories (for example, Wilson, 1966; McLeod 1974; Bruce 2002). Lack of religion was a negative category, pointing towards the loss of religious significance in public life, rather than a positive identity that could be studied in itself. More

[5] We take Lee's definition of the secular as 'something for which religion is not the primary reference point' (Lee, 2012, p.135).

recently positive non-religious categories have been considered with studies of atheists (see Bainbridge 2005; Bullivant, 2008), or Christians that were becoming less religious (see Davie 1994; Day 2011).

Non-religion is a relatively new addition to the previous categories of atheism and agnosticism. As well as Lee (2011, 2012, 2014, 2016) and Cotter's (2011) work on non-religion in the UK there is an extensive literature about non-religion in the US (for example Bainbridge, 2005; Keysar, 2014, Zuckerman et al. 2016). Scholars examining religious identity are also increasingly recognising the need to consider non-religious identities, using terms such as '(non)religion' to denote the fact that they have considered identities beyond the religious in their research (see for example, Arweck, 2013; Prideaux and McFadyen, 2013).

Lee notes that due to the 'speedy expansion' of the field what is lagging behind is no longer a focus on non-religion, but the terminology we have to describe it (2012:129). Her work centres on an attempt to address this terminological deficit. Lee's definition of non-religion as 'anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference with religion' (2012:131), delineates the term in a way that has the potential to encompass a whole range of identifications that are not religious. This is achieved through the concept of 'difference' from religion which can refer simultaneously to rejection of, indifference towards or uncertainty about religion. Non-religion also has the ability to encapsulate a number of commonly used identity labels that may otherwise be used such as 'atheist', 'agnostic' and 'humanist'. Indeed, it is also an important consideration that within any organisation (such as here, the Sunday Assembly) some individuals may want to disassociate from atheism, while others will identify as atheists. Non-religion as a term in relation to an organisation provides a framework that can accommodate both perspectives. Lee emphasises this point, arguing that

she seeks to make non-religion the ‘master concept’ of which atheism is ‘only a part’ (2012:129).

‘Non-religion’ has been criticised as a negative term that simply draws together any identity that is not religious, rather than presenting a position with which people can positively identify (Hout and Fischer, 2002). Lee responds that an increasing number of people are using ‘non-religious’ as a positive way to identify themselves (2011). This capacity for non-religion to be a positive identity will be particularly relevant to this study for two reasons. Firstly, all assembly attendees are actively participating in a non-religious event. Whilst their personal identity may remain unclear, this act of affiliation suggests some attempt to define their position positively. Secondly, it provides a way for individuals who are uncomfortable with the label ‘atheist’ to define positively against religion.

A key social reason that a non-religious person may be reluctant to define as atheist is the effect that New Atheist literature has had on public understanding of atheism. Amaranth Amarasingam notes the significant impact of the ‘recent barrage of anti-religion and anti-God books’ (2010:1), such as those notably released by Richard Dawkins (2006) and Sam Harris (2004), on public understandings of atheism. These books equate atheism, or at least new atheism, with an intolerance of religion and a wish to end it. The impact of the New Atheist literature on attendees of the Sunday Assembly will be evident in the findings.

This discussion of atheism raises an important issue about the public understanding of different identity labels. Two different people identifying as non-religious could use the same identity label to mean two very different things. ‘Non-religious’ is not yet an everyday term. Furthermore, Lee’s own definition cannot be taken as a publicly accepted definition of non-religion. Even common terms such as ‘agnostic’ are understood in different ways: to mean both being unsure about whether God exists and believing it is impossible to know whether

God exists (see Bullivant, 2008:336). Hackett argues that a significant problem in specifying identity is that less well-defined concepts lead to less reliable results, a particular limitation in the study of non-religion (2014:401).

Attempts to address Hackett's concerns about less well-defined concepts are visible in the work of some scholars who endeavour to make sense of non-religion by identifying a range of positions between observant orthodoxy and overt irreligion. However, this study reflects an increasing recognition that religious-secular dichotomies are of limited theoretical value and instead we should get better at 'intellectually creating in-between spaces' (Day et al., 2013:2) to help us understand the broader category of non-religion.

Studies of non-religious identities attempt to understand identities beyond the poles of observant orthodoxy and overt irreligion, but often still describing the spectrum as only between the two poles. Some studies have gone further than recognising the significance of 'in-between spaces' and have sought to delineate the spaces in-between observant orthodoxy and overt irreligion by classifying these identities. While these attempts bring nuance and attention to 'in-between spaces' they are ultimately unhelpful. For example, some scholars have created a religious-secular spectrum on which they have then tried to place individuals or institutions (for example Carette and Trigeuad, 2013; Keysar, 2014). This process imposes a spectrum of positions between religiosity and secularity rather than allowing identities to challenge and exist outside such a spectrum.

Knott attempts to develop the idea of the spectrum by adding an extra pole, drawing a triangular diagram with three poles: the religious, the secular and the postsecular (Knott, 2010: 123). She then attempts to place individual identities within this triangle. Knott argues that this allows more space to show the 'struggles' between poles than a linear spectrum offers (2010: 123). However, this further pole is as likely to be rejected or challenged by

individuals who occupy the in-between, and so potentially the weakness of the spectrum approach has not been addressed. Indeed, even some conceptions such as Davie's 'middle ground' and our own terminology of 'in-between' can be criticised for simply introducing a third position rather than accounting for the full range of identities that can exist between the two poles. In a developing field, we recognise the limitations in our own terminology. In using the term 'in-between' in our analysis of the data, we are seeking to both recognise the complexity in the responses we received and note the difficulty in articulating this range of identities. Consequently this study adopts an approach also found in studies such as Lee (2014) and Engelke (2012), which seek to describe identities as they occur.

This recent turn to consider the range of identities that are not religious is related in this study to a growing interest in the concept of the 'secular sacred'. In 1999 Demerath identified an approach to the study of religion which diverted attention towards the sacred and, of particular significance, suggested that social scientific study of religion should 'always use variables instead of absolutes' (1999: 8). There is a growing recognition by a number of scholars that their understanding of the sacred can be applied to secular activities, spaces and beliefs as well (Francis and Knott, 2011; Lynch, 2012). Scholars such as Knott refer specifically to the 'secular sacred' when instances of 'non-negotiable matters of belief and value that do not derive from formally religious sources' (2010:14) occur.

Both Knott and Lynch focus their research on very public manifestations of the secular sacred. They do this to find examples where a certain viewpoint is held to be non-negotiable by secular society, representing an unflinching boundary which is held to be sacred. These secular sacred boundaries can often be hidden, 'lying dormant' (Knott, 2010:10) until contested. Often in the examples Knott and Lynch give, secular sacred boundaries exist in direct conflict with a sacred boundary that is religious. The Rushdie Affair (Francis and

Knott, 2011), the gay marriage debate (Knott, 2013) and the debate around women bishops (Lynch 2012) are examples of instances that highlight secular sacred boundaries. They all reveal non-negotiable views about the public realm and what should and should not be permitted within it.

While the terminology of 'non-religion' provides a framework in this study for understanding the location of the Sunday Assembly in the lives of attendees and in British public life, the concept of the 'secular sacred' will provide a framework for understanding instances in which attendees of the Sunday Assembly have non-negotiable views about the public sphere, or the Sunday Assembly's place within it. Identifying such a sacred boundary helps to define what attendees of the Sunday Assembly believe to be of utmost importance. We identify a significant boundary for Sunday Assembly leaders and attendees around 'inclusivity' as a feature of their gatherings and the 'community' which they endeavour to establish.

A final concept used in this study for understanding the Sunday Assembly is provided by 'indifferentism' – an engaged form of indifference. As we showed in the introduction, while the Sunday Assembly as an institution can be defined as non-religious, it cannot be defined as indifferent to religion. The whole structure of the Sunday Assembly borrows from religion, at the very least showing an interest in it. However, its approach at individual assemblies, where religion is rarely mentioned, does leave open the possibility for attendees to be indifferent towards religion.

Voas and Bagg argue that indifference to religion has 'triumphed' in the UK and religion is 'simply not very often in the British mind' (2010:4). They posit that indifference is a 'polite' 'British' phenomenon that avoids extreme views and is 'quite tolerant of anything in-between' (2010:6), reflecting an embrace of the middle ground and a rejection of poles. They take the example of Nick Clegg, who publicly 'came out' as an atheist in 2007 to very little

reaction (Voas and Bagg, 2010:8) and use this as an example of the British public's indifferent attitude towards identities concerning religion and belief. Referring to Clegg, Voas and Bagg state that as 'long as [people] don't proselytise too aggressively or seriously advocate for the abolition of religion from all spheres of life, their private rejection of religion is of no consequence' (2010:2). For Voas and Bagg, indifference is bound up with the way personal identities are presented in the public square. The public may remain keenly interested in controversies concerning religion in the media, but they are indifferent towards how individuals choose to identify. Clegg tempers his identification as an atheist by stating that he has enormous respect for Christians, and a Catholic wife with whom he is raising his children as Catholic (Voas and Bagg, 2010:8). Clegg tries to make his atheist identity more acceptable by proving he is not against religion.

Where Voas and Bagg see indifference as able to occupy the spaces in-between observant orthodoxy and overt irreligion, in contrast Bruce envisages an indifferent society as one with 'no socially significant shared religion; and religious ideas being no more common than would be the case if all minds were wiped blank and people began from scratch to think about the world and their place in it.' (2002:42). Clearly, we do not live in this world Bruce envisages and his related hypothesis that indifference is the product of secularisation is not accepted by all. Where Bruce's argument is useful is in his central idea that 'avowed' or 'self-conscious' non-religion is evidence that a person cares about religion. Less self-consciously non-religious positions may, paradoxically, be indicative of a deeper lack of religion.

Lee proposes an extension of indifference which she calls indifferentism. Indifferentism is a form of 'engaged indifference' (Lee, 2014:474) where people self-consciously identify with indifference. Beneath this identification with indifference is often a nuanced position that is

not indifferent to religion. Lee gives an example of indifferentism in one of her respondents who states: 'I tend to think I don't care, you know I'm such an atheist that I don't care. But obviously I do' (Lee, 2014:475). Bruce's approach is closer to indifference, where Voas and Bagg's understanding of public indifference is closer to indifferentism – representing an engaged identification with an indifferent stance. As we will discuss, indifferentism reflects the contradiction in the Sunday Assembly's organisational attitude to atheism, and the personal positions of attendees. The Sunday Assembly's avoidance of atheism as a significant label suggests indifference, whereas an individual publicly avoiding a discussion of atheism whilst privately remaining an atheist suggests indifferentism.

Lee recognises that indifferentism poses a question (2011:169):

> Simply put, people who identify as 'indifferent to religion' are not indifferent to religion. This gives rise to a new question, which is why are people classifying themselves in this way if it does not reflect the substance of their position?

Given the correlation between indifferentism and the Sunday Assembly's own approach to religion, attendees that identify as indifferent may actually display an identity closer to indifferentism. In this case Lee's question becomes pertinent in understanding the fullness of an attendee's identity. Having identified and discussed the significance of the three related concepts of non-religion, secular sacred and indifferentism, and how they broadly relate to the Sunday Assembly, we now turn to an introduction to the data this study is based upon before developing our account of these three themes through an analysis of the data.

Methodology

The data presented in this study were gathered through an online survey, promoted through social media, and semi-structured interviews and participant observation over a six-month period at two different Sunday Assembly meetings in the UK: Leeds and London.. Thirty individuals were either interviewed or responded to the survey. The fieldwork was conducted during 2013-2014 in the first year of the Sunday Assembly – a period of rapid expansion and public visibility – and the two Assemblies were chosen because of their different experience and slightly different demographics. The respondents covered the Leeds and London congregation (13 Leeds, 11 London) but also included attendees at Bristol, Manchester, Newcastle and the Latitude Festival. Twelve respondents identified as occasional attenders, and 9 as one-time attenders, which reflects the particular period of expansion during with the research was conducted.

The London Assembly is the original Assembly, regularly attracting over 200 attendees and led by Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, the founders of the Sunday Assembly movement. The Assembly in Leeds, starting in 2013, was usually attended by approximately 50 people and was one of over 50 newer Assemblies that made up a rapidly growing global network across four continents. Both Assemblies attracted members and attendees who were predominantly white and middle class, which appears to reflect the wider movement, and was reflected in the interview sample. In some ways this seems to corroborate Bullivant (2008) and Taira (2016) who assert that non-religious groups are unrepresentative of broader non-religious cultures. However in other ways this sample suggests more diversity. Women were well represented among the attendees and leadership of both assemblies, also evidenced by the sample which contained seventeen women and nine men. There was also greater diversity in the age of attendees. The Leeds Assembly was characterised by a greater number of young families in attendance, and slightly older attendees whereas the London Assembly attracted many young professionals. Although this diversity of age was less evident in the sample (for

instance, of the full sample nineteen of the respondents were aged between 18 and 29, with only one aged over 50) it also proved to be of less significance to the central questions explored here.

Many scholars have noted that non-religious people are unlikely to join non-religious groups (Lee, 2012:130; Zuckerman et al, 2016:225). There is a history of non-religious groups stretching from a 'mushrooming' of atheist and humanist groups in the Victorian Era (Bullivant, 2012:100), to more recent examples such as the 'Sea of Faith' movement and Alain de Botton's 'School of Life'. While some studies of these groups do exist (e.g. Black, 1983; Hunsberger and Altemeyer, 2000: Engelke, 2012) these are criticised for depicting 'a small and atypical subset of atheists' (Bullivant, 2008:364) that are often unrepresentatively white, male, relatively affluent, educated and over 60 (Taira, 2016:104). While this study arguably focuses on another 'small and atypical subset of atheists', the scale and approach of the Sunday Assembly suggest it may engage with a new and possibly less atypical subset.

In constructing the questions for both the semi-structured interviews and the online survey Day's method of researching (non) religious identity 'without asking [non] religious questions' (2011, p.36) was utilised. Her method leaves any overt mention of religion or non-religion to the end of an interview to test whether these ideas emerge or do not emerge naturally. All participants were asked a series of questions in three sections. The first section asked participants open questions about their experiences of Sunday Assembly and its connections with wider society. The second asked participants about themselves and what they value in a broad sense. Finally, only in the last section were participants more overtly asked how and why they self-identified in relation to religion and non-religion.

Given the small scale of this study, and the fact that the Sunday Assembly is still an emerging movement, we do not seek to make conclusions that are generalisable to all Sunday Assembly attendees. As the fieldwork was conducted during the early stage of development

of the movement the study provides a snapshot of a particular period, and the more recent developments in the movement cannot be accounted for here. Instead this is an initial study that will help to assess which theoretical concepts and frameworks are most useful in understanding individual and communal identity within Sunday Assembly. This study makes initial observations about how the attendees that were interviewed articulated their non-religious identity and uses these data to pose further research questions. Opportunities for further research, both geographical and longitudinal, will be identified in the conclusion**.How Sunday Assembly attendees articulate their non-religious identity**

In order to interrogate the expressed identities of Sunday Assembly attendees, in all their complexity, the three concepts of non-religion, the secular sacred and indifferentism or indifference will be used. The data show that attendees of the Sunday Assembly reject classification, both of the poles of observant orthodoxy and overt irreligion and further of classifying their identity between these poles. Due to this rejection of classification, Sunday Assembly attendees often identify publicly with what we describe here as 'indifferentism'. Despite this public identification, privately respondents regularly identify as non-religious. We argue that the public display of indifference, in the specific form of indifferentism, is due to a secular sacred boundary around the concept of inclusivity.

As expected, given the Sunday Assembly's broad approach to non-religion, attendees identified in vastly heterogeneous ways. Some were religious: 'Christian', 'Unitarian', 'Quaker', others chose labels which were post religious: 'post-Christian' and 'lapsed Catholic'. A further group identified as non-religious: 'atheist', 'agnostic' and 'no religion'. Yet others identified in ways that did not reference religion: 'humanist'; 'feminist'; 'caring optimist'. Motivations for attending the Sunday Assembly also varied from a 'quest for self-

improvement', to connecting with a diverse range of local people to former churchgoers looking to recreate the pleasure of communal singing.

Equally as expected, attendees of the Sunday Assembly largely resisted both the pole of 'observant orthodoxy' and that of 'overt irreligion'. Attendees were often quick to dismiss both poles before spending far longer explaining how they did locate themselves. For example one respondent abruptly distanced herself from both atheism and Christianity:

> I don't agree that it is an atheist church - I am not an atheist myself. One of the speakers was once a really strong Christian though and she tried to convert us all, which led to quite an uncomfortable situation!

This quick dismissal of poles created the context where the interviewee subsequently concentrated on her own agnosticism and beliefs about community. Overall, out of 30 participants, 3 identified primarily as religious, 7 identified primarily as atheist or secularist and the other 20 inhabited the spaces in-between. [6]

Many dismissed the pole of observant orthodoxy, by expressing concerns about 'organised religion'. Two respondents made evocative comparisons between the Sunday Assembly and their previous, negative experiences of religion. Emma, for instance, makes a stark comparison between Christian 'judgement' and the Sunday Assembly's 'inclusivity' stating: 'My past experience of religion is of something harsh, judgemental and exclusive. Sunday Assembly is gentle, welcoming and inclusive'. She explains this comparison further by detailing her experiences of exclusion at Christian services.

[6] In order to code individuals into one of these three positions account was taken of what identity labels they selected, as well as their wider comments about their own identity. Attendees were coded with the pole of religion or atheism if they identified solely with overtly religious or irreligious statement. Anyone who identified with a religion or atheism, but also with a more liminal term or statement such as 'Unsure' or 'Agnostic' was coded into the 'in-between spaces' category.

> I've never been religious but I have been to many Christian church services and have always left feeling downtrodden, confused and sometimes angry. […] I'm damed [sic] because I've not let The Lord save my soul etc. etc. […] The friendly and welcoming nature of Sunday assembly is what really appeals.

This example shows that attendees with negative prior experience of religion may be more likely to overtly reject the pole of observant orthodoxy. However, it is also important to note that Emma is in the minority. More commonly religion was either ignored, identified with nominally or uncertainly, or was syncretised with a non-religious identity, for example by referring to a Jewish upbringing that was no longer 'believed in', or choosing to identify as all of 'Agnostic', 'Atheist', 'Christian', 'Secularist' and 'Quaker'. It is important to note that observant religion is dismissed more through avoidance and syncretism than through outright criticism or anti-religious sentiment. Finally, those three respondents who did identify primarily and solely with religion all stated that they had only attended Sunday Assembly once. This suggests that they may have attended out of curiosity rather than a wish to become regular attenders.

Likewise, many others rejected forms of overt irreligion that they took to be too strong. One attendee asserted:

> I think Sunday Assembly is about thinking about life and how to make a positive impact in a non-religious way. It is not and should not be anti-religion or aggressively atheist.

This use of the adjective 'aggressively' to denote an extreme form of anti-religious atheism was a common feature of respondents' answers. Others separated themselves from 'evangelical atheism' and 'militant atheism'. These rejections are in contrast to several

attendees who utilised adjectives that ascribed a notion of liminality to their non-religious identities such as ‘almost atheist’ and ‘slightly secularist’. The use of such liminal descriptors portrays a less ‘militant’ stance.

Attendees often related positive atheism with ‘anti-religion’, ‘anti-theism’ or even with Dawkins. This confirms Amarasingam’s suggestion (2010) that New Atheist literature has impacted, and to some extent toxified, the public perception of atheism. While it is clear that attendees of the Sunday Assembly largely reject the poles of overt irreligion and observant orthodoxy, there is also a further rejection. Many attendees also resist any attempts to classify their identity between these poles.

When asked what they valued most in life and about their beliefs and views, many attendees of the Sunday Assembly responded slowly and with uncertainty. For example stating ‘it’s all a complete mystery’, ‘I need more time to think about what I value most’ or simply defining their views as ‘confused’ or ‘complicated’. These statements can all be seen as attempts to resist, postpone or show indifference to classifying or delineating their own beliefs or attitudes. This personal resistance is mirrored institutionally by the Sunday Assembly through the leadership’s refutation of the media’s ‘Atheist Church’ label. Clearly, the attendees interviewed shared the leadership’s views: over 80% of respondents opposed or were undecided about the Atheist Church label.

If both the Sunday Assembly and its members resist classification then its remit can be seen as undefined and vague. By refuting labels and then stating ‘we prefer to talk about the things that we do believe in, rather than the things we don’t’, it is easy to question whether there is anything that attendees do all ‘believe in’ and therefore have to ‘talk about’. Clearly, many attendees value the idea of community. However, arguably there needs to be a shared identity, interest or location to build community around.

In order to investigate this further, respondents were asked what they thought that all attendees of the Sunday Assembly had in common. Many respondents answered with broad statements suggesting that all attendees 'want to have a positive impact on the world', have 'a desire to engage with life' and are 'looking for a sense of community'. Despite often being used by religious people and groups too (for example Sentamu, 2013), phrases such as 'positive impact' are so vague that their ability to unify a movement is questionable. Similarly, attendees were given a list of statements from the Sunday Assembly's Public Charter and asked to choose the statement that they identified with most. By an overwhelmingly majority the most popular statement was 'Live Better'. It was also perhaps the least specific. When asked to explain their choices very few attendees felt the need to explain what they mean by 'better'. For example one attendee explained their choice with an equally undelineated explanation: 'I believe life is for living and you should make of it what you can.'

Although there are clearly ambiguous bases for engagement with the Sunday Assembly, this did not stop many attendees strongly identifying with the Sunday Assembly. In fact attendees stated that they 'believe in the concept' of the Sunday Assembly, they 'love the ethos behind it' and that 'it correlates with [their] own personal beliefs a lot better [than religion]!' Such strong identification with a vaguely defined institution can appear paradoxical. This paradox is further represented by one attendee who suggests that it is specifically the Sunday Assembly's lack of a shared belief that unifies it: 'We don't have a message to preach to people, so we can just concentrate on the doing good part!' However, this apparent paradox can be explained if we consider that Sunday Assembly attendees are exemplifying engaged indifference - indifferentism. It was often specifically because the Sunday Assembly did not define its beliefs that attendees felt a particularly strong identification with it. This can be

seen in the comments several attendees made showing that they valued the Sunday Assembly's willingness to accept 'not knowing' all the answers:

> The acceptance of being where you are and just giving things a go. And that it is ok to do your best and not succeed. I think these are really important messages that we don't really get too much of in today's society where there is so much pressure to perform.

This attendee can be seen to be making a reference to the part of a meeting called (for example) 'Lindsey is doing her best'[7]. Here an attendee of the Sunday Assembly tells the congregation about their life and how they have tried to live it as best they can. Examples include a woman who talked about surviving a divorce and a man who talked about being a father to a son with autism. Just like the example of an Easter Assembly being based on 'new beginnings', this institution can be seen as an unacknowledged reference to the Christian notion of testimony. However, where these stories differ from a Christian testimony is that they did not end with divine intervention. Instead speakers invariably tell the congregation about the mistakes they have made and what they have learnt from their experiences.

Another attendee, Emma, builds on this focus on 'not knowing' by making a direct comparison between uncertainty and the absolutism of Christianity.

> As an atheist, when I ask Christians questions on life, the world, and religion, I often hear "free will" as the definitive answer whereas I'd accept "We don't know and that's ok" as much more honest and comforting! I think I wanted a Sunday Assembly before I knew it existed. It appeals to be in the company of people who openly confess

[7] The name of this section changes depending on the speaker. So at the next assembly is could be (for example) 'Elliot is doing his best'.

> they don't know. No one pretends to have the answer, let's just be nice, enjoy each other's company and have a sing song.

Emma specifically compares the ‘We don’t know and that’s ok’ approach of the Sunday Assembly to her own negative experiences of Christianity, where she was offered definitive answers that she could not accept. For her, the honesty of being part of a group of people who admit that they ‘don’t know’ is, in contrast, something she can accept and identify with. When respondents first stated that they ‘believe in’ the concept of the Sunday Assembly it appeared strange. However, on consideration of Emma’s viewpoint these attendees can be seen to believe in, and identify with, the Sunday Assembly's embrace of uncertainty. This relates to indifferentism in that they express engaged indifference about religion and the religious beliefs of others, while positively identifying with uncertainty.

Indifferent and Inclusive

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the Sunday Assembly embraces uncertainty and its attendees are attracted to and identify through a sense of ‘not knowing’. This embrace of uncertainty and rejection of particular descriptions is linked to indifference about religion. However, it is not the total indifference envisioned by the likes of Bruce, where religion is a completely insignificant factor. It is closer to the indifference towards how different individuals choose to articulate their religious or non-religious identity which Voas and Bagg discuss, but it is most accurately described through indifferentism. We will use the responses of one attendee, Abbie, to show how this identity of ‘engaged indifference’ (Lee, 2014) is lived out by some attendees of the Sunday Assembly.

Initially Abbie explains why she decided to attend the Sunday Assembly by noting: ‘I have always been drawn to the idea of community in religion, but I’m not religious, so wanted something without religion’. Once she has established that she is ‘not religious’, she ignores

religion and describes herself without referring to it: ‘I am a caring optimist who values friends, family, education and society, and believe that we can improve society if we just talk and work together.’ This will to improve society by building closer communities is something that Abbie refers to consistently and much more actively than her non-religion.

When confronted with the list of possible descriptions Abbie picked only ‘Unsure’ rather than ‘No Religion’. ‘Not religious’ was, for her, a negative identity label denoting her lack of religion, rather than one with which she chose to positively identify. She explained why she chose ‘Unsure’ stating:

> I like elements of Buddhism and I always 'touch wood' so I must believe in something, but I'm unsure as to what that is and I'm happy not actively discovering that [italics added].

She reinforces this standpoint by further stating:

> I like to think that friends and relatives go onto somewhere else when they pass away, and I would probably pray if I was alone at sea, but I do not like the negative aspects of religion and do not need it in my life to be content and happy [italics added].

Abbie therefore establishes that she is ‘not religious’ but self-consciously evaluates her own complex embrace and rejection of the religious and the secular which involves Buddhism, superstition, prayer and dislike of religion. By doing this Abbie shows that she is definitely not indifferent towards religion. However, what the two statements italicised show is that Abbie chooses to identify through indifference to religion, despite not being indifferent. Abbie’s position can therefore be seen as an example of ‘indifferentism’. Her repeated use of

the phrase ‘happy’ emphasises her will to convey contentment with her chosen label of ‘Unsure’ and not delineate beyond this.

Abbie’s position can be seen as representative of many Sunday Assembly respondents. Another such example came from a woman who made seven strong statements about religion and her relationship to it before stating ‘I’m not fussed with that though, I just want to celebrate the fact we are here!’ Like Abbie this example is indifferentist, given that the seven statements about religion show that she is, in fact, ‘fussed’. These examples show Lee’s question about the reasons behind an identification with indifferentism is pertinent: why are Sunday Assembly attendees identifying in a way that 'does not reflect the substance of their position?’ (Lee, 2011:196)

To understand why attendees like Abbie might want to identify differently in a public and private setting it is useful to return to the secular sacred. As discussed above, the secular sacred is a useful concept for understanding the non-negotiable boundaries in beliefs attendees’ may hold. The strong views that Sunday Assembly attendees displayed throughout our study by rejecting anti-religious attitudes as ‘entirely wrong’, causing them to ‘throw Dawkins’ books out of windows’ and distance themselves from ‘aggressively atheist’ views, can be seen to constitute one such secular sacred boundary. While many views about the Sunday Assembly were expressed, it is these views about ‘radical inclusion’ that provide the kind of non-negotiability that Knott argues will constitute a sacred boundary.

Knott argued that secular sacred boundaries were often revealed through a contestation between non-negotiable views. Emma’s comparison, cited earlier, between the Sunday Assembly and religion reveals one such instance. She states that specifically because of her experiences of the exclusivity of religion, she can only be a member of the Sunday Assembly if it is inclusive. This tension was played out at a Sunday Assembly meeting when an outside

speaker made an anti-religion joke. Immediately an organiser explained that, while they personally welcomed the talk, the guidelines of the Sunday Assembly required them to emphasise the fact that the Assembly was not against religion and all beliefs were welcome. The leader therefore separated the Sunday Assembly from this joke without dismissing the possibility that they were an atheist, or even supported the joke in a personal capacity. The same tension was thus suggested; that the Sunday Assembly is non-religious but chooses not to overtly present itself in this way[8].

This example presents another example of non negotiability: an event that threatened this boundary of inclusivity was immediately rectified. Both these examples show the kind of 'contestation' between two beliefs that Knott refers to. In this case a contestation between a belief in including all perspectives and an attitude of anti-religion.

This sacred boundary around inclusivity helps to suggest one answer to Lee's 2011 question about indifferentism: '…why are people classifying themselves in this way if it does not reflect the substance of their position?' (196). One reason that can cause people to identify as indifferent to religion, even when they are not, is a desire to project publicly an inclusive attitude towards those with different beliefs. This reflects the paradox in the epigraph to this study which shows that the Sunday Assembly avoids referring to atheism precisely so others can see 'that atheism isn't just about not believing in God'. The Sunday Assembly adapts how it talks about atheism in order to project a more inclusive image. What is evident from our study is that attendees are also willing to adapt the way they personally identify in order to appear more inclusive.

[8] The New York chapter of the Sunday Assembly eventually became two separate groups, one remaining a Sunday Assembly and one becoming more actively atheist, evidencing that this tension can sometimes be difficult to contain within one group (Engelhart, 2014).

This willingness was exemplified most clearly by Charles. Charles changed his mind about how he wanted to publicly identify himself during his interview. When first presented with the list of identity labels he chose 'atheist'. However, when asked to explain his decision he asked for the list back and, despite having been made aware that he could choose multiple terms, crossed out his initial decision and circled humanist. To explain his decision making process he said:

> I think I'm more of a humanist actually because, umm… even though I am an atheist I think that humanist is more about helping other people, which shows what I'm all about. So yeah… I think I'm more humanist really

This decision shows that, for Charles, the reason for identifying as a humanist was because of what it 'showed' other people rather than what he actually believes. He acknowledges that he is an atheist in terms of his own private identity, but that by identifying as a humanist he feels more able to publicly portray the fact that he identifies strongly with the idea of helping others. Privately he does not see a contradiction between his identity as an atheist and his primary desire to help others. However, by deleting his decision to identify as an atheist in order to 'show' this desire to help others, the suggestion is that Charles does not think others will recognise this desire if he identifies as an atheist. Furthermore, his decision to cross out atheist rather than to identify both as 'atheist' and 'humanist' could even suggest he thinks others will see atheism and helping others as incompatible.

It is interesting to consider the possible reasons behind Charles' change of mind. It is certainly conceivable that Charles is reacting to the negative connotations associated with New Atheist literature expressed by many respondents above. A further question Charles' decision poses is whether the Sunday Assembly's public discourse and the leadership's own

ambivalence to the term ‘atheism’ could be playing any role in Charles’ choices. If we see the Sunday Assembly as an intentional reaction to more exclusive non-religious groups then it projects a more popular, inclusive form of non-religion into the public sphere. This raises questions about the motivations of the Sunday Assembly’s national and local leadership, which are difficult to answer, particularly given their limited statements about atheism and non-religion.Sanderson, one of the national leaders, grew up attending church regularly but turned to non-religion at a young age (Hattenstone, 2014) and another leader was a member of Holy Trinity Brompton (Brown, 2013). This suggests that for them Sunday Assembly may be as much a reaction to Christianity as to New Atheism. Whatever their motivations, the possibility remains that the way its leaders position themselves affects the ways Sunday Assembly attendees like Charles subsequently identify. More longitudinal research tracking the way that long term attendees identify over time would help to answer these questions.

It is clear that Charles sees atheism as a negative identity that does not fully connote the inclusion or will to help others that he wishes to project. He therefore chooses to identify in a different way. Perhaps then, other attendees like Abbie also identify through indifferentism to resist exclusionary categories, and project an identity that is inclusive. If attendees of the Sunday Assembly believe there is a sacred boundary around this idea of inclusivity, identifying in a way that supports this desire for radical inclusion will be of primary importance.

Non-religion and the Sunday Assembly

So far it has been established that attendees of the Sunday Assembly reject the poles of organised religion and atheism and often publicly reject any kind of classification in-between. Many attendees choose to identify publicly through indifferentism, focussing on inclusivity, whilst privately remaining broadly non-religious. This final section returns to a discussion of

non-religion, to explore how attendees maintain this private non-religiosity and how useful the theoretical framework of non-religion might be for understanding the Sunday Assembly.

Some statements made by attendees utilise the phrase ‘non-religion’ as a positive category in the way Lee suggests is ‘increasing’. It was used positively to describe personal identities, for example: ‘[I] Think I'm a non-religious rather than an atheist as sometimes I do wonder if there is a higher meaning to life’. It was also used to describe the Sunday Assembly as an institution, for example: ‘I think part of what the Sunday Assembly is is non-religious’. These instances appear to support Lee’s attempt to define a positive conceptual field that is broader than atheism. However, although these examples see non-religion as a positive category, Abbie appears to be using the term in a more negative way. She states once that she is ‘not religious’, rather than non-religious, and does not mention it again. Abbie therefore only negatively identifies with a lack of religion and positively identifies in relation to other markers. The perception of non-religion as a more negative identity was also noted in interviews with several attendees who qualified their identification with non-religion by immediately following it with a positive quality or activity. For instance, one attendee stated ‘I am also not at all religious but really like the idea of community and human kindness’. The implication of this attendee’s statement is that identifying as ‘not at all religious’ might in some way separate him from ideas of ‘community and human kindness', which he therefore feels the need to reassert.

The different ways in which ‘non-religion’ was used confirms Lee’s observation that what the study of non-religion lacks is an understanding of terminology. It could be argued that this extends as far as popular usage of the terminology in public life. It is easy to see why data concerning non-religious identification is unreliable if in popular usage it is unclear whether it is a positive or negative category. It is possible that a key reason for participants

identifying with indifferentism was that non-religious categories such as atheism had too many negative connotations which attendees wished to avoid and no alternative term was seen as available.

A further important consideration is that for Sunday Assembly attendees identification with non-religion is often of secondary importance. For example, Abbie displays an extremely developed vision of the kind of community she would like to live in and how she thinks her own local community could be improved. When discussing the Sunday Assembly, Abbie consistently focusses on its potential to create community rather than judging it by the way in which it approaches religion or non-religion. She believes the Sunday Assembly has the capacity to bring about 'a decrease in loneliness especially for older people'. She even offers practical advice on how local assemblies could welcome new members in ways that complement her vision of community. This idea that attendees value the Sunday Assembly's community first and its non-religiosity second, can be further supported by a number of two part statements which attendees used to describe it. For instance one attendee stated 'I really liked the idea of coming together and thinking about life in a positive way without any religious element.' Another described the Sunday Assembly as 'a sense of community, without religious doctrine'. In both these cases the positive statement about community is prioritised, and the negative statement denoting a lack of religion appears almost as a secondary afterthought.

This example leads us to question the word 'primary' in Lee's definition of non-religion. She defines the non-religious as 'anything primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion' (2012, 131). While the Sunday Assembly as an organization and the majority of its individual attendees do show a relationship of difference with religion, we have shown that this is not always primary. According to Lee's definition, if something is not defined

‘primarily with a relationship of difference to religion’ (and is not religious) then it is secular. At what point, then, does a person’s, or an organisation’s, relationship with religion become a small enough part of their identity that they are considered secular rather than non-religious? This question would require further research. However, the way in which Sunday Assembly attendees identify secondarily as non-religious does suggest that an abrupt distinction between non-religion and the secular, such as the one Lee proposes, could be problematic.

Conclusion

In this study it is clear that the Sunday Assembly attendees identify heterogeneously, consistently rejecting the poles of observant orthodoxy and overt irreligion. We suggest further that even in the spaces in-between these poles attendees tended to reject classification and identify with this lack of classification through uncertainty and indifferentism. Strategic use of indifferentism allows attendeesto focus on their personal and organisational inclusivity and acceptance of all beliefs. We have identified that for attendees there is a secular sacred boundary around the concept inclusivity. Finally, we have suggested that behind a more public articulation of indifferentism, attendees broadly self- identify as non-religious.

As a small scale study there are some limitations to the generalisability of these claims but, as has been shown throughout, the data presented have drawn out some key theoretical questions about how irreligion/non-religion and atheism are articulated. There are also political and social implications about how non-religion is articulated, organised and mobilised in British public life, a question explored in Lee’s most recent work (2016) where she posits that indifferentist attitudes towards religion are indicative of wider non-religious contemporary cultures. She states that ‘we need deeper, empirically grounded accounts of what non-religious cultures actually involve’ (p.186). While this study makes a start, further

studies of the growth and change of the Sunday Assembly movement will provide an interesting perspective on these issues.

A further key question that more extensive research would need to answer is whether an institution like Sunday Assembly attracts people who already identify with indifferentism, thus pointing towards an existing cultural trend. Or, does the Sunday Assembly as an institution, deliberately or otherwise, play its part in constituting an approach of indifferentism, through its own articulation and approach? Is their inclusive form of non-religion reflective of an existing attitude, or does attendance of the Sunday Assembly generate and promote new forms and articulations of non-religion?

This study took place when the Sunday Assembly was in its infancy. In the few years since these data were collected the Assembly has grown, evolved and doubtless in some locations it has declined. As an organisation, the Sunday Assembly presents an unparalleled opportunity to better understand non-religion and secularity in different national contexts. Through engaging with its members it also provides an opportunity to better understand how individuals make sense of their beliefs and identity with regard to religion. That the Sunday Assembly operates in such a variety of countries also provides an opportunity to further understand how different social, religious and political contexts give rise to different forms of non-religious or secular activity.

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