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58

Religion for Atheists? Transhumanism, Mindfulness, and Atheist Churches

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Introduction

The concept of "religion for atheists" or an "atheist church" might at first glance seem paradoxical. Indeed, the common understanding of atheism is that it means to be *without* theism or religion. However, there are an increasing number of atheists who engage in what might be seen as "religion-like" practices. There are atheists who gather together on Sundays to sing songs together, listen to engaging presentations, and build community with like-minded people. There are atheists that seek out experiences of "secular spirituality" and "horizontal transcendence" through practices like mindfulness meditation and sensory deprivation. And there are atheists who have dogmatic beliefs about existential and moral questions that they attempt to "evangelize" to others. There are even philosophical treatises written by atheists that advocate for borrowing more explicitly from religion to imbue secular beliefs and values with more meaning and emotionality, including Ronald Dworkin's *Religion without God* and Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists*. In these ways and others, an emerging trend among atheists in the twenty-first century is to practice atheism much like one would practice religion.

In this chapter, I describe some of the "religion-like" beliefs and practices of atheists and other non-religious people. First, I briefly outline the various ways that religion has been defined. I explain how there are many definitions of religion that do not include references to supernatural beliefs or godlike figures, which opens up possibilities for seeing certain philosophies and practices among atheists as being like religion in some ways. Then, I outline some of the ways that atheist beliefs, philosophies, and practices map on to various definitions of religion, with a focus on three examples: transhumanism, mindfulness, and atheist churches. While I will give a brief description and history of each, this is in no way a complete history or accounting of these practices and philosophies. Instead, I focus on explaining how and why atheists and other non-religious

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people have taken up these practices and philosophies in ways that resemble religious beliefs and practices.

Definitions of Religion

In the social scientific study of religion, there may well be more definitions of religion than there are religions to study. Religious studies scholar Candy Gunther Brown (2016) explains that there is no "single, universally accepted, historically stable, politically neutral" definition of religion. While some definitions emphasize certain rituals and practices as being the defining feature of religion, others focus on the presence of beliefs about gods or the afterlife. More generally, social scientists typically sort definitions of religion into two categories: substantive definitions and functional definitions. As sociologist of religion Peter Berger (1974) describes in his more detailed discussion of the history and use of these categories, substantive definitions of religion focus on the *content* of a belief system, while functional definitions focus on the *consequences* of a belief system. Substantive definitions of religion point to beliefs about the supernatural and the sacred, as well as certain rituals or gatherings, as being necessary for religion. In contrast, functional definitions focus on what religion does, either for an individual or a group of individuals, be it the cultivation of community, a meaningful ordering of the universe, or providing answers to existential questions. Substantive and functional definitions of religion are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and some scholars attempt to include both substance and function in their definitions. Even so, fleshing out the differences between the two enables a better understanding of how and when atheist beliefs and practices might be considered "religious." Functional definitions of religion can be found in the work of scholars like Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz. For them, the defining feature of religion is not any specific belief or practice, but the *function* of those beliefs and practices in the lives of religious people. For example, Durkheim argues that the function of religion is to maintain and strengthen the collective values and norms of social groups. Through coming together regularly to ritualize beliefs around sacred symbols and beliefs, religion is a powerful tool for establishing order and reinforcing norms. Geertz makes a similar argument, though focused more on the "moods and motivations" that religions establish in individuals. He argues that religions provide explanations for the meaning and order of life, which offers a "uniquely real" set of symbols with which to orient one's life.

Substantive definitions of religion, however, attempt to outline the specific beliefs or practices that make something religious. Peter Berger and Martin Riesebrodt are examples of scholars who have put forth more substantive definitions of religion. Riesebrodt argues that religion is very specifically about the supernatural and the "promise of salvation." He believes that functional definitions of religion fail to adequately distinguish what makes religion unique, and thus proposes that the underlying component of all religions is the practice of communicating with superhuman powers in order to cope with crises and work toward some form of salvation or reward. Berger has similar qualms with functional definitions of religion and argues that religion's capacity to create a self-maintaining "sacred cosmos" is its defining feature. Geertz and Durkheim also suggest some necessary substantive features of religion – Durkheim emphasized the need for a "moral community" (i.e. a church) and Geertz pointed to a belief in transcendental truths as being unique to religion.

Taken together, there are numerous, and often conflicting, definitions of religion. Most would argue that no one definition captures all beliefs and practices that have ever been considered religious, and many definitions include beliefs and practices that many would *not* consider religious. For example, functional definitions are often critiqued for being too inclusive in a way that almost anything could be somehow religious. For example, Emile Durkheim famously argues that even science can be seen as religious, given his definition – both science and religion attempt to classify and systematize the world in ways that establish order and reinforce norms. And substantive definitions of religion are typically critiqued for being too narrow. For example, many substantive definitions include a belief in the supernatural, but not all supernatural belief systems are considered religious (e.g. belief in the paranormal) and not all recognized religions promote supernatural beliefs (e.g. many Unitarian Universalist traditions) (see Baker and Smith 2015). Thus, it is with functional definitions of religion that there is more room to think through how certain beliefs and practices among atheists and other nominally non-religious people might serve similar functions as religion, though there are also substantive practices that atheists participate in that look similar to religion as well, including attending church and meditating.

Secular Spiritualities and the Secular Sacred

The fact that atheism is, by definition, a rejection of theism means that people typically characterize atheism, as well as other forms of non-

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religion, as simply a *lack* of religious beliefs and practices. However, it is often argued that to believe in the *non*-existence of gods and supernatural forces is just as much a belief as is believing in their existence, and research finds that many atheists are just as dogmatic about their existential beliefs as religious people (e.g. Baker and Smith 2015). Further, atheists create symbols and holidays to collectively recognize and celebrate their secular beliefs and values, including the celebration of Darwin Day, the satirical worship of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and the use of the scarlet "A" as a symbol for atheist (Cimino and Smith 2014). Through these various practices, atheists are imbuing secular beliefs, rituals, and symbols with sacred meanings, or what sociologist Jesse Smith (2017) calls "sacralizing the secular." Professor of religious and secular studies Kim Knott (2013) explains that even in Emile Durkheim's original conception, the sacred–profane dichotomy is not confined to religion. Something that is "sacred" is set apart or special, while something that is profane is mundane or ordinary. And Knott, along with others, argues that both religious and non-religious people differentiate between things based on their value and give special meaning to certain symbols, objects, places, or ideas. For example, Baker and Smith (2015) find that atheists sacralize and place "epistemic authority" in things like science, reason, and self-knowledge, and Cimino and Smith (2014) find that many atheist groups "venerate community instead of god."

It is also the case that atheists and other non-religious people seek out and cultivate what many call a "secular spirituality" or "extra-theistic" spirituality (Ammerman 2013; Cimino and Smith 2014). This seemingly paradoxical concept has been made possible in part thanks to the discursive separation of "spirituality" from "religion" that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas spirituality and religion were once almost synonymous, today, particularly in the west, many people identify as "spiritual but not religious" as a way to distinguish individual spiritual practices from a more formal, organized religious belief system (Ammerman 2013). This means that even as people in the west become more and more disinterested in identifying with a singular organized religious group, most continue to cultivate "spiritual" beliefs about supernatural beings and participate in ritual practices to affirm those beliefs.

However, the concept of "secular spirituality" goes a step further and strips spirituality of all supernatural or theistic meaning. Cimino and Smith (2014) define secular spirituality as feelings of "awe, wonder, and even transcendence" without reference to any supernatural reality. Typically, this transcendence is seen as "horizontal" rather than "vertical" because it is focused on this-

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worldly feelings of "fullness" and being connected to something greater than oneself (e.g. connection to a community or the greater cosmos) (see Schnell and Keenan 2013; Ammerman 2013). Research into this phenomenon has found that a substantial portion of atheists use the language of spirituality to talk about meaning-making practices and experiences in their lives (Schnell and Keenan 2013; Cimino and Smith 2014; Baker and Smith 2015). Even "New Atheist" Sam Harris is a proponent of this practice, and in his book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*, he argues for a "rational approach" to spirituality that he believes can be beneficial for atheists.

Given that atheists and other non-religious people have substantive beliefs and engage in all of the above meaning-making practices in ways that look similar to religious beliefs and practices, some scholars are arguing for getting rid of the religion–non-religion dichotomy all together. For example, Taves et al. (2018) suggest that religion and non-religion both be studied under the umbrella of "worldviews," along with other ideologies like humanism, nationalism, and neoliberalism. They argue that atheism and theism offer competing answers to "big questions" about what exists, how we know what is true, and where we come from, but that both are frameworks for understanding these big questions. They argue that seeing atheism and religion as being on a spectrum with other worldviews enables a better understanding of when these worldviews overlap and when they conflict. Baker and Smith (2015) make a similar argument, though they employ the concept of "cosmic belief systems" rather than worldviews. They argue that both theism and atheism "boil down to the narratives people tell" about the big questions that Taves et al. (2018) describe, and they suggest that secular and religious belief systems have the same formal properties – for example, both can be more or less coherent, dogmatic, or ritualized – that can be studied in the same ways.

Once atheism is understood to be more than just a lack of theism, it becomes easier to understand it as potentially religion-like. Atheists and other non-religious people have a diverse array of substantive secular values, beliefs, and practices, as well as a number of political and social groups through which to share and reaffirm those values and practices. In these ways, atheism can and does serve many of the same functions as religion, and many of the practices that atheists engage in resemble some of the substantive practices found among the religious.

Religion for Atheists?

For the remainder of the chapter, I will focus on three prominent examples of religious-like beliefs and practices found among atheists: mindfulness,

transhumanism, and atheist churches. Starting with mindfulness, I explain how Buddhist and other East Asian religious practices have been co-opted and secularized by consumers across the globe in ways that no longer map onto the religious ideals from which they originated. And atheists and other non-religious people have taken up these secularized practices, like yoga and mindfulness meditation, as a way to cultivate secular spiritualities. Then, I describe transhumanism, a nascent but growing philosophical movement that seeks to accelerate and/or override human evolution and intelligence with technology. While the members of this movement are almost exclusively secular, the philosophies and goals of societal transformation envisioned by transhumanism are religion-like in many ways. Finally, I detail the recent growth of atheist churches in the United States and other western countries. Atheists at these churches are explicitly copying the Christian church model to build community and to "sacralize the secular" in church-like settings on Sundays, revealing how religious forms can serve important functions for non-religious people.

Mindfulness

The term "mindfulness" is the English translation of the Buddhist term "sati," meaning "memory" or "remembrance" (Wilson 2014; Brown 2016). References to this term are found in ancient Indian Buddhist texts, as well as multiple translations that built from these texts. In Buddhism, mindfulness is associated with meditation practices in which practitioners focus intently on their breath without being interrupted by thoughts or emotions in an attempt to become more self-aware and in control. During mindfulness meditation, the meditator focuses on the ins and outs of their breath, noting any passing thoughts, emotions, or physical feelings without judgment or interrogation. Mindfulness meditation techniques were developed in early Indian Buddhism as part of a much larger system of religious beliefs and practices. Buddhist beliefs and practices are diverse, many of which are centered around beliefs about karma, reincarnation, the desire to reduce suffering, and the promotion of compassion and interconnectedness (Kucinskas 2019). Many Buddhists believe that people are perpetually being reincarnated into more or less positive states determined by the force of karma, including into demigods, humans, animals, "perpetually hungry ghosts," or into heaven-like or hell-like realms (Wilson 2014). Mindfulness is just one of many practices that Buddhists believe enable them to achieve more positive states of reincarnation and to ultimately reach a state of nirvana and escape the cycle of rebirth entirely.

In their studies of the secularization of mindfulness and Buddhism in the west, scholars like Jeff Wilson (2014) and Jaime Kucinskas (2019) explain that

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the secularized version of mindfulness that many westerners practice today has lost most of the religious meanings that were originally associated with it. To start, mindfulness meditation was historically confined to monasteries and practiced only by ordained monks and nuns, but it has now become a practice that many believe can be taken up by anyone who is interested. Thanks to a number of factors, including increased contact between the east and west due to war, immigration, and globalization, western countries like the United States have become increasingly exposed to and interested in eastern religions and practices, especially Buddhism. For example, survey research estimates that 40 percent of Americans say they meditate weekly and 30 percent say they are familiar with Buddhist teachings (Kucinskas 2019). However, mindfulness practices in the west are not typically associated with the full spectrum of Buddhist religious beliefs. In fact, the success of mindfulness in places like the United States is largely due to the medicalization and secularization of mindfulness practices. Buddhist practices are being used to cultivate a range of more individualized forms of spirituality that often resemble traditional Buddhism in name only. This is in line with the recent trends away from organized religion and toward personalized spiritualities that were described in the previous section. There is also a rapidly growing body of scientific research that points to mental and physical benefits that can be gained from mindfulness practices like meditation and yoga, including reduced stress, weight loss, enriched personal connections, improved immune system health, and reduced depression (Wilson 2014). These types of adaptations have made mindfulness practices attractive for a wide range of Buddhists and non-Buddhists, including people who identify with other religions and people who identify with no religions.

Wilson (2014) explains that one way that mindfulness gets recast for secular audiences is through metaphorical reinterpretations of Buddhist religious symbols and beliefs. For example, whereas Buddhists believe there are six realms of existence that include heaven, hell, human, and ghost, secularized versions of mindfulness recast these as "realms of stress" to be overcome. The "perpetually hungry ghost" becomes recast as "the stress of never having enough," the hell realm gets recast as the "stress of eternal warfare," and so on. Buddhists also believe in a demon god called Mara who tempts and attacks Buddha and his followers. But in secularized versions, Mara represents any sort of obstacle or temptation, from an emotion to a bad habit. In all of these examples, the religious aspects of Buddhism are downplayed while the scientific, secular, and therapeutic aspects are emphasized. And these secularized versions of mindfulness are becoming big business, finding their

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way into hospitals, schools, and bookstores, with billions of dollars spent every year on mindfulness products, services, and tourism (Kucinskas 2019). Thus, in order to cast as wide a net as possible, particularly for scientific and academic circles, the "secular mindfulness industry" attempts to define mindfulness as generally as possible to attract both secular and religious consumers.

One example comes from New Atheist and neuroscientist Sam Harris in his book *Waking Up: Spirituality without Religion*. Harris explains that mindfulness has been a key practice he has used as an atheist to cultivate a sense of secular spirituality and inner peace. For Harris, mindfulness helps him gain a clearer understanding and awareness of his embodied self in the world – what he calls spirituality without religion. Harris contends that practicing mindfulness does not require the adoption of any religious beliefs and he draws on scientific research about the health benefits of being mindful to try to convince his readers to take up mindfulness practices. Wilson (2014) and Kucinskas (2019) detail numerous other scientists, academics, and practitioners who have used similar language and tactics to market mindfulness to non-believers. Drawing on the rhetoric of science, rationality, and medicine, secular mindfulness practices have become widely available, and even recommended, by many prominent scientists and doctors for use in secular contexts.

It is important to note that while secularized versions of mindfulness are popular in the west, East Asian countries like China and Japan also practice their own secularized versions of Buddhism and mindfulness. China and Japan are two of the most secular countries in the world – recent findings from the Pew Global Religious Landscape study put the number of religiously unaffiliated people in China at 52 percent and in Japan at 57 percent. However, many of the unaffiliated people in these countries still practice Buddhism and other East Asian religions like Confucianism and Shintoism. Sociologist Fenggang Yang (2018) explains that this is because these practices are not considered religious by a substantial proportion of people in East Asia, and research finds that many people who participate in Buddhist and other religious rituals often do so for "cultural" reasons rather than religious reasons. For example, many Japanese people who say they have no beliefs in the supernatural will carry lucky charms and pray in temples. Thus, across cultural contexts, Buddhist practices are reinterpreted in secular ways that attract both believers and non-believers alike.

While secular versions of Buddhism and mindfulness have become increasingly popular, many would argue that there are still religious aspects to the

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secular mindfulness movement. Wilson (2014) explains that for non-religious people who practice mindfulness, happiness and compassion become sacred values and goals to be achieved. And he argues that because mindfulness comes packaged with a set of practices and values, it can become a powerful source of meaning for people, much like religion. In fact, many people have detailed "conversion narratives" about when they found mindfulness and started to apply it to their daily lives. Similarly, Kucinskas (2019) details how a contingent of people in the secular mindfulness movement have ultimate goals of societal reformation through mindfulness. Many believe that through the spread of mindfulness practices, collective social problems like materialism and inequality will be reduced. And Brown (2016) contends that because mindfulness is "steeped in transcendent beliefs" and is associated with moral and ethical values and behaviors, the religious nature of mindfulness is present even in the secularized versions that atheists often practice.

Transhumanism

Transhumanism is a recent philosophical and cultural movement that promotes the use of technology to "hack" human evolution. Through the use of neuroscience, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence, the goal of transhumanism is to enhance and extend human life through technological means. In rhetorical scholar Andrew Pilsch's (2017) book-length analysis of this movement, he explains how transhumanism has become an increasingly prominent movement, particularly in technology policy and bioethics debates, and that there are many overlapping and competing subgroups and philosophies that make up the transhumanist community. One subgroup consists of philosophers and academics who are writing manifestos about the values and potentials of transhumanism. For example, philosopher Max More in many ways introduced the modern concept of transhumanism into common discourse with his 1990 essay, "Transhumanism: toward a futurist philosophy." And sociologist Steven Fuller teamed up with legal scholar Veronika Lipinska to write *The Proactionary Imperative: A Foundation for Transhumanism*, in which they argue that humans are morally obliged to pursue techno-scientific progress.

Another subgroup among the transhumanists is the people doing the actual body modifications that transhumanist philosophers are calling for – the biohackers. Through various practices, including cryotherapy to slow aging, sensory deprivation float tanks to induce meditative states, and the surgical implantation of technological devices into their own bodies, biohackers are attempting to improve and extend their lives by physically altering

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their bodies with technology. One of the more controversial goals of some biohackers and transhumanists is the complete digitization of the brain through "mind uploading." What is currently just a popular science fiction trope is an actual reality that transhumanists are working toward, a reality in which immortality is attainable through shedding humanity's organic form. Pilsch (2017) explains that plenty of less extreme practices can be considered biohacking – meditation, fasting, and the quantified-self movement, in which people are tracking their every move with things like smart watches in order to analyze and optimize their mental, physical, and social health. However, while transhumanists may participate in these practices, it is the philosophy and motivation behind them that makes a practice specifically transhumanist. The belief that there is a moral imperative to these practices and that humanity *should* utilize technology in this way is the underlying philosophy that makes something or someone transhumanist. A final prominent subgroup within the transhumanist movement that I will briefly describe is the political subgroup. In 2016, philosopher and futurist Zoltan Istvan founded the Transhumanist Party of the United States, the first ever transhumanist political party, and ran for office as a presidential candidate with a transhumanist platform. Though his bid for the presidency was unsuccessful, he and philosopher Amon Twyman co-founded the Transhumanist Party Global and started to seek out transhumanist supporters and allies in countries across the globe, including Germany, France, and the UK (Benedikter and Siepmann 2016). Nascent transhumanist political parties have since formed in Germany and Britain. The goal of this global network is to promote technology as the primary tool for enacting positive change and reinventing politics as we know them. They seek to reduce illness and aging, social and economic inequality, and climate change through implementing radical technological changes into societies across the globe (Benedikter and Siepmann 2016).

A majority of people who identify as transhumanist are secular. A survey conducted by Humanity+, the predominant transhumanist nonprofit organization advocating for transhumanist values and the "ethical use of technology to expand human capacities," found that 66 percent of its members are atheistic or otherwise secular, and over one-third believe that transhumanism is incompatible with religion. Most transhumanists are white, well-educated men who work in technology, particularly in technology hubs like Silicon Valley in the United States. On the Humanity+ website (www.humanityplus.org), it is explained that transhumanism is a "naturalist" outlook and that transhumanists "seek to make their dreams come true in this

world, by relying not on supernatural powers or divine intervention but on rational thinking and empiricism, through continued scientific, technological, economic, and human development." However, there are numerous components of transhumanism that can be considered religion-like. The organization Humanity+ addresses this question explicitly on their site's Frequently Asked Questions page. The organizers maintain that transhumanism is a secular philosophical and political movement, but that transhumanism "might serve a few of the same functions" as religion. For example, it offers a sense of direction and purpose and has goals of achieving "something greater than our present condition." Transhumanism, the site explains, offers "a very long lifespan, unfading bliss, and godlike intelligence" – all things sought after by religious people, but that transhumanists claim can be found in this world through technological advancement rather than another world through faith. Pilsch (2017) details other features of transhumanism that are similar to religion. One example is the belief in "the singularity" held by many transhumanists. This is the belief that there will be a moment in the near future when the rate of technological development will exceed human intelligence and forever transform the human world. This has jokingly been called "The Rapture of the Nerds" (Pilsch 2017) because it shares similarities with Christian beliefs in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Both are awaiting the arrival of a better future, but transhumanists are putting their faith in technology rather than God as the "savior." There is also a strong moral imperative to transhumanism in which there is a felt obligation to improve and extend human life through technology because of the benefits it will incur for society. Much like the secular mindfulness movement, transhumanists are looking to spread their beliefs and practices as they work toward a larger societal transformation.

Atheist Churches

While self-proclaimed "atheist churches" are a recent phenomenon, non-religious people have been gathering together in organizational and communal settings for some time. For example, atheists and other non-religious people are often members of Unitarian Universalist Churches, which are geared toward interfaith and non-religious people alike. There are also a number of long-standing atheist and secular organizations across the globe, but particularly in the west in countries like the United States and United Kingdom, that are centered around affirming and promoting atheistic worldviews. Research finds that there are numerous types of atheist groups one could join, including political, charitable, social, educational, spiritual,

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and communal (Cragun et al. 2017). Some atheist groups are focused on identity politics and reducing the stigma surrounding atheism (this is especially prominent in countries like the United States, where atheism is still highly stigmatized), while other atheist groups are created to facilitate social activities with other atheists – like boardgames, book clubs, and hiking. Atheist churches, however, fall into the "communal" category and, as the name implies, they draw explicitly from religious forms as a means of building community among atheists and other non-religious people. Perhaps the most prominent example of the atheist church phenomenon is the Sunday Assembly, an organization I studied for my dissertation research (Frost 2017). The Sunday Assembly is an international network of secular congregations that started in London in 2013. Two British comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, decided to create a group in which they could do "church-like things without the god bits." They started to meet with friends on Sundays, sing pop songs together, and listen to engaging speakers talk about topics of interest to secular people, including science, community organizing, and social justice. Due to the success of their London-based group, they decided to offer a "build your own assembly" toolkit online and the organization exploded to over seventy chapters over the next few years. Most of these chapters are located in the United States and the United Kingdom, though there are a few chapters in other places in western Europe and Australia.

The Sunday Assembly's motto is to "Live Better, Help Often, and Wonder More," and this is reflected in what the local assemblies center their services and activities around. To "live better," they sing songs together, form small groups based on interests like watching TED Talks and playing games, and they have a section in their service called "One Thing I Do Know," which is a space for members from the community to share a personal experience. To "help often," they put on monthly volunteering activities and start phone trees to enable a support system among members. And to "wonder more" they bring in engaging speakers and a portion of their services is devoted to secular inspirational readings – like a poem or a quote from astronomer Carl Sagan. They also have a moment of silence in their services in which they reflect on the things they learned and how to apply them to their lives going forward. Another example of an atheist church is the US-based Houston Oasis, which uses a similar church model to create community and ritual among the non-religious and which started around the same time as Sunday Assembly. The Oasis meets on Sundays, listens to a band play music, invites

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speakers to engage with members, and passes around a hat during services for donations to keep the organization going (Schutz 2017).

Organizations like the Sunday Assembly and Houston Oasis are enacting what sociologist Jesse Smith (2017) calls "communal secularity," and their services serve many of the same functions as religious services. Drawing on a Durkheimian framework, Smith explains that the congregational form that many religious groups utilize has universally appealing functions – it enables an expression of group emotions and values, an embodiment of group ideologies and beliefs, and a sense of belonging and purpose. As I have described throughout this chapter, these are all things that atheists seek out as well, and atheist churches like the Sunday Assembly have been created to fulfill these needs. Or, as Smith (2017) puts it, Sunday Assembly and organizations like it are offering "religious goods" – like moral community and social solidarity – in secular packages. And the founders are very intentional about the religious-like nature of their organizations. For example, the co-founder of the Sunday Assembly, Sanderson Jones, coined the term "lifefulness" to express the ultimate goal of the Sunday Assembly. He makes explicit connections between this concept and secular mindfulness, stating on his website (sandersonjones.co): "Lifefulness is inspired by the work of John Kabat-Zinn who created mindfulness by adapting Buddhist meditation in a secular, inclusive, and evidence-based way." He believes that through a secularized congregational form, atheists and other non-religious people can live fuller lives as a result of the enriching nature of the secular rituals and values this form can cultivate.

Thus, in these ways, Smith (2017) suggest that atheists in atheist churches are "sacralizing the secular" by creating rituals and heightened emotions surrounding certain secular beliefs and symbols. For example, the Sunday Assembly's practice of singing pop songs in a communal setting is meant to cultivate a sense of connection and what Emile Durkheim would call "collective effervescence" among assemblers. However, the sense of transcendence that some feel while singing a meaningful song with others is understood by Sunday Assemblers as scientifically explainable rather than caused by some supernatural force. Similarly, through engaging in volunteer work together and promoting community values centered around helping community members in need, Sunday Assembly produces a shared ethic and value-system that motivates assemblers' actions. In these ways, atheist churches enable their members to transcend the everyday and the individual and engage in ritual practices that promote feelings of community, heightened emotionality, and a sense of shared values. And even though most

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members of the Sunday Assembly would deny that their rituals and beliefs are "faith-based," Smith (2017) argues that they do exhibit a form of faith-based narrative rooted in the sacralization of secular-scientific and humanist meaning systems.

Taken together, the purpose and practices of atheist churches are even more explicitly religion-like than are secular mindfulness and transhumanism. Members of these organizations come together on Sundays to connect with a force that they experience to be outside of themselves – the force of community – and they develop shared rituals and ethics based in secular worldviews to accomplish this connection. During their services, they sacralize and ritualize their values of leading ethical and purposeful lives, helping others, and being filled with awe and wonder about the world around them. While the rituals and beliefs found within atheist churches are secular, their church-like form serves many of the same functions as religion.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I detailed three examples of atheist beliefs and practices that can be seen as religion-like – mindfulness, transhumanism, and atheist churches. I explained how not all definitions of religion include beliefs in the supernatural and godlike figures, especially functional definitions of religion that focus more on what religion *does* for people rather than what religion specifically *is* in terms of specific beliefs or practices. Building largely from these more functional definitions of religion, throughout the chapter I detailed examples of how religious forms – such as meditation, churches, collective rituals, and shared beliefs about the meaning of life and the future of humanity – serve many of the same functions for secular people as they do for religious people. Through these practices and shared beliefs, atheists and other non-religious people cultivate community, answer existential questions, transcend the everyday, and reaffirm their identities and values. I also described how atheists draw on the language of secular spirituality and the secular sacred to talk about their experiences of awe, wonder, connectedness, and transcendence, and they often do so together in groups like the Sunday Assembly that have been created explicitly to capitalize on the usefulness of religious forms. Taken together, these examples reveal the ways that atheists and other non-religious people are seeking out "religious goods" in secular packages.

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