

Ritualizing Nonreligion

Ritualizing Nonreligion: Cultivating Rational Rituals in Secular Spaces

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As the religious landscape in the United States continues to change, and as more Americans leave organized religion, scholars have raised important questions about the role of ritual in secular spaces and whether or not religious decline will result in a decline in meaningful ritual practices. As ritual is often conflated with religion, it is often also assumed that nonreligious people are uninterested in rituals because they are committed to science, rationality, and materialism. And many believe this means that the nonreligious live “disenchanted” lives with no means for experiencing greater meaning, transcendence, or spirituality. Drawing on an ethnographic case study of ritual creation at a secular congregation called the Sunday Assembly, I disrupt these presumed dichotomies between rationality/ritual and science/spirituality. I show how atheists and agnostics at the Sunday Assembly are secularizing religious rituals, as well as creating new secular rituals, by relying on the scientific method and a trial-and-error approach to ritual creation. In doing so, they are producing experiences of transcendence, collective effervescence, and “secular spirituality.” And I show how these “rational rituals” are often seen by nonreligious people as being *more* meaningful than religious rituals because of the work that goes into their creation. I argue that the Sunday Assembly is an illustrative case for shedding new light on the ritual creation process, and my findings contribute to discussions about how nonreligious people negotiate what many assume are conflicting discourses of science and religion as they create meaningful secular rituals.

Introduction

There are ongoing debates about the role of ritual in secular contexts. While some argue that ritualization, or the intentional distinguishing of certain actions as distinct and imbued with special meaning (Bell 1997), will continue to be a

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primary mechanism for making meaning and organizing group life as a society secularizes (Collins 2004; Driver 1991), others suggest that ritual practices will be transformed or recede entirely in the face of secularization (Bell 1997; Giddens 1991). Rituals are often associated with religious beliefs and practices, and a main tenet of secularization theory is that as societies modernize and are increasingly exposed to scientific explanations for how the world works, individuals will no longer seek out religion or ritual to explain and order their worlds (Berger 1967; Giddens 1991; Habermas 1985; Houtman and Aupers 2007; Taylor 2007). In the United States, where there has been a steady decline in religious affiliation over the past few decades (Hout and Fischer 2014; Voas and Chaves 2016), rituals still permeate people's lives, including weddings, funerals, seasonal holidays, presidential inaugurations, and Super Bowl Sunday. However, there is evidence that these rituals are being increasingly secularized and that Americans are becoming less likely to participate in explicitly religious rituals like attending religious services or reading religious texts (Hoesly 2017; MacMurray and Fazzino 2017; Pew Research Center 2017).

Thus, while religious decline in the United States has not necessarily meant a decline in ritual, it has in some ways meant that rituals have become more secular. However, the assumption that secularization and ritualization are at odds is a dominant narrative in sociology (Bell 1997; Giddens 1991; Habermas 1985; Weber 1922), and it shapes perceptions of the growing population of nonreligious Americans (Lee 2015). As more and more people leave organized religion, with now almost 30% of Americans reporting they are not affiliated with a religion (Pew Research Center 2021), the conflation of ritual with religion results in inaccurate assumptions about nonreligious people and practices. Nonreligion scholar Lois Lee (2015) argues that atheism and other forms of nonreligion are typically assumed to be solely the *lack* of belief or participation in a meaningful religious subculture, the rejection of traditional forms of community and ritual, and the embodiment of a rationalistic and materialist secularism. As a result, there is a widespread assumption that nonreligious people have a commitment to science, rationality, and materialism, which is presumed to leave them "disenchanted" and closed off to emotionally fulfilling rituals and spiritual practices (Collins 2004; Giddens 1991; Reed and Adams 2011; Weber 1922).

Drawing on an ethnographic case study of an international network of secular congregations called the Sunday Assembly, I disrupt these presumed dichotomies between rationality/ritual and science/spirituality. At the Sunday Assembly, atheists are constructing rituals based in secular worldviews that prioritize scientific rationalism and eschew any reference to the supernatural. Through an analysis of the ritual creation process at the Sunday Assembly, I show how atheists are secularizing religious rituals, as well as creating new secular rituals, as a means of creating experiences of "secular spirituality" (see Cimino and Smith 2014), "horizontal transcendence" (see Coleman, Silver, and Holcombe 2013), and collective effervescence. While there have been a few recent studies that investigate ritual practices among nonreligious people (Baker and Smith 2015; Cimino and Smith 2014; Lee 2015; Smith and Halligan 2021), a majority of this work is survey or interview-based. Thus, we know

that the nonreligious *do* engage in ritual practices, including collective singing, secular pilgrimages, and even debaptism ceremonies (Cimino and Smith 2014; Farias et al. 2019; Frost 2017; Smith 2017), but we still know very little about *how* these rituals are created and the ways that nonreligious people negotiate what many assume are conflicting rhetorics of science and religion when they engage in these rituals. In this analysis, I describe the decision-making processes through which Sunday Assemblers choose which rituals to incorporate into their services and I examine how they determine whether their ritual attempts are successful.

I find that rather than rejecting religious rituals wholesale, Sunday Assemblers selectively appropriate religious rituals to fit their needs. They draw on their own past experiences with religion, on scientific research about the effectiveness of religious rituals, and on their commitment to materialistic worldviews to make decisions about which religious rituals to incorporate. In doing so, they construct boundaries around certain religious practices as being inherently good and amenable to secularization, like collective singing or meditation, and other religious practices as being inherently bad or irrational, like praying to a supernatural being (e.g., Sorrell and Ecklund 2018). Sunday Assemblers are also attempting to create entirely new rituals in “ritual labs” and workshops that are grounded in their reverence for science and nature, their affinity for prominent secular figures and symbols, and their commitment to the scientific method. And I show how they rely on a “trial-and-error” approach to ritual creation that relies on scientific understandings of how rituals are supposed to work and that plans for failure rather than expecting immediate success.

I argue that not only does the presence of ritual at the Sunday Assembly disrupt dominant assumptions that nonreligious people reject rituals and that rationality is the antithesis of ritual, but the trial-and-error approach to ritual I found among Sunday Assemblers runs counter to dominant sociological theories of how rituals work and what happens when they fail. Much of our social scientific research on ritual does not take into account the processes through which successful rituals are cultivated and how ritual failure can be just as meaningful as ritual success. Thus, the Sunday Assembly is an illustrative case for shedding new light on the ritual creation process among the nonreligious specifically, but my findings also contribute to discussions about how ritual works in modern contexts more generally and how people are creatively combining science and religion to create meaning in their lives.

Ritual Retreat or Reinvention?

Ritual scholar Catherine Bell (1997) explains that the concept of ritual was originally used by social scientists as a way of understanding religious practices. Durkheim (1912), however, was the first to shift the analysis away from a narrow focus on religion to a more sociological understanding of how rituals, and religion more broadly, are means of creating social solidarity. I use Bell’s (1997) definition of ritualization, which is the intentional distinguishing of a

certain act or set of actions as distinct from other ways of acting and imbuing those acts with special meaning and purpose (see also Driver 1991).

There are numerous different types of rituals, including rites of passage, calendrical rites, rites of affliction, and political rites, and Bell (1997) outlines the characteristics found in most rituals, which include formalism, traditionalism, and sacral symbolism. Some rituals explicitly appeal to supernatural beings or forces, whereas others simply govern the rules of an action or set of actions, like sports or warfare. All rituals, however, require some level of regular engagement and some aspect of performance, or “the deliberate, self-conscious ‘doing’ of highly symbolic actions” (Bell 1997: 160). Rituals can involve groups of people acting together (e.g., Collins 2004) or individuals engaging in ritual practices on their own (e.g., Reynolds and Erikson 2017).

Concerns about ritual practices declining in secular contexts are often based in assumptions that rituals are incompatible with a materialist, secular worldview (Habermas 1985; Houtman and Aupers 2007; Taylor 2007). As Bell (1997) explains, ritual’s historical connection with “the sacralities of tradition and organized religion” results in many thinking of ritual as being “somewhat antiquated . . . and at odds with modernity” (138). Similarly, Habermas (1985) argues that ritual has declined in modern society due to the growth of rational discourse (see also Giddens 1991). A related assumption is that rituals are only successful if they are taken-for-granted and appear to be unchanging (Bell 1997; Collins 2004). Bell (1997) explains, “The invisibility of ritual’s origins and its inventors is what ritual is all about” (224). In other words, even if secular individuals attempt to create new rituals that are not based in tradition or religion, many believe that these rituals will fail, or be less meaningful, because the origins and constructedness of these new rituals are not sufficiently disguised (e.g., Reed and Adams 2011).

However, ritual has far from retreated in modernity, and ritual change, improvisation, and invention are common. Rather than retreating, the meanings attributed to ritual have simply evolved to accommodate secular worldviews (e.g., Bell 1997; Lynch 2012). Bell (1997) argues that there is a “new paradigm of ritual” that has replaced an understanding of ritual solely in terms of religion. This new paradigm is primarily about spiritual and emotional expression, and the constructedness of rituals is often very visible in this paradigm. Similarly, in his theoretical treatise on sacred forms in the modern world, Lynch (2012) argues that both religious and secular people create sacred forms, including rituals (see also Knott 2013; Taves 2009). Part of this ritual evolution has been a secularizing of traditionally religious rituals and a decrease in the number of people who practice explicitly religious rituals. Secular ritual creation is becoming big business, too, with “ritual labs” filled with “sacred consultants” like Sacred Design Lab and Ritualist (Bowles 2020; Samuel 2018). These organizations consult with individuals and companies to help them create rituals outside of religious spaces as a way of giving meaning to daily routines.

More generally, there are numerous scholars pushing back against the idea that science and religion are always at odds and that to commit to one automatically results in the rejection of the other. Recent studies show that

a majority of Americans believe that science and religion complement each other more than they conflict (Ecklund and Scheitle 2017). And sociologists of religion have found that religious Americans are often very reflexive about their religious beliefs and are constantly negotiating the compatibility of their beliefs with science and the secular public sphere (Besecke 2001; Martí 2015). Taken together, the prevailing meta-narrative that science and religion are in conflict and that rituals are incompatible with rationalistic worldviews is being called into question.

Secular Spirituality

In addition to disrupting the presumed dichotomy between rationality and ritual, my analysis of secular ritual creation at the Sunday Assembly also contributes to a growing conversation among sociologists about the relationship between science and spirituality. One of the primary reasons for engaging in rituals is to elicit spiritual or transcendent experiences (Bell 1997), but spiritual experiences are typically presumed to be outside the purview of a secular or scientific worldview. However, a number of recent studies have highlighted the ways that religious *and* nonreligious people draw on both scientific and religious rationales to make meaning out of their spiritual experiences.

For example, Besecke (2001) describes the concept of “reflexive spirituality” to show how some people reflect on their spirituality from a rationalistic perspective, using expert and academic knowledge to make sense of their spiritual experiences. Similarly, Eaton (2015) finds an “evidence-based spirituality” in his study of paranormal investigators who he finds apply the methods of science to try and understand supernatural phenomena like ghosts and energies. And in a study of spirituality among scientists, Ecklund and Long (2011) find that over 20% of the physical and social scientists they interviewed exemplify what they call “spiritual atheism” or “science-consistent spirituality” (see also Ecklund et al. 2019). They find that many academic scientists believe they can pursue a spiritual journey much in the same way they pursue scientific knowledge, using the framework of the scientific method to pursue deeper meaning in their lives.

Not only are scientific worldviews often compatible with spiritual beliefs and practice, but the concept of spirituality itself has been evolving to encapsulate purely secular experiences. While it is certainly the case that one can be spiritual *and* religious, and many are, there is a growing subset of Americans who see spirituality as separate from religion. Ammerman (2013) finds that many Americans espouse an “extra-theistic” spirituality that is expressed without any references to deities or supernatural forces. This is a spirituality that is this-worldly and revolves around a sense of awe and wonder engendered by the natural world, by various forms of art and culture, and by secular and scientific philosophies. Many scholars of nonreligion are now calling this a “secular spirituality” (e.g., Cimino and Smith 2014), a concept meant to convey the various ways that individuals—including atheistic individuals who do not believe in any kind of god or supernatural power—are finding sacred meanings in

science, nature, and community (Coleman, Silver, and Holcombe 2013; Cimino and Smith 2014; Knott 2013).

Thus, in contrast to common conceptions of nonreligious people being “disenchanted” and closed off to emotionally fulfilling rituals and spiritual practices, this line of research shows that many nonreligious people are espousing a secular spirituality that can be just as meaningful as religious spirituality. Importantly, the use of the term “spirituality” is still contested among the nonreligious, and some nonreligious people still associate it in negative ways with religion. However, regardless of the terms used, nonreligious people are just as likely as religious people to seek out experiences of greater meaning and transcendence. For example, Caldwell-Harris et al. (2011) find that atheists are just as likely as Christians and Buddhists to answer affirmatively to questions such as “have you ever felt wonderment or felt as if you were part of something greater than yourself” and “I find meaning in life’s experiences.” Similarly, Schnell and Keenan (2011) find that atheists report high levels of meaningfulness, experiences of awe, and horizontal self-transcendence (i.e., feelings of something bigger than oneself that are this-worldly). And Baker and Smith (2015) find that 65% of agnostics and 53% of atheists they surveyed said that they felt a deep sense of wonder at least once a month. In short, the nonreligious are not exempt from the human need to make meaning out of their experiences, and many use the language of spirituality to express their awe in science, their wonder at nature, and their experiences of this-worldly transcendence.

Ritualizing Nonreligion

In order to elicit secular spiritual experiences and celebrate their secular world-views, many nonreligious people are starting to create explicitly nonreligious rituals. Cimino and Smith (2014) find that rituals play an important role in organized humanist and atheist groups, including secular weddings and holidays, meditation, and even “debaptisms,” which they describe as the practice of “renouncing baptisms, usually with the help of a hair dryer” (120). They also found that the nonreligious celebrate certain discourses, symbols, and prominent figures as being representative of their beliefs, including symbols like the Darwin fish, the scarlet A, and the Flying Spaghetti Monster, as well as scientists like Carl Sagan and Charles Darwin. Through these various practices, the nonreligious are imbuing secular beliefs, rituals, and symbols with sacred meanings, or what Smith (2017) calls “sacralizing the secular”. They are also building communities of practice through these rituals and are attempting to offer substantive alternatives to religious communities. In secular congregations like the Sunday Assembly, for example, atheists and agnostics are engaging in what Smith (2017) calls “communal secularity” that enables an expression of group emotions and values, an embodiment of group ideologies and beliefs, and a sense of belonging and purpose.

Taken together, rather than rejecting ritual, many nonreligious people are embracing it and creating secular rituals that are grounded in materialism and scientific rationality and that enable them to have “secular spiritual” experiences.

In what follows, I draw on a three-year ethnographic case study of the Sunday Assembly to analyze the processes through which these secular rituals get created and the negotiations that nonreligious people engage in as they attempt to balance the selective appropriation of religious practices with their commitment to scientific rationality.

Data and Methods

Data for this analysis come out of a three-year ethnographic case study of a nonreligious organization called the Sunday Assembly. The Sunday Assembly is an international network of secular congregations, or what some call “atheist churches,” that was founded in 2013. It is made up of primarily atheists and agnostics that intentionally, and only slightly ironically, borrow aspects of the Christian church model as a means of cultivating meaningful rituals and communities for the nonreligious. Local Sunday Assembly chapters meet on Sundays for services where they sing pop songs alongside a band, listen to invited speakers and testimonies from assemblers, and have moments of silence and reflection. The Sunday Assembly motto is “Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More,” and this is reflected in what the local assemblies center their services and activities around. To “Live Better,” they sing songs together, form small groups based on interests like photography or yoga, and they have a section in their services called “One Thing I Do Know,” which is a space for members from the community to share an experience that taught them an important lesson. To “Help Often” they put on monthly volunteering activities and advocate for helping each other out by starting phone trees and cooking food for people who are sick or going through a hard time. To “Wonder More” they bring in speakers to give inspirational and educational talks, they engage in rituals like collective singing and nature walks, and a portion of their service is devoted to the reading aloud of inspirational poems and passages from books.

The Sunday Assembly is not the first church-like organization to cater to nonreligious people, and it is certainly not the only “atheist church” in operation today. For example, Unitarian Universalist churches often cater to nonreligious demographics in ways that affirm secular values while also promoting communal and ritual practices (Hoop 2012). And many humanist organizations promote a rationalistic moral philosophy and focus on providing secular alternatives to religious life transition ceremonies, like funerals and weddings (Hoesly 2017). However, Unitarian and humanist organizations often also cater to religious people and include both religious and nonreligious themes in their services. At secular congregations like the Sunday Assembly, however, the goal is to remain explicitly nonreligious and to focus on promoting secular beliefs and values. There are also other secular congregations in the United States, including the Houston Oasis, the Seattle Atheist Church, and the North Texas Church of Freethought. But while most of these organizations have only one or two chapters, the Sunday Assembly is notable for the way it rapidly expanded to over 70 local chapters within two years of its founding. While many of these chapters have since dissolved, at least 30 chapters were still active in 2021.

I spent three years conducting ethnographic observations and interviews with a chapter of the Sunday Assembly located in the Midwestern United States, which I will call Midwest Assembly. From March 2014 to August 2017, I attended a majority of their Sunday services and many of their mid-week social events, such as volunteer outings, potlucks, and trivia nights. I also attended the monthly organizing meetings where decisions about the services and the organization were made. As part of this ethnography, I interviewed 25 Midwest assemblers, from the founding members of the chapter to occasional attendees. In addition to collecting data on the Midwest Assembly chapter, in May of 2015, I attended a three-day Sunday Assembly annual conference called the Conference Called Wonder in Atlanta, Georgia. At the conference, I met numerous organizers from other chapters in the United States and the United Kingdom, spoke to and listened to the founders speak about the organization and its goals, and sat in on workshops and organizational meetings meant to help Sunday Assembly organizers create and support their local Sunday Assembly chapters. During the course of my ethnography with the Midwest chapter, I was also added to an organizational email listserv called Sunday Assembly Everywhere where I gained access to over 5,000 emails in which members and organizers from all the local assemblies engaged in email discussions about the goals and structure of the organization.

I started observing the Midwest Assembly chapter in early 2014, which was a few months before the Midwest Assembly had even held their first service. Thus, my data were collected at a time when the norms and boundaries of the organization were still very fluid and contested, and there were a lot of new ideas being debated about the types of nonreligious beliefs and practices the Sunday Assembly should promote, including the types of rituals the assemblers should try to cultivate in their local chapters. This meant I was able to observe the day-to-day processes of how decisions about the structure of the services were made, watch how various ritual practices failed or succeeded at services, sit in on discussions about how individual services went and how they might be improved, and talk with assemblers about how they felt about ritualization more generally and their reactions to the language of ritual and spirituality in an organization devoted to secular worldviews.

Constructing Rational Rituals

The rituals I encountered at Sunday Assembly services were a mixture of secularized religious rituals and newly created rituals centered around secular figures and symbols. A majority of the religious rituals that assemblers were repurposing came from their own experiences with religion, either as former religious people or as people with religious friends or family. Many Sunday Assemblers told me that they saw certain aspects of religion—particularly the “church model”—as being conducive to creating community and transcendent experiences. Midwest assembler Amanda told me, “I think patterning the assembly off of this church service framework makes sense because there’s a reason that framework exists. I mean, it likely would not have persisted as a formula for thousands of years if it

didn't work on some level." And Midwest assembler Beth said something similar when she told me, "I don't think the church model, in and of itself, is bad. It's been very successful. So, to me I think there isn't anything wrong with modeling it after that. I'm not even sure what we would do if we didn't."

Thus, there was a certain amount of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) at play in the decision to model Sunday Assembly off of a Protestant church, and many assemblers talked about how they could not imagine another way to create the kind of community they wanted. However, the choices that assemblers made about which rituals and religions to borrow from were also shaped by their social locations. A majority of the Sunday Assemblers I encountered in my fieldwork were white, formerly Christian, middle-class Americans, and so the religions they borrowed from largely mirrored these demographics. For example, the decision to meet on Sunday mornings, to center services around collective sing-alongs led by a make-shift band, and to listen to a sermon-like presentation about living a good life were pulled straight from the mainline and evangelical Protestant churches many of the assemblers grew up in. Other Christian-influenced rituals included the creation of a secular liturgical calendar and experimentation with ecstatic dance sessions. There were also a number of former Mormons who brought in secularized Mormon rituals like listening to testimonies from fellow congregants about living a positive secular life. Assemblers also sometimes attempted to mimic the Quaker practice of sitting in thoughtful silence together. Non-Christian religions were borrowed from as well, but less so. For example, secularized Buddhist practices like mindfulness and meditation were very common.

I also observed Sunday Assemblers creating rituals centered around their own secular values and prominent secular figures and symbols. For example, they typically celebrated Darwin Day, a day devoted to honoring Darwin's research and his theory of evolution. At the Midwest Assembly, we also had an entire service devoted to celebrating Carl Sagan and his intellectual contributions. One of the services happened to coincide with the late Sagan's birthday, so we sang Happy Birthday to him; read excerpts from his book, *A Pale Blue Dot*; and listened to a researcher at a local university talk about the search for life on other planets.

Importantly, the decisions that Sunday Assemblers made about the types of rituals they should incorporate into their services were shaped by their commitment to secular and scientific worldviews. The boundaries that assemblers drew around the religious rituals they borrowed from were often influenced by whether or not a ritual was in line with secular values or whether there were scientific studies showing that a ritual practice was beneficial for emotional, physical, or communal well-being. For example, in an organizing meeting I attended, the Midwest Assembly organizers engaged in a number of debates about which songs to sing at Sunday services and often tweaked the lyrics of songs in order to avoid any references to religion or the supernatural.

Assemblers also looked to scientific research to determine which rituals and religious structures they should borrow. Amanda and Beth who were quoted earlier as being in favor of the "church model" justified their support by

referencing scientific research that shows the church model is a good “formula” for creating effecting rituals and communal experiences. Similarly, one of the key components of a Sunday Assembly service is the pop song sing-alongs, which were intentionally included because scientific research has shown collective singing to be effective at producing heightened emotions and bonding people into communities.

Taken together, Sunday Assemblers drew on a variety of different resources in the process of creating secular rituals for their services. And this decision-making process was grounded in a rational approach to ritual creation in which the constructedness of the rituals was not hidden and assemblers were making reflexive decisions about which rituals to include. They drew on their past experiences with religion, on their interest in and affinity for certain secular figures and symbols that are celebrated within the larger nonreligious community, and on their commitment to secular and scientific worldviews. However, not only were their rituals grounded in their reverence for science and secularity, but they also used scientific research and methods to help them construct and repurpose these rituals and to explain and cultivate feelings of secular spirituality and collective effervescence.

Manufacturing Ascent

Many studies have highlighted the ways that nonreligious people often find spiritual meaning in science, in celebrating scientists and scientific discoveries, and in the knowledge that humans have gained about the world through science (Baker and Smith 2015; Ecklund and Long 2011; Jones et al. 2020). And this was true among Sunday Assemblers too. Greg, a Midwest Assembler, explained this spiritual approach to science when he told me,

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

However, as Greg’s quote starts to illustrate, this scientific approach to spirituality also often means that nonreligious people *use* their scientific worldview—and the scientific method itself—to help them “test their beliefs” and to make meaning more generally. This rationalized, evidence-based approach was evident in the way that Sunday Assemblers thought about ritualization and creating secular rituals. An example comes out of data I collected at a workshop I attended at the 2015 Sunday Assembly conference. The workshop was titled “Secular Spirituality” and it was run by Sunday Assembly co-founder Sanderson Jones. Jones kicked off the workshop by explaining that

despite secular people's aversion to the word "spiritual," he was hoping that Sunday Assembly could work toward developing a language for and rituals surrounding a "secular spirituality" that was devoid of any reference to the supernatural.

The goal of the workshop, Jones explained, was to work as a group to start fleshing out what a secular spirituality might look like and to develop some rituals that local Sunday Assembly chapters could use to elicit secular spiritual experiences at their assemblies. To accomplish these goals, our first task was to break into groups and talk about experiences we had in our lives that we might classify as spiritual and to come up with words we would use to describe those experiences. Someone in my group mentioned "secular serendipity" and the ways that these kinds of experiences often happen by chance rather than intentionally. Others in the group mentioned "awe," "wonder," and "wow" to describe experiences they had in nature, at a concert, or thinking about existential questions. "Transcendence," "focus," and "consciousness" were also brought up as being central to experiences of secular spirituality.

After about ten minutes of small-group discussion, Jones brought the room back together and we all reported back to the larger group. As we went around the room, Jones wrote our ideas on a giant sheet of white paper he had brought in. Some groups talked about secular spirituality in a strictly biological and scientific sense, mentioning things like oxytocin, hormones, and serotonin. Some groups emphasized "giving up" and "surrendering" to feelings that are out of your control, while others countered with understandings of spirituality as being about "grounding" and feeling "connected to the whole." People also talked about words like "love," "trust," and "tolerance," and the need for these things in order to have a truly meaningful spiritual experience.

Next, Jones explained that the second major task for the workshop was to try and invent and test out some rituals that might help elicit these feelings of wonder, connectedness, and transcendence that were just discussed. An older male participant who identified himself as a former Mormon suggested that we try a "secular testimony" in which people who felt compelled could share something with the group. Jones liked this idea and suggested we all hum at a low volume while we waited for individuals to speak out to provide more "charge" to ritual. We all started humming, and a few people giggled. After about 30 seconds, a man stood up and said that participating in the Sunday Assembly was the first time he had "felt at home." A few more people "testified," and then Jones suggested that we try a different practice. He asked us all to stand up, clap our hands in unison, and intentionally look at other people in the eye. He said,

Research shows that when people move or sing synchronously, they become more open to new ideas. And by clapping in unison and looking each other in the eyes, we can trick ourselves into releasing oxytocin. So, in theory we should be able to elicit these feelings of spirituality and transcendence whenever we want!

We all stood up and started clapping, but most of us found it difficult to look each other in the eyes for any extending period of time without laughing.

We all clapped for about a minute before the activity devolved into sporadic, asynchronous clapping and people started to give up and sit down.

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

Thus, not only do nonreligious people have a reverence for science and get a lot of their spiritual meaning from reflecting on and celebrating scientific research and progress, but they also use their scientific worldviews—and scientific research itself—to test out new rituals and to cultivate and explain their secular spiritual experiences. Below, I explain how this “trial-and-error” approach to ritual creation works in more detail and I argue that it runs counter to how many sociologists think about the process of ritual creation and the potential consequences of ritual failure (e.g., [Chao 1999](#)).

Trial-and-Error: The Meaning of Ritual Failure

In his highly cited theory of interactional ritual chains, [Collins \(2004\)](#) draws on Durkheim to argue that a successful ritual “makes the individual participant feel strong, confident, full of impulses to take the initiative,” while a failed ritual “lowers the confidence and initiative of participants – it lowers their emotional energy” (xii). Failed rituals are argued to hinder the creation of communal bonds, whereas successful rituals strengthen them. And [Collins \(2004\)](#) argues that individuals are naturally drawn to successful rituals that increase their emotional energy and they naturally avoid “weak” or failed rituals “like rats leaving a sinking ship” because they drain emotional energy (52).

While failed rituals can certainly turn someone off of seeking out similar rituals in the future, I found a very different understanding of ritual failure among the nonreligious people in my study. I found that rather than avoiding ritual failure, nonreligious people at Sunday Assembly often *expected* ritual failure and attributed it to their “trial-and-error” approach to ritual creation. Based in their scientific understanding of how certain kinds of rituals can induce spiritual experiences, the nonreligious people in my study often approached ritual creation like they would approach a research study (e.g., [Ecklund and Long 2011](#)). Grounded in an extensive review of the literature, and through trial-and-error, they have faith that the scientific method will guide them toward a successful set of ritual practices. We have already seen examples of this in my analysis. The largely failed attempts at the Secular Spirituality workshop to create effective

rituals on the spot were often awkward and unsuccessful, but that failure did not result in the rejection of these rituals or a sense of drained emotional energy. Instead, the *process* of ritual creation was part of what helped create communal bonds, and many assemblers talked about how the effort and intention that went into the rituals at Sunday Assembly were what made them so meaningful.

This trial-and-error mentality permeated the organization's approach to ritual, and some chapters even started what they called "ritual labs" where the purpose was to experiment with different rituals and see what worked. In a Sunday Assembly Everywhere email thread devoted to talking about secular rituals, New York assembler Clive wrote, "We started holding a small group called Ritual Lab where about eight of us meet to experiment with rational ritual. We've tried some things that work in a small, intimate group, and we're thinking about what we could do that would scale up." This idea that a ritual, something assumed to be irrational and religious, could be created in a lab, a space imbued with rationality and science, is a perfect example of how the nonreligious often combine religious and scientific language to create new rituals. Another example of this trial-and-error approach surrounds the first official Midwest Assembly service and the discussions that organizers had before and after. I started observing the Midwest chapter about three months before they held their first Sunday service. After a few planning meetings and an ice cream social to help get the word out, the Midwest Assembly chapter decided they were ready to have a "soft launch" in the summer of 2014 and see how things went. They had been offered a free space to hold their services in the basement of a Unitarian church, and they had put together a band that consisted of a pianist, a guitarist, and two vocalists. Before the soft launch, the organizers of the Midwest Assembly held a rehearsal to work out any kinks and make sure they had everything they needed in the space. When I arrived at the rehearsal to observe, the band was getting ready to start practicing. However, they were struggling to get the song lyrics projected onto the wall due to technical issues. I sat down and talked to organizer Amanda about how she was feeling going into the first assembly. She told me that she and the other organizers were nervous and feeling under-prepared, but that it would all come together eventually. She said, "Well, we're just getting started, and we don't really know what we're doing. But I think after a few trial-runs we will come to something that works and we can be less anxious and just enjoy it."

As the band started to practice, one of the vocalists was clearly struggling to stay on time and in tune, and the band had to pause on multiple occasions because the vocalist kept stopping to apologize. There were multiple errors on the lyrics slides being projected onto the screen at the front of the room as well. During one of the band's many pauses, another organizer named Jeff announced loudly, "Remember guys, this is a *soft* launch, it doesn't have to be perfect the first time."

The soft launch itself was a mixture of failures and successes. The band kicked off the service with the theme song from *Cheers*, "Where Everybody Knows Your Name," which elicited a collective chuckle from the attendees. However, while the band had hoped that everyone would sing along and even stand or dance,

everyone stayed sitting and very few people sang. The vocalist who had struggled at rehearsal was still noticeably shaky but had definitely improved, and she asked everyone to stand up and sing along for the second song. We all stood up in silence and the band began playing an upbeat pop song by Ingrid Michelson. A handful of people sang along, but many people did not know the lyrics and were struggling to keep up with the fast pace of the slide progression. Someone tried to start clapping but was the only one who did, so they quickly stopped. Next up were the reading and the guest speaker, which went smoothly, and then the band sang a Foo Fighters song, which more people seemed to know because there were more people singing along. The most successful part of the service was the “Meet Your Neighbor” activity near the end. It was a version of the game Rock, Paper, Scissors where everyone challenges someone in the room to a game and then the loser has to follow the winner around rooting for them until everyone in the room is rooting for one of two finalists. This game went over really well, and by the end of it everyone in the room was on their feet and shouting the names of the two finalists. I could feel the mood in the room shift and the organizers looked visibly relieved that some sort of collective effervescence had been produced.

A few days after the soft launch, the organizing team got together to debrief and start planning for a July service. Overall, the organizers agreed that it could have gone better, but there were some good moments, like the Rock, Paper, Scissors game, that proved they were working towards success. Organizer Jeff said, “We’re learning. I believe in the failing forward concept. Failure is not a bad thing, it’s actually a good thing that can teach us lessons and we can grow from them.” The other organizers agreed and even said that the “authenticity” of what they were doing made it all the more enriching. An organizer named Joseph said, “The genuineness and vulnerability of the speakers and the songs is an awesome element that I don’t think people get everywhere. If it’s too polished, it’s just a show and there is no sense of connection.”

The organizers talked through ways to improve upon this first attempt, including asking people to stand up for the songs and they negotiated whether that felt too much like a church service or not. They decided it would more easily produce the kinds of feelings they were trying to create if everyone was standing and more involved in the singing. They also agreed that some songs worked better than others, and that they should be open to adapting the model handed down from London as needed. One of the organizers said, “Structure is nice, and people should know what to expect. But unlike a church, if there is part of the program that’s not working, or that people don’t like, we can get rid of it. The idea is to experiment and see how things go.”

While the first few Midwest Assembly services were a little shaky and both the organizers and attendees struggled to navigate the newness of the rituals, the trial-and-error approach did end up paying off on many occasions. The collective singing, for example, did start to induce feelings of transcendence and collective effervescence in the ways assemblers hoped. At one service, the band covered the song “You’ve Got a Friend in Me” from the movie *Toy Story* and I saw multiple people looking at their friends and family with smiles. I also noticed two women hug each other as they sang along loudly. During another service, the

band covered the song “Brave” by Sara Bareilles and attendees were noticeably engaged and many sang along loudly and danced along. I even saw one attendee mouth to a friend next to her, “They got it!” When I talked to her after the service, she said,

It was a big week, I think. I feel like the band has been struggling to get people to sing along and I haven’t really felt the kind of emotional connection with people during the songs as I had hoped. But I knew it was just a matter of time. And I think they finally got it. I felt a real high when we sang “Brave.” And I don’t know what that drug is, but I think we are finally figuring out how to make it work.

In addition to the collective singing slowly becoming more successful, rituals like the readings and the testimonies from assemblers also started to induce more “emotional energy,” as Collins (2004) would call it, over time. At a service where we listened to a reading of Robert Frost’s poem, “The Road Not Taken,” one of the assemblers sitting next to me starting to rub his arms and said the reading had given him chills. A few months later, an assembler named Natalie gave a “testimony” about her experiences with body image and weight loss. When Natalie first started attending, she was very quiet and reluctant to participate in the ritual aspects of the services. But during her testimony, she talked about how she appreciated the honesty and effort that everyone at Sunday Assembly was putting into creating positive experiences for secular people. She said she now felt comfortable sharing her experiences with others in the group because she saw how comfortable those around her were with “failure and trying at something until you succeed.” Her testimony brought both her and many other assemblers to tears and it was often brought up by other assemblers in interviews as an example of a successful ritual.

Taken together, I found this trial-and-error approach to ritual creation among both organizers and attendees at the Sunday Assembly and it was a primary orientation for how assemblers understood both ritual success and failure. Sunday Assemblers believe that successful rituals can be cultivated with the help of science and that doing this successfully required practice. And rather than avoiding ritual failure, as much of the sociological literature on ritual predicts, assemblers often expected and planned for failure, and they had faith that success would come if the right “formula” was followed. However, this was by no means a linear process where rituals failed at first but then were always successful after. Instead, rituals were sometimes successful and sometimes not. Importantly, though, assemblers often found just as much meaning out of the process and the experimentation as they did out of successful ritual experiences. For them, the “authenticity” of their rituals was what they valued, and the awkwardness and failure often elicited important conversations about meaning and brought assemblers closer together.

Discussion and Conclusions

As more and more Americans are leaving organized religion, it is important to investigate what this might mean for whether and how people engage in

ritual practices. Rituals have been found to enable increased social cohesion, to provide meaningful structures for important life events and the passage of time, and to mobilize individuals to participate in social movements that shape our institutions and the distribution of resources (Bell 1997; Collins 2004; Durkheim 1912; Giddens 1991; Reynolds and Erikson 2017). However, ritual is often conflated with religion in social science research, either explicitly or implicitly, which has meant that many scholars assume that a decline in religion will mean a decline in ritual. Through an ethnographic analysis of secular ritual creation in a secular congregation, I show that ritualization is still an important mechanism for making meaning in secular spaces, and I argue that we need to revisit our dominant assumptions that ritual and rationality are necessarily at odds and that scientific worldviews are incapable of producing spiritual experiences. These assumptions have led not only to inaccurate understandings of the beliefs and practices of nonreligious people, but they have also contributed to harmful stereotypes about a disenchanting and disengaged secular demographic uninterested in constructing meaningful practices or shared moral values.

In my analysis, I find that nonreligious people at the Sunday Assembly are constructing rituals based in secular worldviews that prioritize scientific rationalism and eschew any reference to the supernatural. I show how many assemblers look to scientific research as a means of secularizing religious rituals in order to elicit “secular spiritual” experiences. To do so, they construct boundaries around certain religious practices as being inherently good and amenable to secularization because they are beneficial for well-being or are part of the universal human experience. And I show how these “rational rituals” are often seen by nonreligious people as being *more* meaningful than religious rituals because of the work that goes into their creation. Even though the rituals that Sunday Assemblers create are not always successful, the “trial-and-error” approach to ritual creation that I found among assemblers meant that much of the meaning made out of ritual was in the creation process itself, and the failure of a ritual was simply part of the process rather than a reason to reject a ritual.

This means that in contrast to our theoretical narratives that so often conflate meaningfulness with comfort, certainty, and success, I find that a “meaningful” ritual experience at the Sunday Assembly was not always one that was comfortable or successful. Many nonreligious people describe finding meaning in the awkward, uncomfortable, and often failed attempts at constructing new beliefs, practices, and communities. Whether through overcoming anxiety about collective singing or struggling through awkward attempts to create collective effervescence in conference workshops and ritual labs, the nonreligious people in my fieldwork often talked about the construction process as being just as meaningful as the ultimate product.

And these processes play out among religious groups attempting to ritualize their beliefs as well. Even though many religious rituals have a long tradition of practice and their constructedness is often hidden in the ways that scholars like Bell (1997) and Collins (2004) suggest is necessary for successful ritual experiences, religious people often fail to get the desired outcome from their rituals. And many religious people approach their rituals with a spirit of

experimentation and a “try until it works” mentality. However, religious people often have a belief in a supernatural force or higher power to fall back on and to look to as an explanation for their ritual failure. Nonreligious people, however, look to scientific research to help them explain their ritual failures, and their trust in and reverence for the scientific method enables them to find meaning in the process as much as the successes.

While my analysis here is focused on the rituals at Sunday Assembly services, I do have evidence that the ethos surrounding ritualization at the Sunday Assembly shaped if and how assemblers engaged in rituals outside of the Sunday Assembly. After enjoying collective singing at Sunday Assembly, for example, one of the assemblers I talked to tried out an ecstatic dancing group. Another assembler said they started going on more nature walks after participating in a group walk at Sunday Assembly. And many talked about how they are more interested in and aware of the ways that rituals could enhance their lives. Relatedly, a recent panel analysis found that participation in Sunday Assembly activities increased well-being among Sunday Assemblers (Price and Launay 2018). Thus, ritualization at the Sunday Assembly has important impacts on the lives of members outside of it, and more research is needed on the ways that participation in secular congregations shapes other aspects of nonreligious people’s lives.

Although my analysis focused largely on group or collective rituals, research on secular rituals also needs to pay more attention to solitary rituals and the ways that nonreligious people ritualize aspects of their lives outside of groups. Much of the research on ritual in sociology suggests that humans are “naturally” ritualistic and that everyone is drawn to intense, collective rituals (e.g., Collins 2004; Driver 1991; Durkheim 1912), but ritual significance can also emerge at the level of individual experience (Reynolds and Erikson 2017). Some of the nonreligious people I encountered in my study preferred solitary rituals over communal rituals as a way to elicit secular spiritual experiences, like solo meditation or taking nature walks, and some even expressed a dislike or distrust of communal rituals because of the negative experiences they had with religion. Future research should pay more attention to these distinctions and the ways that nonreligious people often seek out solo ritual experiences because of the ways they associate collective rituals with religion.

Similarly, while everyone I described in my analysis was largely in favor of ritualization and the language of secular spirituality, I also encountered Sunday Assemblers who were averse to the term “spiritual” to describe their experiences and were averse to rituals of any kind. Some Sunday Assemblers expressed they were uncomfortable with the focus on ritual and spirituality at the services, and there were often conflicts among assemblers as to whether and how much ritual practice should be included in the services. While I intentionally focused this analysis on those who were interested in ritualization to highlight the processes through which secular rituals are constructed, it is also important to note that not everyone is “naturally” drawn to ritual practices (e.g., Collins 2004). This does not mean, however, that these nonreligious people are somehow lacking in meaningful experiences or that they live a meaningless or unfulfilling life, as many of our social scientific narratives seem to assert. And we need

more research on how nonreligious people who reject ritual and the language of spirituality make meaning and embody their secular beliefs and values in other ways.

It is also important to reflect on how the approach to ritual at the Sunday Assembly affected the successes and failures of the congregations themselves. While there were at one point around 70 local Sunday Assembler chapters, there are now closer to 30 still in operation. Was the varied ritual success across different chapters a factor in the failure of some of these chapters? Perhaps. I certainly interviewed people who attended a few services and found them to be too awkward or were not drawn to the kinds of rituals they found. However, there are a number of other factors at play in the success of this type of organization. I argue that the important takeaway from my findings is that for at least some nonreligious people, ritual and rationality can go hand-in-hand, and many find a rational approach to ritual creation *more* meaningful than religious rituals.

An important limitation of my analysis is that it is focused on an organization made up largely of white, middle-class, formerly Christian people. This means that the religious practices they are repurposing are often the practices of white, middle-class Christians. Nonreligious people of color are often excluded from white atheist organizations, often because these spaces are created based solely around the goals and values of white people, and as a result people of color have started to create their own nonreligious organizations (Swann 2020). More research is needed in these spaces, as they may cultivate different perspectives on the relationship between religion, science, ritual, and spirituality that I was not able to capture in my study. Along these lines, it is also important to note that the Sunday Assembly is in some ways a unique organization and my findings cannot necessarily be used to understand how nonreligious people think about ritual and spirituality outside of these spaces. While there are a number of secular congregations, the Sunday Assembly being just one example, there are many nonreligious people who do not attend these kinds of organizations and who may have very different perspective on ritual and meaning. We need more work—especially quantitative work that can look across different subgroups and capture people who are not members of organizations—that assesses the ritual lives of the nonreligious and the kind of meanings they get from ritual experiences.

Collective singing, liturgical calendars, sharing testimonies, and ecstatic dancing—these are just some of the rituals that nonreligious people are practicing in secular spaces like the Sunday Assembly. Sunday Assembly is evidence that nonreligious people do not see their commitment to science and materialism as hindering their ability to cultivate meaningful rituals or experience collective effervescence or secular spirituality. My ethnographic analysis of the processes and negotiations through which these secular rituals are being created sheds new light on longstanding sociological questions about the consequences of secularization and the evolving nature of ritual and spirituality in modern contexts.

About the Author

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