

‘Nones’ Belonging: Sunday Assemblies, Cathedrals and Quakers

Ian Toombs

University of Birmingham, England

Rhiannon Grant

University of Birmingham and Lancaster University, England

Abstract

This research note reports on observations of the Sunday Assembly and places this movement in the wider context of ‘secular spirituality’: those who do not hold traditional religious beliefs but engage in spiritual or religiously shaped practices. In particular, we argue that the group identified in the sociology of religion as ‘Nones’, or people who identify as ‘spiritual but not religious’, commonly engage in spiritual practices and have spiritual aspirations. Observations of Sunday Assemblies are compared with the situation of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and other church settings such as cathedral attendance to shed light on varied religious participation by ‘Nones’. As such, it suggests that researchers investigating nones or non-theists may need to better understand the spiritual nature of their engagement.

Keywords

Secularisation, Sunday Assembly, spiritual but not religious, atheism, belonging without believing, sociology of religion

Identifying ‘Nones’

Before considering a group who consist mainly of ‘Nones’, we need to place this category in the wider context of the sociology of religion. The term ‘Nones’ refers to those who claim to have no institutional religious activity or affiliation (for example, when asked in a survey).¹ The term has been in use for some time

1 Zuckerman, P., ‘The Rise of the Nones: why more Americans are Becoming secular,

and is not synonymous with unbelief or atheism: in 1968 Glenn Vernon was already highlighting the existence of religiously unaffiliated people or 'nones' who nevertheless endorsed a belief in God.² Nones may be spiritual in the sense that Richard Flory and Donald Miller use the term, or non-affiliated believers who designate themselves as SBNR (Spiritual But Not Religious).³ Thus they may be attenders at 'religious' meetings or services, with or without any overt embodiments of commitment, self-identification or formal affiliation to any religion or religious cause. David Voas, in his population study of religious change in Europe, showed that the Nones are an unstable group. He identified a population dynamic in Europe in which Nones stop being identified as religious faster than they identify as being secular.⁴ Voas called this a 'fuzzy fidelity', implying a notional attachment to religion that is underpinned by a fundamentally secular orientation.⁵

Voas presented various interpretations of his statistics, including the Nones as consumers of individuated religion and as noninstitutional believers in spirituality.⁶ This is what John Knox would term the 'sacro-egoist' approach, in which people understand the ultimate authority regarding religious thought and interpretation to rest with the individual.⁷ Alternatively they may be seen as a group that believes without belonging (as identified by Grace Davie⁸). Voas concluded that the Nones are part of a transition process whereby fuzzy fidelity represented an increasingly important proportion of the population, and saw them as transient and unlikely to persist. His model predicts that after wholly secular people outnumber religious people the proportion of the fuzzy religious will reach a plateau, before declining to disappearance. From this viewpoint Nones may be just a convenient staging post on the way from a religious to a secular hegemony.

The sustainability of the present rate of rise of the Nones in Europe may well be part of a global story in which the Nones may become little more than a bit part. Eileen Barker comments: 'just as there are many ways of being religious, so there are many ways of not being religious.'⁹ What is becoming clear is that not only religiosity but also both secularity and secularisation are far more complicated,

and what that means for America', in Pinn, A. B. (ed.), *Theism and Public Policy: humanist perspectives and responses*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 37–52.

2 Vernon, G., 'The Religious "Nones": a neglected category', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 7 (1968), pp. 219–29.

3 Flory, R. and Miller, D., *Finding Faith: the spiritual quest of the post-boomer generation*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008, pp. 17–18.

4 Voas, D., 'The rise and fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe', *European Sociological Review* 25 (2009), pp. 155–68.

5 Voas, 'Fuzzy Fidelity', p. 165.

6 Voas, 'Fuzzy Fidelity', p. 166.

7 Knox, J. S., *Sacro-Egoism: the rise of religious individualism in the west*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016.

8 Davie, G., *Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1994.

9 Barker, E., 'Preface', in Kosmin, B. A. and Keysor, A., *Secularism & Secularity:*

even paradoxical, than has been recognised. Among other possibilities, there is some evidence that the European and American trend towards secularity does not mean that the rest of the world will follow in the same direction, or at the same speed.¹⁰ Jose Casanova has argued that the traditional theory of secularisation works relatively well for Europe, but not for the United States, while the American paradigm works relatively well for the US, but not for Europe. Neither can offer a plausible account of the internal variations within Europe.¹¹ Casanova adds that sociologists may be able to predict the hour of the death of Christianity in Britain as being in 2030,¹² only to find that the Anglican Communion thrives globally and that other world religions are growing in Britain. 'Like the death of Mark Twain, the repeated announcement of the death of religion may turn out to have been greatly exaggerated.'¹³

Josh Bullock's work on the Sunday Assembly has positioned it within this complex picture. He says: 'the adoption of a church skeletal structure indicates that a post-Christian transition is not an easy transition, one particularly felt by those who left their religious tradition',¹⁴ and notes that 'Even though the Sunday Assembly is reimagining the secular in an unimaginative way by mimicking existing structures, by doing so it is tapping into a memory of a post-Christian population that seeks to belong, but does not want to believe.'¹⁵ In this research note, an examination of the Sunday Assembly is presented in some detail before a comparison is made with other communities that, by different routes, may have ended up in a similar position.

Examining the Sunday Assembly

During 2015 I¹⁶ attended a number of meetings of the Sunday Assembly Movement and was fortunate to discuss the movement with the co-founder, comedian, Sanderson Jones, and a visiting assessor, as well as a researcher in the

contemporary international perspectives, Hertford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, 2007, pp. iii–iv.

10 On Britain see Bruce, S., 'The Demise of Christianity in Britain', in Davie, G., Heelas, P. and Woodhead, L. (eds), *Predicting Religion: Christian, secular and alternative futures*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, pp. 53–63; and for the USA see Voas, D. and Chaves, M., 'Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?', *American Journal of Sociology* 121 (2016), pp. 1517–56.

11 Casanova, J., *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring/Summer 2006), p. 9.

12 As done by, for example, Bruce, 'The demise of Christianity in Britain'.

13 Casanova, J., 'Beyond European and American Exceptionalisms: towards a Global Perspective', in Davie, G., Heelas, P. and Woodhead, L. (eds), *Predicting Religion: Christian, secular and alternative futures*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, p. 27.

14 Bullock, J., 'The Sociology of the Sunday Assembly: "Belonging Without Believing" in a Post-Christian Context', PhD thesis, Kingston University London, 2017, <https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/41775/1/Bullock-J.pdf> [accessed 05/05/20].

15 Bullock, 'The Sociology of the Sunday Assembly', p. 235.

16 Ian Toombs.

field. The Public Charter on the movement's website explains the aims and hopes for the Assembly: 'The Sunday Assembly is a godless congregation that celebrates life. Our motto: live better, help often, and wonder more. Our mission: to help everyone find and fulfill their full potential. Our vision: a godless congregation in every town, city and village that wants one.'¹⁷

Josh Bullock's research on the Sunday Assembly positions the movement as a franchise, operating under strict commercial rules of operation, having a standardised liturgy and limited beliefs.¹⁸ Despite marketing themselves as a radically inclusive congregation open to all beliefs, faiths and practices, the reality is different. The official aim of the movement is to foster community belonging and promote a sense of wonder through regular Sunday Assembly meetings and conferences, but it hopes to inculcate a secularist agenda and the pointlessness of religious belief.

My first attendance at a Sunday Assembly involved being welcomed at the door with a cup of coffee. Those wishing to attend are expected to book online so that attendance is known in advance for the purpose of providing refreshments. I sat next to a doctor in her late twenties who had been to five Assembly meetings. She told me she liked the friendliness and opportunity to meet interesting people and said there was no need to make any commitment to do anything. She could enjoy the event anonymously. Her main criticism was that there was not enough time for silent reflection and the applause for every item and the hearty backslapping and hugging was wearing.

The Assembly started with a comedy-type warm-up session and then followed an agenda pre-published on the Internet. Members were given the opportunity to select the music and contribute with material submitted in advance. The liturgical pattern was similar to an order of service. The songs were enthusiastically sung with dancing in the aisles and picking of partners at random. The talks and song lyrics were projected onto a screen visible to the congregation. The meeting was for fun. Reflection time was explained as a moment to think and lasted exactly 60 seconds. The values of community appeared to revolve around being fit and living to enjoy yourself, with no mention of the unable, the disabled or sick. In conversation, I asked Sanderson Jones about his attitude to compassion. His reply was: 'life may well be comedy, for much of my comedy was about the stupidity and tragedies of life, and that's how we should treat it'.

The Assembly liturgy appeared to emulate Christian church worship, wherein participants were encouraged to feel animated enthusiasm and optimism. In an interview with *Reform* Jones, apparently acknowledging this, said: 'Pentecostal humanism! We invented it. Everyone was screaming and shaking their arms around.' Pippa Evans, the Sunday Assembly co-founder, added that '[t]he idea was to get to secular mass hysteria by the end of it. We got there, almost. There was

17 Official website: <https://sundayassembly.online/> [accessed 5/05/20].

18 Bullock, 'The Sociology of the Sunday Assembly', p. 54.

one time they wouldn't stop screaming which was really exciting. Everyone got this wonderful buzz and then left.'¹⁹

For Jones, the purpose of the Sunday Assembly is to give participants an experience, and the show is set up to achieve this. Standards of performance, therefore, like those of any show or performance, needed to be vetted and controlled by an Assessor. After attending the Assembly, I reflected that the focus on personal happiness, while failing to ask at whose expense, leads to a narrow utilitarian performative spirituality. The repeated shouting out of the slogan, 'happiness is all that's true' left me with a view that the happiness felt at the Sunday Assembly amounted only to the experience of sacro-egoist performance. My attendance felt isolated from the world and other people. I had no sense of community, beyond my interaction in a game or dance. Mutual help and self-giving concern for others were not at the root of this kind of affiliation. As such, the movement promotes an inhibited form of community.

This impression may be a function of the research method used, because Bullock's more extensive individual interviews suggested that 'strong community attitudes exist within the smaller sub-groups of the congregation, but that Sunday Assembly newcomers find it more difficult to increase meaningful social connections and a sense of community by merely attending the wider Sunday service'.²⁰ Members of the Assembly were proud of the movement and its success. They exuded a sense of satisfaction and joy at the end of the meeting and pity towards those not sharing the insights and experience of the movement. A comment that there must be many vicars who would give their right arm for what the members of the Assembly had here is indicative of this attitude.

After my first Assembly, Sanderson Jones asked if I found anything inspirational. I told him that I found the Assembly very interesting and I was emotionally moved, whereupon I was given a bear-hug and my back was slapped! Jones said that the criteria for the movement's success was that the Assembly event actually took place and people just like me were given inspiration. As long as there were joyful participants, Sanderson Jones felt that what they believed was of no concern. Rather like the Elizabethan Settlement, he was not making windows into men's souls—but, as in the English Reformation, a spectrum of attitudes is evident—in the case of the Sunday Assembly spanning from those with a sense of wonder and transcendence to militant non-theists and Atheists.²¹

American research by Robert Wuthnow into attitudes among postmodern consumers concluded that the innovative worship styles that had previously appealed to the baby boomer generation were no longer popular: 'They think

19 *The Reform Magazine* 'Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones Interview: how great thou aren't', (November 2013), <https://www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2013/10/pippa-evans-sanderson-jones-interview-how-great-thou-arent/> [accessed 20/05/20].

20 Bullock, 'The Sociology of the Sunday Assembly', p. 197.

21 The Birmingham Sunday Assembly split because it was insufficiently atheist and so formed a rival Birmingham Atheist Assembly.

church services should feel like church ... the so-called seeker services geared towards people who disliked church are not passé ... young adults are often as interested in preserving traditional worship as they were in changing it.²² The conscious copying of charismatic evangelical practice produces the desired happy crowd, but with a narrow agenda. The Sunday Assembly deliberately sets out to feel like church, and more than one regular Sunday Assembly meeting takes place in a redundant church. As such, in some respects it aims to replace them.

Sanderson Jones claims:

I'm trying to get a community together. I find talking about atheism dull. The infinite richness of this one life lived more than is possible to anyone who thinks they've got anything happening afterwards. Like when you're in a restaurant and you're having something which is just sensational, and the closer you get to the end of it the better it tastes, and you're savouring every single thing because it's all you've got.²³

The movement demands standardisation. The same liturgical pattern is followed at the meetings: the movement publishes an operational guide to organising and performing an Assembly, and both I attended followed a similar format. Control of the franchise is maintained through a series of operational handbooks and online guides. As Evans noted, '[w]e don't want to be in charge of everyone, but if someone goes to Sunday Assembly here and someone goes to Sunday Assembly in Newcastle, we want them to have a similar experience. So we wrote some guidelines.'

To ensure the performance is in line with policy, and the content properly controlled by the local organising committee, assessors periodically visit and report on the local Sunday Assembly meetings. I talked with an assessor called Mark, who was in his early fifties and lived in London. He regularly attended the London Sunday Assembly and worked full time as a management consultant, giving advice to business organisations. He said his skill set was particularly relevant to the job he was doing for the Sunday Assembly movement. He was at the Brighton meeting to undertake an annual assessment of the performance. His role, he explained, was to visit UK Sunday Assemblies to check on their content and quality and give advice to the local organising committee so they can improve their offering. He was not concerned with their financial or functional organisation, but had three pages of points relating to the management and performance of the meeting that he diligently filled in during the performance of the assembly. Mark was seated in front of me, so I could see him making notes throughout the performance. He told me he had already reported on ten such meetings over the last year and that this was the first yearly assessment for the

22 Wuthnow, R., *After the Baby Boomers*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

23 *Reform*, 'Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones interview: How great thou aren't', November 2013.

Brighton Sunday Assembly. The movement, he said, was growing so fast it was difficult to keep control.

I asked what he looked for in his assessment report. He commented:

It is really an advisory task but we have to maintain standards. There is a starter pack and some of us will go down and help start up a new group. Once a Sunday Assembly is under way, we have to ensure things are properly organised. That means the format is standard, that the health and safety is ok, the songs relevant, the meeting and language is inclusive, the chosen songs fit the theme of the event, and that message items like 'This much I know' is appropriate to the theme. TMIK is a personal statement of belief or insight, which is meant to be meaningful and relevant. We learnt a lot from the churches as to how to do it. We build community first and that is what we are about, whilst the churches only want community to convert people. You don't have to believe anything to join in and stay in, and that's fine by us but is not for the churches.

When asked whether all the content was checked during the audit to ensure that it was in line with the objectives of the Sunday Assembly movement he replied 'I am an atheist and I personally can't stand references to God or religious feelings. So I don't like it. But provided people don't go on about God they can say what is important to them in line with the theme for the day.' Given his response, I asked what would happen if a speaker used religious terms or talked about God, and received the following response:

We are careful with our speakers and there is little scope for debate about such issues at a SA. They would just be asked not to do it again as the Assembly is God-less and for nonreligious people. So as God or religion are not relevant at an Assembly, such language and ideas are not appropriate. In our other 'upper room' meetings, such ideas can be discussed. People who want to talk about religious experience or God should do it somewhere else, not at a Sunday Assembly. And that's a fair point we all understand.²⁴

The assessor, in effect, is checking to see that the liturgical form and content of the assembly is in line with that recommended and conforms to the objectives of the movement. So, in common with many religious groups, there is a distinction between what may be said at formal public meetings and what may be discussed or presented at more private meetings that are open to diverse opinion and discussion. I sensed Mark's irritation with people in the movement who had religious ideas. While the movement is formally tolerant of theists, he clearly did not want too many, as this had already brought about one split in the movement, in Birmingham. On this subject, Pippa Evans has commented that 'Birmingham felt like [the guidelines] were too controlling so they split',²⁵ to which Jones added, 'I think [the Birmingham split] is really healthy. The

24 Report on the Brighton Sunday Assembly Meeting on 26 April 2015 by Ian Toombs.

25 *Reform*, 'Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones Interview: how great thou aren't', November 2013.

great thing about there not being a heaven and hell is that it never takes on existential threats.²⁶

At each of my subsequent attendances I noted familiar faces and was able to observe that the group was not representative of Brighton people. Ethnic minorities, the elderly and the disabled appeared conspicuous by their absence. The majority of those attending were aged between 25 and 45 years. The wearing of a smart jacket, to indicate his authoritative status, marked out the Leader. Attenders at the Sunday Assembly range, as noted above, from atheists who want to promote atheism and for the Assembly to be exclusively for atheists to those who just want an opportunity for a bit of communal fun on a Sunday. Among the people I met, there was a gap between the gig seekers and truth seekers. In between are humanists in the broad sense of the term and theists who see celebrating life and humanity in a communal and enjoyable way as in no way compromising their personal beliefs in God or a transcendent Being.

Overall, people had fun. It was good popular non-elitist entertainment which Sanderson Jones himself and the helpers called 'a gig'—and, indeed, I felt that it was an enjoyable experience, similar to what I would receive if I attended a musical performance. And perhaps for that reason it was an ephemeral experience, addressing neither the issues of communities local or national nor the issues of the wider world. It merely addressed the need to meet, talk, sing and dance and had little to say about the pain of existence other than to treat it as a joke.

The copying of spiritual practices for use outside of the source religious organisation or the adopting of the spiritual practices of one religion by others have been features of the last hundred years. Kieran Flanagan and Peter Jupp see contemporary spirituality as more at risk of reappropriation or incorporation into religious organisations. They argue that non-religious spirituality needs to develop a collective image and by so doing it will need 'to organise resources to realise a desired façade. This causes an aggregate of practices to slide into a religious form, whether virtual implicit or invisible. In so organising, holistic spirituality risks the charge of being a quasi religion.'²⁷ The Sunday Assembly appropriation of religious practice into a secular environment produces a quasi-religious format, with secular content capable of transcendent emotional resonance or of none. The parody of a revivalist charismatic religious service gives substance to a religious type of experience in which, the founder argues, self-discovery of the true self in and through community will take place. The solution was to have all the fun of religion without the religious bit, here by addressing both the failure of most people to enjoy life to the full and their need to escape from the entrapment of rootless individuality. It might be argued that probably 100 per cent of the

²⁶ *Reform*, 'Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones Interview: how great thou aren't', November 2013.

²⁷ Flanagan, K. and Jupp, P. C., 'Conclusion', in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, Aldershot, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007, p. 255.

population meet that criterion. In the case of the Sunday Assembly, the questing by attenders in addition to the enjoyment of a gig is towards a kind of holistic spirituality that will hopefully yield results: personal happiness engendered through recognising the happiness and joy already in the self.

This section has given a description of the Sunday Assembly. It suggests that in the secular life, transformation can be personal, in terms of commitment to the aims and objectives of the movement, but, more importantly, individuals may be emotionally inspired to creatively participate and undertake communally beneficial activities. During the Assembly meetings there is a stress upon personal change by being inspired to build a sense of community, as well as taking part in practical expressions of community support. Seeking wonder and inspiration indicates that, while the Sunday Assembly movement has secular aims, it has a spiritual experiential substance that is more than secular materialism and may be called a kind of secular spirituality.

Spirituality has the capacity to illuminate religion, the self and culture in ways other concepts cannot. There is a constant pull between those who like to place spirituality outside organised religion and those who try to wrestle it back. The Sunday Assembly may be seen as accidentally and unintentionally occupying both camps.

Places for Nones to Worship: Cathedrals, Quakers, Unitarians and the Sunday Assembly

There are many reasons for attending a religious-type meeting, as Pink Dandelion's sociology of the Religious Society of Friends has established; at such putative religious events a wide spread of beliefs, including a lack of belief in God, may be found.²⁸ Surveys conducted by Dandelion and other sociologists indicate a varied spread of beliefs and practice among both religious and the nonreligious. At the Sunday Assembly there are diverse attenders, many of whom, if they have read the pre-publicity, are seeking a sense of belonging and fellowship in community. This does not appear very different from the motivations of those attending overtly religious meetings, where, as Dandelion's work would suggest for Quaker meetings, believing and belonging are not necessarily related, nor consecutive.

Flory and Miller identified that the religious and non-religious churn is not inevitably from complexity to simplicity or from strong to weak belief systems: instead, other factors, such as the level of control individuals have over their religious lives, are more significant.²⁹ Their investigation into the changing faith of the children of the baby boomer generation found that the movement of young adults is in many directions, including from the more simplistic quietist

28 Dandelion, P., *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: the silent revolution*, Lampeter: Edwin Mellin Press, 1996.

29 Flory, R. and Miller, D., *GenX Religion*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 237.

religious forms to the performative and complex, from the unstructured to the structured, and from the more cognitive to the more traditional ritualistic.³⁰ As continual change accounts for so much of the dynamic within the Nones, within that churn movement may be as much from simplicity to complexity as from traditional and fixed forms to an increasingly vague understanding and expression of religion. Flory and Miller call this ‘entrepreneurial’ and focus on the ways in which members of Generation X seek space to create new religious forms that may incorporate traditional aspects alongside innovations.³¹

Charles Taylor has identified the retreat from the sacred and the promotion of specifically religious activities as a significant surrender to secularism. In so doing people abstract or ‘depersonalise God and thereby deny the importance of communion and relationship and the community of communion that is the church.’³² Eileen Barker remarks negatively on the considerable but nevertheless inconsistent evidence indicating a diversity of disbelief and unbelief as well as confusion regarding the nature of beliefs held. She says, ‘we are unclear about the beliefs that include ideologically inspired atheism, agnosticism, apathy, indifference in what Voas calls the muddled middle between the religious and the secular.’³³

In many respects the practice of the Nones in religious places and at the Sunday Assembly’s quasi-religious meetings seem little different from the religious practice of the affiliated. While some hope for new spiritualities to emerge among the Nones, a lack of informed theology and depth of spiritual experience makes Nones open to inspiration from concepts, such as ‘community’, which may not be expressed coherently or explored in depth and therefore that do not provide the long-term stability necessary for personal growth. Alternative pursuits revolving around commercial spiritualities and therapies may equally prove disappointing and unfulfilling. In the late twentieth century it has been argued that religion was not declining but was really just changing;³⁴ from this viewpoint there are as many ways of being religious as not religious, and ample examples are given in this text of the ambiguity of practice and performance and of the muddled ground between the religious and the secular.

Abby Day, pondering this issue, asks why people continue to identify themselves as Christian while other markers of religion show a decline.³⁵ Why is it that atheists believe in ghosts, why is it that agnostics who despise religion claim to be Christian, why do apparently rational humanists believe in life after death, and why do Christians prefer talking to their dead relations than to God in prayer?³⁶

30 Flory and Miller, *GenX Religion*.

31 Flory and Miller, *GenX Religion*, p. 234.

32 Taylor, C., *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 278–79.

33 Barker, ‘Preface’.

34 Beckford, A., *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 170.

35 Day, A., ‘Believing in Belonging’, PhD thesis, Lancaster University, 2009.

36 Day, ‘Believing in Belonging’.

Two explanations are current: first, that self-identifying Christians are nominal identifiers who perform religious acts only on occasion and that the high rates of religious identification actually tell us nothing about their beliefs. Secondly, influentially advanced by Grace Davie, is the argument that people continue to believe but do not affiliate with any church organisation.³⁷ Day challenges this with her finding that, in conversations with young people about belief, belief was not absent but relocated to a social realm where it is polyvocal, interdependent, emotionally charged and illustrative of experiences of belonging.³⁸ Similarly, Day and others have identified a 'performance Christianity' among young people, which focusses on action and authenticity.³⁹

Day sees religion as part of the activities that bind communities and, as such, she concluded that religion and secularisation are subsets of belief that is ever-present in the social situation.⁴⁰ If religion is characterised as a bonding experience, much of what the religious do can be seen as about creating a sense of belonging. Attendance at a church service, Quaker Meeting or Sunday Assembly involves a sense of belonging, even if it does not actually build community, and that marks it out as a potentially religious event. Moreover, attendance at any event reinforcing familial values may well be an expression of belief for the Nones.

A report issued by Theos indicates that over three-quarters of all adults (77 per cent) and three-fifths (61 per cent) of non-religious people believe that there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means.⁴¹ This research concluded that spiritual beliefs are clearly not the preserve of the religious but are to be found across religious and non-religious groups, although those who consider themselves to belong to a religious group are more likely to hold such beliefs.⁴² Linda Mercadante found that attendance by Nones at cathedral services in America had little effect upon their beliefs and behaviour.⁴³ So, if that is the case, what needs, if any, are being met by attendance and participation in performance at such meetings? Is it that Nones who go to worship meetings have no expectation of or desire for belief, belonging, experience or social contact? Jane Shaw has noted a growth in Episcopal/Anglican cathedral worship in the

37 Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*.

38 Day, A., 'Believing in Belonging: an ethnography of young People's constructions of belief', *Culture and Religion* 10 (2009), pp. 263–78.

39 Vincett, G., Olson, E., Hopkins, P. and Pain, R., 'Young People and Performance Christianity in Scotland', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27 (2012), pp. 275–90.

40 Day, A., *Believing in Belonging*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 202, 207.

41 Theos report, 'The Spirit of Things Unseen: belief in post-religious Britain', <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2013/10/17/the-spirit-of-things-unseen-belief-in-post-religious-britain> [accessed 20/05/20], p. 7.

42 The results from Theos are based upon 2,036 adults from Great Britain interviewed by ComRes online on 4 and 5 September 2013.

43 Mercadante, L. A., *Belief without Borders: inside the minds of the spiritual but not religious*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

USA of around 14 per cent a year.⁴⁴ Regarding the Church of England, a recent report states ‘A total of 36,700 people per week (81% adults and 19% children aged under 16) were reported attending usual cathedral services in 2018, slightly down on 2017 (37,000). Attendance grew 17% in the period 2008 to 2013 but has remained basically flat since then.’⁴⁵ In her comments on some earlier statistics, Judith Muskett positioned cathedrals as a mid-way point:

Precisely because the cathedrals are located at the interface of the religious and secular worlds, they have a unique capacity to cross into the mainstream (for example, through media, such as television) and to enable the idler to become acquainted, unintentionally, with vicarious religion.⁴⁶

This potential has been accompanied by a 10 per cent annual growth in attendance at services in cathedrals in England over the last ten years. These institutions have the resources to be beacons of excellence in the music, ritual and drama of liturgical worship. They are often iconic buildings and radiate tradition and historicity, which Flory and Miller identify as potentially attractive to many people.⁴⁷

Similarly, Jane Shaw identifies the attraction of an embodied spirituality of rich ritualism.⁴⁸ She argues that it is effective in speaking to the present age, to people such as Nones, who see things religious and scriptural as incomprehensible. She raises the importance of being able to speak outside the cognitive channels of learning to media-saturated contemporary society. She suggests the depth and language of embodied spirituality as a form of communication integrated into community activity, as a Christian offering, which speaks multi-sensually to literate and illiterate alike.⁴⁹

The connection with Karen Armstrong’s insight regarding the nature of religion in most of the non-Christian world may have relevance here. Armstrong points out that in earlier times religion was not something chosen.⁵⁰ It was lived and individuals did not need to believe it, as it identified who they were. In such a situation, the call for commitment made little sense, for religion was who you were holistically. Thus who you were in a religious sense was wider than that generally understood today, encompassing more aspects than simply belief. Karen Armstrong explains that medieval Christianity had been an essentially communal

44 Grace Cathedral Annual Report 2013–14.

45 Church of England Research and Statistics, ‘Cathedral Statistics 2018’, <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/policy-and-thinking/research-and-statistics/key-areas-research#cathedral-statistics> [accessed 20/05/20].

46 Muskett, J. A., ‘Reflections on the Shop Windows of the Church of England: Anglican cathedrals and vicarious religion’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30 (2015), p. 283.

47 Flory and Miller, *Finding Faith*, pp. 124–56.

48 Shaw, J., ‘The Potential of Cathedrals’, *Anglican Theological Review* 95:1 (2014), pp. 137–47.

49 Shaw, ‘The Potential of Cathedrals’.

50 Armstrong, K., *Fields of Blood: religion and the history of violence*, London: Bodley Head, 2014.

faith where most people experienced the sacred by living in and having a sense of community. She argues that Luther's view of religion was an 'essentially subjective and private quest over which the State had no jurisdiction', as (was) the foundation of the modern secular ideal.⁵¹ This argument proposes that the need for religious experience and a sense of the presence of God became important with the rise of individualism in late medieval times in Europe. Faith communities from the seventeenth century onwards developed an increasing requirement for evidence of individual belief, salvation experience and commitment to a particular religious organisation and its cause. Armstrong argues that the only tradition that satisfies the modern western criterion of religion as a purely private pursuit is Protestant Christianity, which, like our western view of religion, is a creation of the early modern period.⁵²

Cathedrals such as Jane Shaw's in San Francisco offer an anonymous home for Nones who want to be in a transcendental setting. Perhaps some attend to experience a different form of cultural fun without the religion or to be present with others in a kind of vicarious sense of community. The common search for consolation, community and identity may mean that there is a similarity between the religious and the Nones who attend these places, for whatever reason. Cathedrals, Quaker meeting houses, gigs and Sunday Assemblies may all offer havens as mobile homes in a quasi-spiritual universe for the transient non-religious and growing religiously non-affiliated.

Conclusion

As seen in this study, today's secular world is characterised not by an absence of religion but by the continuing multiplication of new options—religious, spiritual and anti-religious—by which individuals and groups may seek to make sense of their lives. In some cases, like the Sunday Assembly, these options provide entertainment as well as engagement in a community.

Nones play a critical role in the discussion about the inevitability of secularisation and its speed. David Martin and Rebecca Catto criticise those upholding the standard narrative, whereby secularisation is destroying religion, as unable to recognise the connection between the inevitability argument and an increasingly questionable scientific epistemology. They ask why defenders of secularisation should be so hostile to the continued existence of religion when faced with desecularisation evidence.⁵³

This study notes that the decline of belief in any absolute truth means that Nones consider personal commitment or allegiance of little value. Their

51 Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*.

52 Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*, p. 3.

53 Martin, D. and Catto, R., 'The Religious and the Secular', in Woodhead, L. and Catto, R. (eds), *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*, London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 374–75.

sustaining values may be the leftovers of the enlightenment, now enshrined in a continued acceptance of the value of a belief in reason and the primacy of tolerance. In such a world, examining people's beliefs about religion discloses little other than ambiguity and confusion. It is within that ambiguity and complexity that the interpretation of religious change and spiritual trends need to be explored and understood. This study suggests that the Nones, while using a secular rhetoric, exercise a sacro-egoist pick-and-mix approach to performative religion, dipping into and out of conventional religious practice and spiritualities. In this they may be no different from many of their putative religious fellow citizens. Their approach is in some ways similar to the 'bricolage' approach taken by some nontheist Quakers, or the 'eclectic' approach found among some Pagans.⁵⁴

It is suggested here that secularist, desecularist and transitional models of the future remain provisional. Nevertheless, the dynamics of the Nones in this study confirm a loose connection, at best, between concepts of believing, belonging and behaviour. One interpretation is that when individual belief is placed alongside the postmodern assumption of no over-arching meta-narrative, sacro-egoist individuals navigate through life by taking their pick of what they find useful. This may involve expenditure of effort on therapy, ritual or religion, as a social or communal activity, whether or not it is conducive to the fulfilment of the self or some need. If Day's theory is correct, they do so with reference to their personal familial background, social situation and community identification.

Because of the fragile relationship between belonging, belief and behaviour, the understanding of religion, I argue, can move little beyond belief as action and action as belief. Religion may then be understood as the way people live, and the actions that mirror religious performance may be seen as religious, irrespective of any belief or commitment. Participation in the performance of any ritual, liturgy or religious cultural event may carry with it a range of sensations and emotions that create a sense of religious identity and community. The migration of elements of religious performance and culture into the secular, such as with the Sunday Assembly, means the secular and religious potentially may become indistinguishable.

This study suggests that belonging without belief and participation in quasi-religious performance may build community and identity. The religion of the Nones may then be understood as embodied performative beliefs brought into being through lived experience and actions of belonging.⁵⁵ For those of a theist disposition they may be seen as worship of a god, but for those of both secular and theist dispositions they may also be actions of social commitment to familial

54 Yarlett, S. D., 'The Accommodation of Diversity: liberal Quakerism and nontheism', PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2019; and Harrington, M., 'Paganism and the new Age', in Lewis, J. and Kemp, D. (eds), *Handbook of New Age*, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

55 Day, A., *Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World: believing in belonging*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 194.

and communal relationships giving identity and an emotional sense of belonging. Disentangling belief and commitment from religion and locating it in life's experience may from a theist viewpoint be part of a shift from believing in God to being in God. Multi-sensual communal worship, or being still and 'knowing I am God', is not a cognitive process. The social and religious implications of this shift to the non-cognitive are worthy of further exploration.

Self-discovery need not be a solely individual pursuit and can be undertaken on a communal basis. The spiritual or religious pilgrimage or 'journey of discovery' among fellow explorers fits the mind-set of the Nones; perhaps fellow caravanners on the road in a strange country is a good analogy!⁵⁶

Rowan Williams has commented:

The traditional forms of religious affiliations ... lose their integrity when they attempt to enforce their answers; and one of the most significant lessons to be learned from the great shift towards post-religious sensibility is how deeply the coercive and impersonal ethos of a good deal of traditional religion has alienated the culture at large.⁵⁷

The inhibitions produced by this sense of alienation from traditional religion together may lead the Nones to explore groups such as Unitarians, Sunday Assembly and Quakers, but the need for multi-sensual ritual and roots with a trans-generational heritage may make them temporary and provisional stopping-off places. For those researching Quaker belief, the spirituality of Nones or non-theists needs to be taken into account, rather than being seen as wholly focussed on secular modes of belonging.

Author Details

Ian Toombs completed his BA at the University of Hull and later in life an MSc and MA. He was also an ordained member of the Anglican clergy. Sadly, Ian passed away in 2018, leaving his completed MA thesis on the Sunday Assembly and the beginnings of a PhD on non-theistic spirituality unpublished. With the support of his supervisor, Pink Dandelion, Rhiannon Grant edited the following, based mainly on his MA thesis.

Rhiannon Grant works in the Centre for Research in Quaker Studies at Woodbrooke. Her recent publications include *Theology from Listening: Finding the Core of Liberal Quaker Theological Thought* (Brill, 2020) and *Quakers Do What! Why?* (Quaker Quicks series from Christian Alternative Books, 2020).

Email: rhiannon.grant@woodbrooke.org.uk

⁵⁶ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, pp. 228–30.

⁵⁷ Williams, R., Lecture: 'The Spiritual and the Religious: Is the Territory Changing?' April 2008, <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1208/the-spiritual-and-the-religious-is-the-territory-changing> [accessed 05/05/20].