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Preaching to the Nones

How Two British Comedians Started a Popular Atheist Church (No Joke!)

by: [Becky Garrison](#)

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UPON ENTERING A SUNDAY ASSEMBLY, held in historic York Hall in East London, one could easily assume that these gatherings are yet another attempt to plant a holy hipster church. If you stick around, however, it becomes clear that these atheist services take on the upbeat tempo of an evangelical praise service, sans any signs of Jesus junk. Described by its founders as “a godless congregation that’s part atheist church, part foot-stomping show, and 100 percent celebration of life,” the Sunday Assembly is the brainchild of British comedians Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones. On any given Sunday, comic Jones struts across the stage like a charismatic preacher (think Elmer Gantry with a beard or Billy Graham), while fellow comic and cofounder Evans leads the band in a celebratory sing-a-long that would make any traditional choral director burst at the Bible belt.

Jones describes a typical Sunday Assembly as positive and high energy. There’s one guest speaker, a reading, a contribution from one of the audience members, and a final message. In between are the fantastic songs that, he says, everyone can get into. “The songs should be uplifting and well-known, with lyrics that are appropriate (no explicit sexiness or swearing!).” For example, a recent service focusing on volunteering had the group singing the Beatles’ “Help!” and the 1984 hit, “Holding Out for a Hero,” by Bonnie Tyler.

The UK-based Sunday Assembly came into fruition about two years ago when Evans and Jones began chatting, in the car en route to a comedy gig, about their mutual desire to start an atheist church. Evans observes how their backgrounds as stand-up comedians playing to global audiences enabled them to create an entertaining and lively program. “We’ve traveled around the world doing standup comedy and played to all kinds of people. So we know how to put together an event and connect with the room.”

For those who doubt that a “church” spearheaded by comics rather than spiritual leaders or professional church planters could succeed, the late Sam Kinison demonstrated when he moved from preacher to stand-up comic that perhaps these two professions aren’t as disparate as one might think. Comedian Troy Conrad, co-executive producer of the TV series and live show, *Set List: Stand-Up without a Net*, describes how a quest for truth led him out of the church: “Doing stand-up comedy, I discovered how we all find our own truth in creating meaning out of what we see in life.” Emery Emery, host of the Ardent Atheist podcast, sees the roots of stand-up comedy as a means of social criticism. He cites comics like Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Bill Hicks, and Paul Provenza who’ve long lampooned all that contemporary culture holds sacred.

When Evans and Jones launched the Sunday Assembly in London on January 6, 2013, they engaged in a bit of idol smashing by nicking the best components of church while creating a gathering free of religious dogma for those (as their motto goes) who want to “live better, help often, and wonder more.” As Evans notes, “What separates us from other atheist organizations is that we encourage believers and nonbelievers to come. We focus not on the absence of God,

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but on the fact that we only have one life and we need to make the most of it. We aren't interested in converting people to atheism."

Presently, their London-based service meets in a 1,200-seat arena and they've started social clubs and peer-to-peer support groups, with plans underway to coordinate opportunities for volunteerism.

Following their explosive growth in the UK, Jones and Evans decided to launch assemblies in Australia, the United States, and Europe, and from October to December they'll embark on a roadshow dubbed, "40 Dates & 40 Nights." The tour will be crowdfunded, with Sunday Assemblies held in the towns that show the most interest.

"We get a lot of messages from people saying they had a similar idea or were looking for something like this," Evans reflects on the rapid growth of the atheist church idea. "There seems to be something in the air where people want to start a community without being told how to live their lives."

This begs the obvious question: Can a gathering of live-and-let-live nonbelievers thrive in predominantly Christian America? According to statistics from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, even though one-fifth of the population claim their religious affiliation as "none," only about 5 percent of Americans currently identify as atheist or agnostic. And despite overtures from those who market their wares on the Christian author/speaker circuit promoting a new kind of Christianity, 88 percent of the "nones" have no interest in joining a religion.

Roy Speckhardt, the executive director of the American Humanist Association (AHA), acknowledges that many Americans want nothing to do with dogma or the ceremony commonly attached to it. "Many nontheists have negative associations with church that range from a personal discovery that the church liturgy was fabricated to being ostracized by church members and abused by church leaders," he notes. "Others are meeting their needs for community interaction through political advocacy and community service, and they simply see no reason to use their time to gather on Sundays."

Yet, the success of the 2012 Reason Rally, which drew 30,000 nontheists to the National Mall on a cold and rain-drenched day, coupled with the explosive growth of the Humanist Community at Harvard indicates there is a need for some nonbelievers to gather in person with like-minded individuals. Furthermore, campaigns like #AtheistsUnite (set up by comic Doug Stanhope to assist Oklahoma tornado victim Rebecca Vitsum who publicly announced her atheism on CNN) and American Atheists' campaign to create atheist monuments in public spaces point to a desire among nontheists to highlight the positive side of atheism.

The forthcoming documentary *Refusing My Religion* features former religious leaders affiliated with the Clergy Project, such as Jerry DeWitt and Mike Aus, who lost their faith, became atheist activists, and have now been forming godless congregations. Filmmakers Michael Dorian and Marc Levine repeatedly found that individuals around the country who've eschewed religion claim to miss the "sense of community" that church had formerly provided.

Fred Edwards, national director of the United Coalition of Reason, speaks to the proliferation of nontheist communities, including atheist parenting groups, freethought summer camps for children, student groups, charities, and socio-political activism that have proliferated since the New Atheism emerged as a social phenomenon circa 2004.

"It was only natural that, as nontheistic people expanded their range of interests from challenging religious doctrines to living a more humanistic lifestyle, communities of the like-minded would become more popular," Edwards concludes. "And since a well-established form of community in the United States happens to be the congregational structure of the church, synagogue, mosque, temple, and ashram, then it was only to be expected that some atheists and agnostics would experiment with this model."

Speckhardt concurs that as the overall number of out atheists continues to skyrocket, the number of those who want to get together to share experiences is also on the rise. "They've been waiting in the wings for the kind of fulfilling opportunity only a robust community can provide."

While the mainstream media tends to view "atheist church" as a new social phenomenon, Edwards offers this concise history of U.S.-based freethought movements:

Starting in 1850, immigrant German freethinkers began founding free-thought congregations in the United States, mostly in the midwest. The movement thrived until World War I when simply being German became unpopular—so Germans didn't want to be seen as anti-clerical as well. Ethical Culture was a congregational movement in the northeastern states that grew out of Reform Judaism in 1877 and began identifying with humanism in the 1930s. It continues today. Humanism as a movement within Unitarianism

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and Universalism appeared during World War I and dominated the Unitarian Universalist denomination from the 1960s through the 1980s. There continue to be humanist congregations in this denomination as well as atheist ministers. Also in the 1960s, the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) was formed, and humanistic Jewish congregations, all of which are nontheistic, now exist across the United States, in Israel, and elsewhere. Moreover, during all of this time there have been independent atheist and humanist churches that have come and gone. Some of the old ones remain and there continue to be new ones.

Greg Epstein, the humanist chaplain at Harvard, has launched a “Humanist Community Project” (HCP) there and is working with the American Humanist Association to study and promote humanist communities and congregations in the United States. In August 2013, they hired Clergy Project grad and former “church planting” expert Teresa MacBain to coordinate groups like the Sunday Assembly and many others towards building a true community movement. The project will also result in a book, *The Godless Congregation*, to be written by Epstein and James Croft and published by Simon and Schuster in 2015.

Epstein, ordained as a rabbi by the SHJ, works with Unitarian Universalists and Ethical Culturists, drawing inspiration from many of the myriad ideas and projects they’ve developed over the years. But, he notes, both UU and Ethical Culture still call themselves a religion, a term he feels may become irrelevant to most humanists. Furthermore, while the Ethical Culture movement began in 1877 when their leader had a visionary and radical way of restructuring what a religious gathering is supposed to look like, the basic format remains the same today. And so a movement deemed radical in the late nineteenth century seems antiquated when viewed through twenty-first-century eyes. Also, as UU congregations take on a variety of formats, nontheists looking for a community are often unable to find a nontheistic UU church.

As atheist churches continue to grow across the United States, Epstein sees the HCP’s plan for a new humanist center in the heart of Harvard Square as a hub to help connect and shepherd Sunday Assemblies and other similar communities. His experience over the past decade working within the humanist/atheist movement makes him cautious, however, and he warns that quality is sometimes sacrificed for quantity when dozens of communities get established very quickly. “Sanderson and Pippa have come up with some brilliant ideas,” Epstein notes, “and I really hope they succeed. We’ll try to work with them to figure out what sustainability looks like.”

With events already in the planning stages in Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Silicon Valley, Buffalo, San Bernardino, and Marietta, Georgia, as well as in the UK and Australia, Evans and Jones will certainly have a chance to see how their foot-stomping brand of Sunday service plays with U.S. audiences. Judging from the response they’ve gotten so far, the possibility of success is no joke.

Comedian Paul Provenza, cofounder of the previously mentioned *Set List: Stand-Up without a Net*, observes how comedy speaks to the universal quest for authenticity. “I used to try to convince people over to my side but I’m finding much more creative freedom in just being an example. This is particularly helpful with people who are doubting their faith. Just be who you are and let your values and art speak for themselves.” 

Becky Garrison is a writer and storyteller. Her seven books include **Roger Williams’ Little Book of Virtues** and **Red and Blue God, Black and Blue Church**.

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