

The Opinion Pages | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

# Religion Without God

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THIS Christmas our family will go to church. The service is held in a beautiful old church in the charming town of Walpole, N.H., just over the border from Vermont. The Lord's Prayer hangs on the wall behind the sanctuary. A lectern rises above the nave to let the pastor look down on his flock. The pews and the side stalls have the stern, pure lineaments suited to the Colonial congregation that once came to church to face God.

Except that this church is Unitarian. Unitarianism emerged in early modern Europe from those who rejected a Trinitarian theology in preference for the doctrine that God was one. By the 19th century, however, the Unitarian church had become a place for intellectuals who were skeptical of belief claims but who wanted to hang on to faith in some manner. Charles Darwin, for example, turned to Unitarians as he struggled with his growing doubt. My mother is the daughter of a Baptist pastor and the black sheep, theologically speaking, of her family. She wants to go to church, but she is not quite sure whether she wants God. The modern Unitarian Universalist Association's statement of principles does not mention God at all.

As it happens, this kind of God-neutral faith is growing rapidly, in many cases with even less role for God than among Unitarians. Atheist services have sprung up around the country, even in the Bible Belt.

Many of them are connected to Sunday Assembly, which was founded in Britain by two comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. They are avowed atheists. Yet they have created a movement that draws thousands of people to events with music, sermons, readings, reflections and (to judge by

photos) even the waving of upraised hands. There are nearly 200 Sunday Assembly gatherings worldwide. A gathering in Los Angeles last year attracted hundreds of participants.

How do we understand this impulse to hold a “church” service despite a hesitant or even nonexistent faith? Part of the answer is surely the quest for community. That’s what Mr. Jones told The Associated Press: “Singing awesome songs, hearing interesting talks, thinking about improving yourself and helping other people — and doing that in a community with wonderful relationships. Which part of that is not to like?”

Another part of the answer is that rituals change the way we pay attention as much as — perhaps more than — they express belief. In “The Archetypal Actions of Ritual,” two anthropologists, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, go so far as to argue that ritual isn’t about expressing religious commitment at all, but about doing something in a way that marks the moment as different from the everyday and forces you to see it as important. Their point is that performing a ritual focuses your attention on some moment and deems it worthy of respect.

In Britain, where the rate of atheism is much higher than in the United States, organizations have now sprung up to mark life passages for those who consider themselves to be nonbelievers. The anthropologist Matthew Engelke spent much of 2011 with the British Humanist Association, the country’s pre-eminent nonreligious organization, with a membership of over 12,000. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, a prominent atheist, is a member. The association sponsors a good deal of anti-religious political activity. They want to stop faith-based schools from receiving state funding and to remove the rights of Church of England bishops to sit in the House of Lords. They also perform funerals, weddings and namings. In 2011, members conducted 9,000 of these rituals. Ceremony does something for people independent of their theological views.

Moreover, these rituals work, if by “work” we mean that they change people’s sense of their lives. It turns out that saying that you are grateful makes you feel grateful. Saying that you are thankful makes you feel thankful. To a world so familiar with the general unreliability of language, that may seem strange. But it is true.

In a study in which undergraduates were assigned to write weekly either about things they were grateful or thankful for; hassles; or “events or circumstances that affected you in the past week,” those who wrote about gratitude felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the coming week. There have now been many such studies.

Religion is fundamentally a practice that helps people to look at the world as it is and yet to experience it — to some extent, in some way — as it should be. Much of what people actually do in church — finding fellowship, celebrating birth and marriage, remembering those we have lost, affirming the values we cherish — can be accomplished with a sense of God as metaphor, as story, or even without any mention of God at all.

Yet religion without God may be more poignant. Atheists trust in human relations, not supernatural ones, and humans are not so good at delivering the world as it should be. Perhaps that is why we are moved by Christmas carols, which conjure up the world as it can be and not the world we know.

May the spirit of Christmas be with you, however you understand what that means.

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