**The Stickiness of Non-Religion?**

**Intergenerational Transmission and the Formation of Non-Religious Identities in Childhood**

**Abstract**

The rapid rise of those identifying as ‘non-religious’ across many countries has prompted growing interest in the ‘religious nones’. A now burgeoning literature has emerged, challenging the idea that ‘non-religion’ is the mere absence of religion and exploring the substantive beliefs, practices and identities that are associated with so-called unbelief. Yet we know little about the micro-processes through which this cultural shift towards non-religion is taking place. Drawing on data from an ethnographic study, this article examines how, when, where, and with whom children learn to be non-religious, and considers the different factors that are implicated in the formation of non-religious identities. While research on religious transmission has demonstrated the importance of the family, our multi-sited approach reveals the important role also played by both school context and children’s own reflections in shaping their formation as non-religious, suggesting a complex pattern of how non-religious socialization is occurring in Britain today.

**Keywords**

childhood, non-religion, secular, socialization, transmission, non-religious childhood, non-religious children, atheist children, agnostic children, non-religious parents

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**Introduction**

The growth of those identifying as ‘non-religious’ in many former Christian liberal democracies across Europe and North America has been rapid (Woodhead and Catto, 2012; Day and Lee, 2014; Lee, 2015; Woodhead, 2016, 2017). In Britain, ‘non-religion’ has come to replace Christianity as the cultural default, especially among younger age cohorts, and there is now a ‘no religion’[[1]](#endnote-1) majority (Lee, 2015; Woodhead, 2017). Several explanations have been put forward for these changes. These include: increased participation in higher education, with strong correlations between higher education and declining religiosity reported in several studies (Baker and Smith, 2015), negative publicity about religion such as the Roman Catholic sex abuse scandals leading to religion becoming a ‘toxic brand’ (Armfield and Holbert, 2003; Woodhead, 2016), and a rejection of the dogmatism that organized religion seems to stand for, which is at odds with the ‘long democratic revolution’ (Williams 1961) that over time afforded more social categories of people the ability ‘to acknowledge, express, and act upon their own desires’ (Woodhead, 2017: 258). Yet while ‘no religion’ is on the rise in many countries and there is growing attention to the macro-level causes of this, we know relatively little about *how* this change is taking place.

In recent years, a small number of studies have therefore begun to explore the question of non-religious transmission. While some literature on the rise of non-religion has considered the ‘nonversion’ (Bullivant, 2017) of people moving from having a religious faith to becoming a ‘none’ and/or an ‘unbeliever’ (e.g. Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 2006; Brown, 2017), other studies have demonstrated that processes of intergenerational non-religious transmission or the failure of religious transmission are more important than changes in adulthood. Woodhead (2017) notes, drawing on data from the British Social Attitudes Survey, that there is a 45 percent chance that those raised as Christian will end up identifying as non-religious, but for those raised as non-religious, the chance that they will remain non-religious is 95 percent. Thus, she argues, ‘“no religion” is currently “sticky” in a way Christianity is not… [N]ot only are “no religion” parents more likely to produce “no religion” children, those children will do the same – so the pool of the non-religious goes on growing’ (Woodhead 2017: 252-53). Bengtson et al. (2018) likewise emphasize the importance of intergenerational relationships and argue that a key vehicle for the growth of non-religion in the USA is the increase in the numbers of parents and grandparents explicitly socializing their children to a non-religious worldview. Yet while these studies indicate *that* non-religious transmission across generations is taking place, there has been little attention to the micro-level processes through which socialization into a non-religious identity happening. The ‘neonatal’ body of work in this area (Bengtson et al. 2018) has addressed the importance of parents in the process of how non-religion develops in the family (Bengtson et al., 2013; Manning, 2015). Focused on the USA, these studies provide insight into how parents intentionally seek to impart a non-religious worldview to their children in a context in which to be non-religious is the cultural minority. However, we know little about processes of non-religious socialization in contexts such as Britain in which being ‘non-religious’ is now a majority identity, or about how family influence relates to the influence of schooling, peers, and other social networks in determining children’s non-religious identities.

This article addresses the variety and forms of non-religious transmission in relation to children of primary school age in England. If ‘no-religion’ is ‘stickier’ than Christianity in terms of its successful transmission, how should we account for this? Are children being actively socialized by family members as non-religious, as studies focused on the USA have highlighted, or can this be understood primarily as an *absence* of religious transmission? Or a combination of both? And precisely what is being passed on, in what ways, as children come to identify as ‘non-religious’? Drawing on data from a qualitative study examining non-religious childhoods in England, we demonstrate that there are different processes through which non-religious transmission occurs. In the context of family life, forms of transmission range from active non-religious socialization to implicit and banal expressions of non-religion. Coupled with this, we show the importance of the place of religion in British schools in shaping non-religious identities. This context of religion in schools, we argue, allows the largely unremarked processes of non-religious socialization in the home to become marked, explicit and known through the binary constructions of religious and non-religious identities in Religious Education[[2]](#endnote-2) and acts of collective worship (terms we explain further in what follows). Our approach, focusing on the formation of non-religious identities across both home and school, and examining children’s agency in constructing these, thus sheds new light on the range of processes of transmission contributing to the growth in non-religious identification.

**Transmitting Non-Religion**

There have been numerous studies examining the transmission of religious identity across generations (e.g. Hervièu-Léger 1998; Scourfield et al. 2012; Bengtson et al. 2013). It is usually assumed that family environment is the primary determining factor shaping religious identity, and that family socialization is central (e.g. Voas, 2003; Sherkat 2003; Bengtson et al. 2013). A number of researchers attentive to the agency of children and young people have however questioned how these approaches tend to present the child as the passive recipient of parental socialization and have contested the use of the term ‘socialization’, emphasizing instead the ‘dynamic process of inter- and intra-generational negotiation of belief and morality’ (Scourfield et al., 2013: 20). ‘Transmission’ should, they suggest, be seen as ‘bi-directional or transactional rather than uni-directional’ (Scourfield et al., 2012: 92; Pinquart and Silbereisen, 2004; Hopkins et al., 2010), while a number of researchers have drawn attention to the importance of peer socialization or religious institutions in shaping belief and identity (e.g. Singh, 2012; Madge et al. 2014). With growing research interest in religion and youth, a range of studies have revealed the myriad influences shaping young people’s contemporary religiosities, including digital media and social networks, such that parents may no longer be the primary source of their learning about religion (Woodhead 2010).

 The relative absence of research on non-religious transmission and socialization, in comparison with studies of religious transmission, is bound up with the broader historical lack of social research on non-religion and ‘unbelief’ (Bullivant, 2008; Lee, 2015). The literature on religious transmission, dominated by quantitative North American studies based on largely white, Christian samples and surveys of teenagers (Boyatzis et al. 2006), has charted the decline of religious identification and belief amongst such populations, with children’s and young people’s non-religious identities and worldviews mostly theorized in terms of a lack (e.g. Smith and Denton 2005). This reflects how within the history of sociology, the varieties and forms of secularity and non-religion have historically not been areas of substantive enquiry in their own right, but have been interpreted in terms of what Taylor (2007) has called a ‘subtraction story’. In this narrative, religion was assumed to fill up space and the secular was presented as the absence of religion rather than having any positive formations of its own. The rapid growth of ‘the nones’ across Europe, North America and other parts of the world has, however, prompted a now burgeoning literature on non-religion and secularity examining what it means to be non-religious, and the beliefs, rituals, and practices of non-religious and secular populations. Within this literature, there has been a small but growing body of research exploring forms of non-religion among teenagers and young people (e.g. Catto and Eccles 2013; Bengston et al. 2013; Wallis 2014; Madge and Hemming 2016). Coupled with this, broader research on non-religious adults has demonstrated the importance of both family life and education in the process of becoming non-religious (e.g. LeDrew 2013; Voas and McAndrew 2012). Yet there has been little qualitative examination of how non-religious socialization takes place within the family or across educational settings, or its ‘role in determining the pace and pattern of religious decline’ (Storm and Voas 2012: 132). As Hemming notes (2017: 125), we also know little about the experiences and perspectives of non-religious children in relation to these processes, reflecting a broader historical marginalization of children’s perspectives within the sociology of religion (Ridgely, 2011; Strhan et al. 2017).

 In understanding how people come to identify as ‘non-religious’, children’s voices offer important insights. Existing data on children’s religious or non-religious identities largely relies on adults’ identification of their children as religious or non-religious, and Voas and McAndrew (2012) note that religious affiliation drops when children reach adolescence and become old enough to complete their own censuses. Brown’s (2017) oral history research with people who became atheists notes that while people often perceive losing religion as something that happens as part of a coming of age process, a considerable proportion of his respondents reported their loss of faith as happening between the ages of 7 and 13. This suggests that the period of ‘middle childhood’ (Scourfield et al. 2013: 18) is especially important for understanding how people come to experience themselves as non-religious, both for those who were formerly religious and for the increasingly large population of the ‘never religious’. Yet speaking to children not only affords insight into what it means to them to be non-religious but also provides important data advancing our knowledge of the micro-level processes through which non-religious transmission and socialization take place.

**The Study**

Our paper draws on data from a qualitative study that, in conversation with the growing research literature on non-religion, irreligion and ‘unbelief’, explores what it means to be unbelieving and non-religious for children. Our use of the term ‘unbelieving’ follows other studies in this area in referring to a lack of belief in traditionally religious phenomena such as belief in God rather than the idea of having no beliefs (Lee et al., 2017). Our broader study examines the nature, varieties and forms of children’s non-religion and unbelief (e.g. disinterest, indifference, positive rejection, doubt etc. in relation to ‘religious’ areas such as sacred beings/God/gods/the afterlife, an ultimate purpose/order in life),[[3]](#endnote-3) as well as how these relate to the children’s parents’ perspectives and the place of religion in everyday school life. Moving beyond the dominant narrow focus in existing studies of unbelief and non-religion on elite adult populations largely based in certain parts of North America and Europe (Lee et al., 2017; Smith and Cragun 2019), our study focuses on children’s formation as non-religious across three contrasting geographical ‘micro-climates’ of religion/nonreligion in England.[[4]](#endnote-4)

We draw here on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three primary schools, with Shillitoe spending between six and seven weeks with each school between October 2017 and July 2018. All respondents and schools and have been anonymized and names replaced with pseudonyms. The first school, St Peters’, a Church of England primary academy is located in an inner-city urban area in the southwest of England, a ‘micro-climate’ we chose, following Voas and McAndrew (2012), because of the high proportion of religious ‘nones’ and a diverse non-religious and religious population. Our second fieldsite, Waterside Primary Academy, is in a largely middle-class suburban setting in the north of England, to enable insight into suburban cultures of unbelief beyond stereotypes of ‘godless suburbs’. The final fieldsite, Sunnybank Community Primary School, is in a predominantly rural location in the unbuckled ‘British Bible belt’ of the northwest (Voas and McAndrew 2012: 41), chosen to deepen understanding of the lives of predominantly white, working-class non-religious children in a setting in which a low proportion of the population identify as ‘non-religious’. We adopted a relational approach towards understanding how children learn to be non-religious both in relation to their peers and adults and in relation to their movements across the spaces of home and school. We used participant observation to allow children’s voices to be heard within their own social context (James and Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 2011) and to enable us to understand children’s daily routines, rhythms and embodied practices in everyday school life. Institutional ethical approval was obtained and ethical issues were taken seriously throughout the project. Both child and parental consent was obtained for child participants.

Shillitoe spent most of her time during participant observation in each school with Key Stage Two (children aged 7-11 years old[[5]](#endnote-5)), acting as a teaching assistant, and observing daily school life, with a particular focus on Religious Education (RE), Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE), collective worship/assemblies, and contemplative practices (e.g. circle time, reflection time, and meditative practices). She carried out paired interviews with thirty to forty children per school (from across Key Stage 2; n=115).[[6]](#endnote-6) Since previous studies have demonstrated the limitations of focusing on religious or non-religious categories of identification (Day and Lee, 2014; Lee, 2015), and we were mindful of avoiding the adult-centric nature of religious and non-religious categories (Shillitoe, 2018), we sampled children using a worksheet activity in which children were asked about their un/belief in God. Prior to this activity, Shillitoe had spent two weeks in each fieldsite to inform children about the study and answer any questions they had. For example, at St Peter’s, when walking to the lunch with Fatima, a Muslim child from Year Five, Fatima asked her, ‘for your project, when you said “God”, do you mean our God, Allah, or your God?’ Such interactions helped inform how we presented the study to children. A child-friendly presentation about the research was delivered to each class in which it was explained that no particular definition or religious understanding of God was being used here, and there were no right or wrong answers. Following this, worksheets were distributed, and children who gave the answer ‘no’ or ‘not sure’ to the question ‘do you believe in God?’ were invited to participate. The interviews were loosely structured around the idea of what it means to be ‘not religious’ and explored the beliefs and values children saw as significant in their own lives.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the parent(s) of fifteen children per school (n=45), sampled from the children interviewed in each school. Depending on availability, these were sometimes conducted with the children present, and explored parents’ beliefs and values, and how these related to their children’s upbringing.[[7]](#endnote-7) Interviews with four teachers per school (n=12) were also conducted to explore how they understood the place of religion in the school (e.g. in relation to the school ethos, citizenship, PSHE and RE) and to deepen understanding of how adults seek to shape the educational spaces in which children’s non-religion is located. During the ethnographic phase of data collection, recurring patterns were noted and coded to identify key themes emerging. All fieldnotes and interview transcripts were analysed thematically, with the systematic analysis attending to different forms of non-religious transmission in home and school settings for each fieldsite.

**Varieties of Nonreligious Transmission: The Importance of the Home and the School**

Throughout the different points of data collection, the lack of religious socialization or reference to religion in family life was a theme that emerged consistently. During interviews, children and their parents were asked about how often religion came up as a topic of discussion at home, with friends, or at school, and most answered that religion was rarely mentioned in family life or with friends. Other than during school assemblies or RE lessons, religion was not discussed or mentioned in the majority of children’s everyday lives. Daniel and Harry, two Year Five boys at Sunnybank, discussed this:

Interviewer: How interested would you say you are in religion? Is it something that comes up in discussions much with your family and friends?

Daniel: Mainly in school in RE.

Harry: The same as Daniel, it comes up a lot in RE and assembly.

Children were asked how they felt their parents would identify in terms of religion and were provided with a list of possible religious and non-religious classifications. Many children did not know whether their parents were religious, and often deferred to grandparents’ religiosity or life cycle rituals such as baptism as potential markers for religious identity. Edith and Amy, two Year Four girls from St Peters’, noted that religion never came up in discussion at home and that the question of religious or non-religious identity had never been mentioned. The girls did not think their parents were religious, noting the lack of religious practice in their lives, adding that if their parents were religious ‘you’d know about it’:

Edith: My mum, I don’t really know about her because I think she’s the same as me, she doesn’t really know [...]

Amy: If you don’t know about it, I don’t think he’d be really religious.

Interviewer: What makes you say that?

Amy: Because then you’d be going to church every Sunday, wouldn’t you, if he was really religious. You know what I mean, if he was really religious I think you’d probably know.

Edith: Yes, because he’d probably be like praying to God every night.

Amy: Yes, he’d have a prayer mat and you could just hear someone every night, ‘Hmmm,’ something like that.

Edith: Meditating.

Thus, the lack of explicit religious practices became markers of non-religious identity for children. Charlie, a Year Four boy from St Peters’, said that religion was never discussed at home and was only recently discussed as a result of the letter home to parents about this study, and mentioned that it was only through this letter that he had discussed and become aware of his parents’ non-religious (humanist) identities.

Parents were also often unaware of their children’s religious or non-religious identities. When Cassandra and Liam, parents from Sunnybank, were asked about this, Cassandra said she was unsure about her children’s beliefs in relation to religion:

Cassandra: As far as we’re aware, they don’t believe in it. We’ve never really…

….

Liam: No, I don’t really talk about it much.

Interviewer: I was going to say, does it come up in conversation much?

Cassandra: No, it just doesn’t. That’s probably why they [children] don’t believe in it.

The lack of discussion about religion and absence of religion in family life was one factor in the transmission of non-religion, as the lack of socialization in relation to religion has the effect of socializing children as non-religious. This can be seen as an instance of what Zuckerman (2008) terms ‘bald secularity’. In his research with non-religious populations in Denmark and Sweden, Zuckerman argues that his informants’ reluctance to speak about religion was not due to their seeing religion as a private, personal matter or any active rejection of religion. Their reticence rather arose from ‘the simple fact that religion is such a marginal aspect of their culture, and such a minimal element in their daily lives’ (p. 103), and they therefore lack a ‘narrative structure’ when it comes to religion. However, while this ‘bald secularity’ was evident in children’s home lives, shaping the unremarked nature of nonreligious socialization in the context of the family, religion was afforded more prominence in the space of school, with Religious Education and collective worship meaning that children do discuss and engage with religion on a regular basis at school.

Both RE and collective worship have been compulsory parts of education in state-funded British schools[[8]](#endnote-8) since the 1944 Education Act. The Religious Education clauses of educational law have caused decades of confusion and controversy, with many questioning whether and how religion should be taught in schools (Hull 1975; Cheetham 2000). In these discussions, concerns are often expressed that RE is a form of subtle religious indoctrination or implies a normative tilt towards taking on a religious identity. However, our research found the opposite of this taking place: the ways in which religion (and non-religion) were presented in RE provided children with the opportunity to reflect on and consider their non-religious beliefs and identities in a way that was not happening in their homes or friendship circles.

During fieldwork at St Peters’, Years Four and Five were learning in RE about the Christian creation story. In one Year Four lesson, Charlotte, the class teacher, explained to the class ‘we are going to think about the creation story and what Christians believe, as that’s what we are doing this term’. Charlotte began by asking the children if they could describe the creation story and what happened on each day, and went on to explain that ‘some Christians believe it took seven days and some people believe in the big bang, and this is what scientists believe’. A number of children raised their hands at this point. Jake put his hand up and said that he believed in both the big bang and God and that we developed from monkeys into humans, but that God could have started it all off. Another child raised her hand and said she was unsure. Charlotte nodded in response to the children’s contributions and said:

Yes, some people think only the big bang happened and some people only believe the creation story. Some people believe the big bang and that the creation story is just a story but God is behind the creation and the big bang. You can believe in something and have faith in something but you’ll always have lots of questions.

Charlotte went on to say ‘some people don’t believe and that’s OK. You might change your opinion throughout your life. And remember we’re learning that’s what Christians believe.’ She then introduced the activity for the lesson. Located in three different areas of the classroom were three signs: ‘sometimes agree’, ‘agree’ and ‘never agree’. Charlotte explained that she would read a number of statements about the creation story and the children would have to stand near one of the statements depending on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement. She emphasized that we all have different opinions ‘because we’re all different and that’s OK. We all have different beliefs and opinions and that’s OK and it makes our world a more interesting place’, and reminded the children not to simply follow their friends when deciding if they agreed or disagreed.

Charlotte then read a series of statements about forgiveness and being good: ‘is the world a good place?’ and ‘is it easy to forgive?’. The children walked eagerly around the classroom for each statement, deciding whether they agreed and discussing the statements with each other. Although the children were not asked to state their religious or non-religious identity, being asked to express what they thought about the world provoked discussion about who was and was not religious. Thus, while absent in the home, religion was not absent in the school, leading to the unremarked nature of children’s non-religious identities becoming marked, explicit and pronounced in daily school life.

This binary construction of the religious and the non-religious in RE occurred at all three schools. At Waterside Primary, during a Year Three RE lesson, the children were asked to think of as many festivals and ceremonies as they could and write them on post-it notes. The class teacher asked them to stick these on a large piece of paper, which she had divided with the headings ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’, and then led the class in a discussion about whether the children thought particular holidays and festivals were ‘religious’ or ‘non-religious’. There was animated debate about ‘Christmas’, with many children commenting that they were not religious but still celebrated Christmas. Although not aimed at encouraging the children to take a position as religious or non-religious, this activity nevertheless reproduced a binary relationship between religion and non-religion, prompting the children to consider where they stood in relation to this.

Some non-religious children experienced the focus on religion during RE lessons as excluding. In a Year Four lesson on prayer at Sunnybank Community Primary, children were asked to write their own prayers. Although these prayers did not have to address God, end in ‘amen’ or have any explicit religious content, a number of children were frustrated and confused at the relevance of the lesson and what they should do. Tia had her head in her hands as Rachael walked up and sat next to her and asked what was wrong. Tia shrugged her shoulders and said, ‘I don’t know what to write. I don’t get it. What’s the point? I’m not religious. I’ve never prayed’. A number of children at Tia’s table nodded sympathetically, saying they also did not know what to write.

When asked whether they provided any education about religion or worldviews, a number of parents mentioned that this did not occur in the family home, and that religion was only discussed in relation to events at school. Reflecting on her uncertainty about her children’s religious or non-religious identity, Debbie, a parent from Waterside Primary, said that school was the main way her children encountered these ideas, and that this had prompted discussion at home:

Debbie: See, that’s an interesting one, because Tim [son] has- Sarah [daughter], I think, I don’t think she kind of knows either way, or she’s not particularly- she’s only 6, I don’t that think it’s kind of starting to be apparent to her yet. Tim, I think through assemblies at school and stuff like that, he is more aware of religion, and through sort of looking at other religions in other cultures. And he does say to me things like, ‘Mum, do you believe in God?’ And I will say, ‘No, I don’t believe.’ I don’t think I should lie to him. And then he’ll say to me, ‘Well, do you think there was Jesus?’ And I’ll say, ‘Well, I think there probably was somebody, but you know, we don’t really know.’ As far as his own… He says to me he believes in God, but when I say, ‘Why do you think there’s a God?’, he doesn’t really know. I think it’s just a case of, it’s just the stuff that they have talked about at school. But I think… I wouldn’t say he was religious. I think it’s almost as a given, maybe, that there might be a god out there.

It was not, however simply the absence of religion in the family home that contributed to the transmission of non-religious identities. There were also instances of more implicit and banal expressions of non-religious socialization in some families. Harriet, the mother of Elliot, a 7-year-old boy from Sunnybank Community Primary, discussed her non-religious identity and difficulties with institutional forms of religion. At the start of all parent interviews, informants were always asked how they had responded to the religion question on the last census and what they would choose if they were given a list of nonreligious and religious classifications now:

Harriet: If I was being really serious and taking the survey serious, I’d put ‘no religion’. If it was a census I’d put ‘Jedi’ from that thing that started in the early 2000s about if enough people said Jedi they’d classify it. So, every census, I always put down ‘Jedi’, but for proper work stuff, I’d put ‘no religion’.

When asked about whether she intentionally incorporated any religious, spiritual or secular worldviews into her son’s upbringing, Harriet responded that she was not aware of doing so and could not think of any occasion when she had intentionally done so. At the end of the interview, as the interviewer was about to leave, Harriet asked if she would like to see her toilet as this might be of interest for the study. Her downstairs toilet was covered in framed pictures and paintings of religious imagery and figures within Roman Catholicism and Mormonism. On the windowsill above the toilet were a number of pieces of religious iconography, including small statues of the Virgin Mary, crucifixes, and rosary beads. When asked why she had decorated her toilet like this, Harriet laughed. She said she wasn’t really sure why, but had mentioned earlier that she was interested in these religious traditions because of her grandparents’ and ex-husband’s religiosity. When asked why she chose the toilet to hang these pictures, Harriet laughed again saying, ‘well I like to make my boyfriend uncomfortable when he goes to the toilet’. This represents a ‘banal’ form of non-religious socialization (Lee, 2015): it is the ‘unwaved flag’ (Billig, 1995), a material, unremarked-upon cultural form of non-religion. Harriet’s initial uncertainty over the meaning of her decoration of the toilet reflects this ‘banality’: these images hung in the toilet as interior decoration, and she was not intentionally conscious of their part in the implicit socialization of religion as something to be made fun of in her children’s lives.

**Choosing to Inherit: The Importance of Children’s Agency**

While we have seen the importance of both the school and family life in transmitting non-religious identities in childhood, what of children’s own role in shaping their identities, beliefs and practices? Molly and Rosie, two Year Four girls from St Peters’, discussed their religious or non-religious identities in relation to their parents and how this might change over time. Molly spoke about how although her dad was Muslim, this did not mean she would have to identify as Muslim:

Molly: If I was in Reception and you were talking about this I would have definitely said ‘I’m Muslim because my dad is.’

Interviewer: Sure, but as you got older-

Molly: I’ve realized that religion is something that you choose to be, you don’t inherit it. I mean you could inherit it but you choose to inherit it. You choose to be what you are.

Rosie: When I was younger I thought I had to be a Christian, because I went to a Christian school, but now I know I don’t really have to be anything. I can just believe what I like and I can choose. I don’t have to follow what school I go to, what people believe in. I don’t have to do that just to fit in. I can choose whatever I like. I used to think that I had to be Christian to fit in as well, otherwise everyone would not like me, but then I realized Molly likes me and she knows I’m not a religion.

Molly: I thought the same thing too.

Rosie: I have a lot of friends even though I’m not a religion and then I realized I could just believe whatever I liked.

For Molly and Rosie, choice and the ability to reflect and make your own decisions regarding your personal beliefs and identity were of central importance. Although both girls recognized the relationality of beliefs and religious identity (Day, 2009, 2011), they did not see these as dictating how they identified, and perceived personal autonomy as crucial. Louise, another Year Four girl from St Peters’ also recognized the importance of individual choice when deciding your own religious or non-religious identity, commenting on how this changed with age, noting that in early childhood, you are more likely to mirror parents’ practices, but transitioning into middle childhood allowed for greater freedom:

Louise: You know when you're young, you always seem to follow what your parents do. But when you grow up, you have more of a choice. But I've just chosen to be the same as my parents because that's what I believe. I could have chosen something else.

Although Louise had adopted the same non-religious identity as her parents, she named this decision as her own.

Craig and Steve, also Year Four pupils from St Peters’, likewise commented on the freedom their parents afforded them, noting that their parent’s religious identity did not dictate their own:

Steve: My mum believes in Christianity, I believe in pretty much nothing. We just keep on chatting about it.

Craig: Is your mum trying to get you to believe in Christianity?

Steve: Not really. She just lets me believe what I believe.

Although Steve reflected that he had choice in terms of his beliefs, he also said that he felt ‘forced’ to go to church, as this was what his parents did. Craig, Steve’s friend, reflected on how his parents’ lack of belief in God influenced his own atheism, which he saw as stronger than theirs:

Craig: I think I believe that God isn’t real stronger than my mum and dad because they don’t believe in God. That makes me not want to believe in God.

Interviewer: So they don’t believe in God?

Craig: No, my parents don’t believe in God. No.

Interviewer: They don’t. So that influences you as well?

Craig: So, that’s why I think I more strongly believe that God isn’t real, because my parents don’t believe. So, I didn’t anyway, but then because my parents don’t believe he’s real, that makes me believe more strongly that he’s not real.

Although conscious that his parents’ views shaped his own, Craig nevertheless saw his beliefs as ultimately his own. Sam, a Year Three pupil from Sunnybank Community Primary, also reflected on the importance of relational belief and the different factors that contributed to his own practice and identity.

Interviewer: I was wondering if you can tell me what you believe in? Do you believe in God for example?

Sam: I can’t say yes and I can’t say no. I don’t know if I actually do cus my mum doesn’t believe in anything but my grandad, my nan believes in evolution and then grandad believes in God so I don’t know what my beliefs are supposed to be. I weren’t christened from church. I was born in a hospital. Nothing special happened to me in a church. So, I don’t actually know what my beliefs are.

Steve, Craig and Sam were all conscious of the spaces, people and practices that shaped their religious or non-religious identities. Sam was uncertain of his beliefs, relating this to the diversity of beliefs within his own family and the lack of life cycle rituals at birth. Although this could be interpreted as Sam simply deferring to his family’s religious identity, it could also be seen as showing Sam’s acknowledgement of the various factors shaping his beliefs. Sam was not simply accepting or rejecting his parent’s beliefs, but rather seeing these in a broader context of other family relations and his not having a christening at birth. Craig, Sam and Steve all illustrate that when considering the transmission of non-religious identities, children’s sense of agency in this process is also a significant dimension of their recognition of themselves as non-religious. Therefore to conceptualize the growth of non-religion in simple terms as either the failure of religious transmission or children being socialized by their parents neglects the importance of how children internalize, respond to and construct their own non-religious beliefs and identity, both in relationship with family members and through conversations in everyday school life, especially in relation to RE.

**Conclusion**

With growing research attention to the ‘religious nones’ across a range of global contexts, understanding the rise of non-religion requires attending to *how* this rise is taking place. Children’s formation as non-religious is an important element of this process. While studies of the transmission of religious beliefs and practices have tended to locate the family as the primary vehicle of religious socialization, our study demonstrates the important role also played by schools and children themselves in the development of non-religious identities. Hervièu-Léger’s influential theory of religion as a ‘chain of memory’ (2000) argues that in modernity, this chain is being broken through a lack of religious transmission. Our findings reveal a more nuanced picture, demonstrating that not only is a lack of religious transmission occurring but that this takes place alongside and in relation to banal, implicit forms of non-religious socialization in the home together with more explicit forms of socialization occurring in schools (in RE and collective worship in particular), through which children come to articulate their non-religious beliefs and identities. While our fieldsites were chosen to represent different populations and institutional contexts, there was remarkable commonality to this interplay of factors shaping children’s formation as non-religious across each setting.

Just as non-religion is, as Woodhead argues, dissimilar to any kind of organized religion in Britain today, rejecting ‘scripture, leaders, dogma, orthodoxy, and higher authority in general’ (2017: 260), so non-religious socialization is different from processes of religious socialization. While growing up as a Muslim (Scourfield et al. 2013) or an evangelical Christian (Strhan, in press), for example, entails the child learning to situate themselves in relation to a body of teachings, practices, and institutional authority, our data suggests that non-religious socialization in children’s home lives is mediated in more subtle and unremarked forms, bound up with a relative absence of overt discussion about religion. RE lessons however make explicit for non-religious children what is implicit and unremarked upon in home life. Although children were not asked ‘are you religious’ in RE, focusing on the beliefs, practices and traditions of religious groups prompted the children to reflect on and acknowledge their own non-religious identities. For these children, their non-religiosity was relational, as they recognized the importance of other family members’ perspectives in shaping their own. At the same time, they articulated a sense that they had the freedom to choose their (non)religious identity and beliefs, demonstrating a commitment to the ideal of individual choice and freedom that is a central commitment for the non-religious more broadly[[9]](#endnote-9) (Woodhead, 2017).

 Our focus on how non-religious socialization takes place across both everyday home and school life advances on previous studies of religious transmission through demonstrating how children’s experiences in relation to both these spaces have an important bearing on the formation of non-religious identities. This approach enables insight into the different modalities of non-religious socialization and how these need to be situated in relation to each other to understand how, when, where and with whom children learn to be non-religious. While children’s perspectives have historically been marginalized within the sociology of religion (Ridgely, 2011; Strhan et al, 2017), focusing on children’s own reflections on their non-religious identities demonstrates their agency and the ways in which they reject, accept, negotiate or challenge the forms of religion and non-religion they encounter across different spaces in everyday life. At a time when the discussion of how children should (or should not) engage with religion in public spaces such as schools often provokes heated debate, with concerns often expressed about the potential religious indoctrination of children, there is currently little attention given to how children respond to and engage with the ideas of religion that are being presented to them in schools, the role this plays in shaping their religious or non-religious identities, or the processes through which they have a sense of determining their own identity and personhood in relation to religion. In a wider landscape of religious change in Britain, a country in which Christianity remains deeply culturally embedded, but which is also becoming both more non-religious and more diverse in its religious profile at the same time (Davie 2015: xii), moving beyond secularization theories in which non-religion and the secular are presented as the mere ‘absence’ of religion is an important task (Lee, 2015). Understanding what it means to be ‘non-religious’ in this context requires attention to *how* non-religious identities are formed and the significance of his. This entails exploring how spaces such as schools and other micropublics (Ho, 2011) contribute to the varieties and forms of contemporary non-religion, how these construct social distinctions in ways that enable or inhibit connections across religious difference, and how these processes come to shape the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006) in the contemporary moment.

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1. ‘No religion’ is now a majority identity in Britain defined in terms of identification as ‘non-religious’, and this changing identification away from ‘Christian’ taking place alongside declining participation in religious rituals, with more of the British population, for example, now preferring a ‘non-religious’ rather than a Christian funeral (Woodhead 2017). In terms of the relationship between ‘non-religion’ and ‘belief’, the majority of those identifying as ‘non-religious’ in Britain are sceptical about or disbelieve in the existence of God or a higher power but do not however identify as ‘atheist’ (ibid). For further discussion of definitions and measurements of non-religion, see Lee 2015 and Smith and Cragun 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. We use the terms ‘collective worship’ and ‘assemblies’ interchangeably, following their use in our fieldsites. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A broader aim of our study is to explore the range of beliefs, practices and values that children held alongside their ‘unbelief.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Along with the family, quantitative research (e.g. Voas and McAndrew 2012) has also demonstrated the significance of local geographical variation in contributing to the decline of religious belief and affiliation, and therefore our broader study examines the significance of place in shaping children’s unbelief across three contrasting geographical ‘micro-climates’ of religion/non-religion. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Key Stage 2 incudes Years 3, 4, 5 and 6. For the age ranges of these, see <https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum> (accessed 17 April 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. These were carried out in the schools and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. These were carried out in parents’ homes (or occasionally workplaces) and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. These are known as Religious and Moral Education and Religious Observances in Scottish schools. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. There may also be examples of children from ‘unbelieving’ family backgrounds who decide to adopt a religious identity, for example, when attending faith schools. However, because our sample focused on ‘unbelieving’ children, such children did not feature in our study. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)