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‘Just leave it blank’
Non-religious children and their negotiation of prayer in school

Abstract

This article examines how non-religious children experience acts of collective worship and prayer in primary school settings and analyses how they negotiate religion and their non-religious identities in these events. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork examining non-religious childhoods and collective worship in three English primary schools, the authors explore how non-religious children demonstrate their agency when confronted with particular boundaries and concepts related to religion and non-religion in school contexts. Attending to the experiences, perspectives, and practices of non-religious children adds to our understanding of the varieties of non-religion, which has to date largely focused on elite, adult populations. Focusing on non-religious children’s experiences of prayer reveals how these children did not experience tensions between praying to God and their non-religious identities and articulated their own interpretations of these practices, deepening understanding of the lived realities of non-religious cultures and identities.

Keywords

childhood, agency, secular, prayer, non-religion

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Introduction

On her first day of fieldwork at St Peter's Primary School, Shillitoe was spending the day with the Year Five class[1], who were undertaking an activity in which they had been asked to write about themselves, entitled 'Where are we from?' Jane, the class teacher, asked the children to write down on sheets of A5 paper the name of the country they had been born in, the countries their parents or grandparents had been born in, the languages they spoke and the religion they belonged to. While Jane was introducing the activity to the children, one pupil, Caleb, put up his hand and asked 'what do you do if you don't have a religion?' Jane quickly responded, 'For those who don't have a religion, don't put anything. Just leave it blank'.

Shillitoe had not met the class before and had only introduced herself to the class teacher earlier that morning. While the class were busy writing their statements, Jane came over to the back of the classroom where she was standing and asked if she could create a wall display showing where all the children were from. Jane gave her passport-sized photos of each child, a large laminated world map, some string and drawing pins and told her to link each child's photo and statement to the country of their birth with the string. For the remainder of the lesson, children either individually or in small groups came up to Shillitoe with their completed sheets. Although Jane had briefly introduced her to the class, the children only knew that her name was Rachael and that she was here to 'do a special project' with them that term. As she was attaching the sheets and pictures to the wall, she read through the forms and talked to the children about what they had written. One girl, Maisie, aged nine, handed hers over. It read: 'My name is Masie, I come from England and we speak eglish But my Grandad is from Irland so I am a quarter Irish. I don't realy have a religon but I join in with the prays at school most of the time[2]'. Maisie explained that she 'wasn't sure' if she was religious. She said that

[1] These children were aged 9-10 years old.
[2] All quotes are verbatim and in conversational English.

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she did not think her parents were religious and she did not go to church, but that she liked to join in with the prayers at school and so felt it was important to put that down. Shrugging her shoulders and smiling, Maisie said, 'I don't know. I don't think I do have a religion' before walking to the sink to get herself a cup of water.

This article explores how non-religious children experience and negotiate forms of religion and non-religion in childhood. While there has been a growing body of social research exploring forms of non-religion among teenagers and young people in recent years, very little is known about the nature and forms of children's non-religion. This emerging literature (e.g., Catto and Eccles 2013; Bengtson et al. 2013; Wallis 2015; Madge and Hemming 2016) has demonstrated the range of beliefs and practices of young people who identify as non-religious and/or 'unbelieving'. At the same time, broader research on non-religious adults has demonstrated the importance of education in the process of becoming non-religious or unbelieving (e.g., LeDrew 2013; Voas and McAndrew 2012). However, we know little about the experiences of non-religious children themselves within and beyond educational settings, or about how children encounter, construct and reconstruct particular ideas of religion and non-religion.

Contributing to the now burgeoning research literature in non-religion, this article adds to our knowledge of the nature, varieties and forms of children's non-religion through examining how non-religious children experience and engage with acts of collective worship and prayer that they encounter in the context of everyday school life. Collective worship has been a legal requirement in maintained schools in England and Wales since the 1944 Education Act. This requirement has caused decades of confusion and controversy[3] with schools required

[3] The most recent public contestation involved two parents who challenged the legal requirement of collective worship by launching a high court case against their child's school (Guardian 2019). The parents, supported by Humanists UK, claimed that children withdrawn from collective worship were not provided with a meaningful alternative and argued for a secular, prayer-free alternative for their children rather than the usual assembly which included prayers at their child's school. The school conceded and agreed to provide alternative activities for

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to performs daily acts of worship which are wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character on behalf of all the pupils in attendance (Hull 1975; Copley 1997; Cheetham 2000, 2001; Gill 2000; Clarke and Woodhead 2015, 2018; Crumper and Mawhinney 2018). Our ethnographic focus on children's experiences of collective worship provides insight into an important but previously underexplored means through which Christianity remains deeply culturally embedded within public institutions such as schools within the UK against the backdrop of the country becoming both increasingly non-religious and religiously more diverse (Davie 2015). Focusing on non-religious children's experiences and how they engage with ideas of religion, spirituality and non-religion that they encounter in the context of collective worship also opens onto wider public issues, raising the question of what it might mean for acts of collective worship to be continued in the context of growing numbers of non-religious children. In what follows, we explore the tactics (de Certeau 1984) non-religious children developed during acts of collective worship, revealing how, for example, children's experiences of prayer are highly individualized and subjective. We draw on a relational conception of non-religion (Campbell 2013; Quack 2014; Lee 2015) in order to understand the heterogeneity of children's non-religiosity and to conceptualize how children's non-religiosity is negotiated and sits in relation to religion.

Studying Non-religion and Childhood

The current gap in our understanding of non-religious childhoods reflects a broader historical marginalization of children within the study of religion. While previous research on children and religion has emerged from psychology, theology, sociology and particular subfields within religious studies, children have often been silent within these studies, appearing 'primarily as

children withdrawn from assembly, though making clear that this would not constitute an alternative assembly (BBC 2019; Guardian 2019)

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reflections of adult concerns about the present or as projections of adults' concerns for the future' (Ridgely 2011, 1). While there have been quantitative studies focused on intergenerational continuities and changes in relation to religion, as well as studies of children's religious development, the present realities of children's lives and their experiences and concerns in relation to religion have mostly not in themselves been areas of scholarly attention (Strhan et al. 2017). Across the social sciences and humanities more broadly, the historical silencing of children has been challenged by what became known as the 'new paradigm' or 'new social studies of childhood' (e.g., James and Prout 1997; James et al. 1998), which emphasizes that children should be studied in their own right, and that childhood needs to be understood as a social construction and variable of social analysis that intersects with other variables such as class, race and gender (Oswell 2013).

A small but growing body of work exploring childhood and religion is now emerging, influenced by this approach (e.g., Orsi 2005; Ridgely 2005; Scourfield et al. 2013; Hemming 2015; Strhan 2019; Shillitoe forthcoming). To date, this research has mostly focused on the experiences and perspectives of children identified as religious. Research on socialization and religion, dominated by quantitative North American studies based on largely Christian samples or surveys of teenagers, has charted the decline of religious identification and belief amongst such populations, with non-religion mostly theorized in terms of a lack (e.g., Smith and Denton 2005, see discussion in Strhan and Shillitoe 2019). The concept of intergenerational transmission (or its lack) is also often used as an explanation for secularizing processes within childhood and adolescence (Voas 2003). While providing important knowledge of wider religious landscapes, these approaches do not afford insight into the substantive nature, varieties and forms of children's non-religion. Moreover, such approaches often implicitly reinforce an image of a child as a passive being who imitates and learns certain practices through the nurturing of an unreflexive habitus. Voas and McAndrew (2012) report that

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religious affiliation drops when children reach adolescence and become old enough to complete their own affiliation on censuses. This approach, however, relies on adults' determination of their children as religious or non-religious, and further qualitative work is needed to open up understanding of what it means to be non-religious in childhood (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019).

Within the now rapidly expanding broader research literature on non-religion and secularity, a number of terms and concepts are commonly used to name the phenomena, beliefs, practices, and identities being studied, including 'secularism', 'not-religious', 'nones', 'unbelief', 'non-religious', 'godlessness', 'post-religious', 'irreligious' and 'anti religious'. However, as Lee discusses (2014, 2015), these terms often elide our understanding of 'secularity', 'secularism', and 'the secular' with these other concepts. At the same time, our usage of 'non-religious' and 'nones' risks being conceptually and methodologically muddled, with the result that research using such categories (e.g., survey questionnaires such as the UK Census), is often unable to indicate how these identifications relate to an individual's religious non-affiliation, disaffiliation or alternative form of affiliation (Day and Lee 2014). Such data cannot reveal much about the empirical realities of the non-religious and secular life more broadly, leading to a flattening of 'distinctions between religious and non-religious categories as 'positive' and 'negative' respectively' (Lee 2014, 467). In response, Lee (2015) proposes a relational approach to non-religion whereby rather than seeing religion and non-religion as oppositional, non-religion becomes a concept in which religion is centrally relevant. Rather than understanding non-religion as the absence or opposite of religion, non-religion is understood as 'any phenomena – position, perspective, or practice-that is primarily understood in relation to religion but which is not itself considered to be religious' (Lee 2015, 32). This approach encourages attention to the range of ways in which non-religion exists in relation to religion. The emphasis here is on difference and the forms of 'meaningful differentiation', which can include but is not limited to a rejection of religion itself (Lee 2015, 32), disrupting

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simplistic understandings of religion and non-religion as an oppositional binary. The growing number of studies of non-religious populations has predominantly focused on elite adult populations, largely based in certain parts of North America and Europe (Lee et al. 2017), with little attention paid to the everyday lived realities of marginalized groups such as children. Therefore, in this study we adopt a relational approach to non-religion and focus on children's lived experiences of non-religion.

Maisie's reflection during the 'All About Me' activity reveals how children construct and articulate their non-religious identities in relation to aspects of everyday school life such as acts of collective worship. Despite Jane telling the children not to write anything down if they had no religion, Maisie and other children wrote down their non-religious identities during the class activity, or at least contemplated what 'religion' or 'no religion' might mean to them. Sam, another child in Class Five also reflected on his beliefs in relation to his non-religious identity and did not simply 'leave it blank'. His statement read: 'I came from england. My parents come from poland but my dad comes from england. I speak English and I cant actually speak polish yet. I don't have a religon but I believe in some things.'

While the class teacher's approach, telling the children to 'not write anything' if they did not have a religion, treated their non-religion as an absence, this did not equate with how some children perceived their own non-religious identity: they wanted to elaborate on aspects of their practice or belief that they perceived as somehow in relation to religion. Their desire demonstrates how children experienced the limitation of insubstantial, negative classifications of non-religious identity, and they wanted to articulate their identities in relation to religion in more substantive, positive or affirming ways (Lee 2012, 2014, 2015). Maisie considered her engagement with the school prayer during collective worship to blur the distinction between the religious and non-religious and as such it made identification a little more complex. Although she was not completely sure about how to identify, Maisie felt it was important to

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write something that reflected her uncertainty and this conceptual ambiguity while affirming something substantial about her practice and identity. In what follows, we explore non-religious children's experiences of prayer in school and how they understand and negotiate such occasions. We consider how teachers attempt to reframe prayer during acts of collective worship and how children tactically reconfigure such attempts in order to resist or create their own meanings. Subsequently, we show how children subvert our conceptual categories of religion and non-religion, adding further complexity to them and revealing the importance of attending to such experiences during childhood.

The Study

Our paper draws on two periods of ethnographic data collection completed by Shillitoe. The aim of the first study, at St Peter's and Holly Oak, was to examine and foreground children's experiences of collective worship. This study was conducted between May 2015 and October 2015 with Shillitoe spending seven weeks at each school. St Peter's is a Church of England primary school[4], located in an inner-city urban area in the southwest of England. Holly Oak is a special school[5] located in an urban area of the south west. During this first study, one analytic focus was on how non-religious children experienced acts of collective worship. Building on this, the second study conducted by both authors focused on examining the nature and varieties of non-religious childhood more broadly, as well as how these relate to children's parents' perspectives and the place of religion in everyday school life. This second study included additional fieldwork with St Peter's as well as two new primary schools in contrasting 'microclimates' of religion/non-religion.

[4] A Church of England school is a government funded school with a designated religious character and may or may not have some degree of local authority control depending on its voluntary controlled, aided or academy status. Schools with a religious character may entail faith impacting pupil admissions, staff recruitment, religious education and broader school ethos and values (See Hemming 2015; Long and Danechi 2019 for more information)

[5] A special school is a school that caters for children with special education needs or disability.

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In this second study, Shillitoe spent between six and seven weeks with each school between October 2017 and July 2018. Our first school, St Peter's, which was also a field site for Shillitoe's first study, was selected because of its high proportion of religious 'nones' and diverse non-religious and religious population. For this second study, other primary schools in contrasting 'microclimates' of religion/non-religion (Voas and McAndrew 2012) were chosen. In this article, we draw on fieldwork conducted during this study at Sunnybank Community Primary School, a community school[6] located 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 used a mix of qualitative methods, including participant observation, to allow children's voices to be heard within their own social context (James and Prout 1997; Corsaro 2005). Adopting a child-centred ethnographic approach which champions the experience of children enabled us to understand children's daily routines, rhythms and embodied practices in everyday school life. Shillitoe acted as a teaching assistant during her time at each school and mainly worked with children in Key Stage Two (children aged 7-11 years old), observing daily school life, particularly Religious Education (RE)[7], collective worship/assemblies and contemplative practices (e.g., circle time, reflection time, mindfulness and meditative practices). During her first study, Shillitoe carried out paired interviews with twelve to twenty-seven children per school (from across Key Stage 2; n=39). Children in this first study were asked for their voluntary participation and other than attending collective worship, no other sampling criteria was used as this was the focus of the study rather children's beliefs or religious/non-religious identity. During the second study, Shillitoe conducted thirty to forty

[6] A state funded school, controlled by the local authority.
[7] All state funded schools in England and Wales are required to teach Religious Education as part of their curriculum. The curriculum is determined at a local level by a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE).

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paired interviews with children per school (from across Key Stage 2; n=115). Following the approach of Day (2009) and other studies that have demonstrated the limitations of focusing on religious or non-religious categories of identification (Day and Lee 2014; Lee 2015), we were mindful of avoiding the adult-centric nature of religious and non-religious categories (Shillitoe 2018). We therefore sampled children using a worksheet activity in which we asked them about their un/belief in God. During both periods of fieldwork, Shillitoe had spent a minimum of two weeks in each fieldsite in order to spend time with the children and to inform them of the study and answer any questions they had. Child-friendly presentations about the research were also delivered to each class in addition to children-friendly information sheets[8].

During the paired interviews with children, Shillitoe did not use terms such as 'atheism', 'non-religion' or 'unbelief' unless the children used them themselves, which they rarely did. As the focus of the first study was on children's experience of collective worship, these interviews were loosely structured around this and how children experienced and encountered religion through collective worship in their school. Questions about what happened, likes and dislikes were asked as well as more situational questions where children were asked to pretend they had to describe collective worship to an alien or someone new to school. This latter question helped encourage a level of description and detail that can often be missed during interviews when the children assume a shared level of knowledge with the interviewer. Occasionally, these interviews developed into walking interviews when children did not feel comfortable sitting down for long periods of time. This allowed the children to describe the material and spatial dimensions of collective worship as they walked round the

[8] Ethical approval was granted for both studies and the researchers followed the Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association, the Economic and Social Research Council, the Social Research Association, the British Sociological Association and the National Children's Bureau Guidelines for Research with children and young people. All participants were fully briefed on the study and voluntary consent was asked for and obtained from all schools and participating teachers, parents and children involved in the study

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school gymnasium and cafeteria where worship was normally conducted. Twenty-one teachers across St Peter's and Holy Oak were also interviewed about collective worship in school as well as religion and spirituality more broadly. Interviews during the second study primarily focused on exploring the idea of what it means to be 'not religious', as well as examining the various beliefs and values the children held. Additionally, with the second study, semi-structured interviews with parents of fifteen children per school (n=45) were also conducted. These parents were sampled from the children interviewed in each school and examined parental religiosity or non-religiousity as well as their beliefs, values, and worldviews, and how they saw these in relation to their children's upbringing. Interviews with four teachers per school (n=12) were also conducted to explore how they understood the place of religion in school.

Prayer at St Peter's

Religious observances have been a feature of school life prior to the 1944 Education Act (Cruickshank 1963), with prayer a common feature of acts of collective worship (Collins-Mayo 2008). Hull (1975) notes that religious observances were varied and often mixed depending on the type of school, but that in Board and County schools, would have typically consisted of a prayer, a Bible reading, hymns and religious instruction. Prayer has become intricately bound up with collective worship, though its shape, content and usage varied dramatically. Recent studies on prayer demonstrate how different groups, individuals – including the non-religious – and social and cultural contexts shape and inform the practice of prayer (Giordan and Woodhead 2015). Research on prayer has tended to focus on prayer as a ritual or form of piety rather than the perspectives and opinions of the social actors who participate in such acts (Cornelio 2015), with recent research generating insights into the embodied and material dimensions of prayer (Luehrmann 2013; Bielo 2014), prayer's spatial dynamics (Bender 2014),

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prayer in relation to nones (Drescher 2013), and the importance of agency and subjective dimensions of prayer and the broader social worlds they take place in (Bandak 2017a).

At St Peter's, the children were invited to pray during assemblies and these prayers varied from day to day. They were usually prayers of thanks, addressed God, and ended with 'Amen.' The teachers leading the assembly always explicitly reminded children that it was their choice whether they wanted to join in or not. They explained that this was a 'time to pray, to put your hands together, talk to God, your God, or a time to think'. Some staff leading collective worship occasionally added, 'bow your heads, close your eyes and put your hands together' before reading the day's prayer. Prayers always took place towards the end of collective worship and were usually read by a teacher. Occasionally, there were class prayers in which a small group of four of five children were selected to write and read a prayer to the rest of the school. During an interview, Carol, the head teacher, discussed prayer at St Peter's and how prayer was being presented to the children. Carol explained how the idea of 'choice' was a significant part of collective worship, ensuring its inclusivity for all pupils. She stated:

> I'm just saying 'Dear God'. I'm not saying 'My God', 'Your God' or 'Our God', it's just 'Dear God' and actually, you talk to who you want to. You know, you pray to whatever being you want to. Or don't pray (...) what I think is really special about our school is that no one leaves collective worship. It is really inclusive.'

Amy, the teacher with overall responsibility for coordinating collective worship at St Peter's, spoke about the prayers read during collective worship and said, 'we're probably doing it in a religious way but at the same time we're doing it in however you want take it like personally'. Amy considered moments of prayer and reflection to be inclusive by allowing the options for children to reflect rather than pray. Although she acknowledged that these acts were

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done in a 'religious way', she reflected that non-religious children were given suggestions of the different ways they might participate during these moments of prayer and reflection and were provided with space to create their own meanings. Carol and other staff did not specify which God children were to pray to and encouraged an individualized experience by suggesting that children could speak to 'their God' or sit and reflect on the words spoken. Although attempting to be inclusive and suitable for children of all faiths and none, as Amy reflected, these prayers were nevertheless performed in a 'religious way' through both the language used and the use of Christian embodied techniques of prayer, with Christianity here assuming the status of 'default religion' (Hemming 2011, Collins-Mayo 2008). However, the experience of prayer at St Peter's still encouraged an individualized and subjective experience amongst some children, which can be interpreted as bound up with wider processes of individualization (Giddens 1991, 1998; Beck 2010). Yet we see at St Peter's the emphasis on the individual inflected with a particular sense of liberal individualism, with the children free to participate in prayer as they liked, and a sense that everyone should be afforded this right (Madge et al. 2014; Hemming 2015, 2017).

Many of the children articulated this sense of their own individual authority when it came to participating in prayer during collective worship and they did not see any conflict between having no religion while at the same time praying to God. Luke and Oliver, two boys from Year Five spoke about their experiences of prayer and when asked what they think about during prayer time responded:

> Oliver: It sort of gives you a time to think and a time to say your own prayer in your head, because you know if you have someone that's gone up to heaven or something like that then you can sort of prayer to them. Yeah cus my grandma she died a few years

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ago and I sort of, it gives me a chance to prayer to her and hope that she's all right up there.

Luke: It just feels like magical cus you can actually speak to them during that time so…

Oliver: Yes, so it feels like a really precious part of your day.

Before expressing their thoughts on prayer, Luke had described himself as 'non-religious' and Oliver as a 'sort of Christian'. Oliver was 'a sort of Christian' as he believed this was how his family identified but they did not regularly go to church, demonstrating how his religious identification was bound up in kinship networks (Day 2009). However, he still demonstrated uncertainty over those this category and Oliver was toying with the idea of 'what counted' as being Christian. He therefore needed to clarify that he was 'sort of' Christian to emphasize the uncertainty of his identity. Luke, however, was quite clear that he was not religious and did not believe in God. Oliver and Luke both participated in prayer and reflected on this moment as being 'precious' and 'magical'. It took on an almost supernatural quality as both boys could speak to deceased relatives. As Luke described, 'you can actually speak to them' and for Oliver it was an opportunity to pray for his Grandma's wellbeing in the afterlife. However, for neither boy did their supernatural beliefs and practices conflict with a non-religious identity. We can observe that during collective worship, children did not experience prayer in terms of a rejection of religion, but as in relation to religion. Luke's experience was not characterized by 'irreligion', the rejection and more hostile position towards religion (Campbell 2013), but rather a 'magical' time in which he could consider existential questions and important matters in his life.

Luke went on to speak about how his baby sister had died some years ago, and said that prayer was an opportunity to talk with her and maintain a relationship with her. Many non-religious children across all three field sites spoke of prayer as a time to speak to relatives,

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including those who had passed away or to pets, to sit and reflect on issues affecting them or their friends and family, or as a time to speak to God. The children experienced prayer as highly relational and their constructions of belief were rooted in the everyday worlds they inhabited and the people they knew and encountered (Day 2009, 2011).

In his research on prayer, Stringer's (2015) participants used informal and everyday language when engaging in prayer and constructed a relationship with the 'other' that they experienced primarily in terms of intimacy rather than transcendence. The children at our fieldsites likewise exercised their own authority in reconstructing teachers' 'official' prayers so that they focused on intimate relationships with deceased relatives and pets. Children often spoke of this need to recreate their own meanings for such prayers in order for them to reflect and resonate with their own belief systems. Luke's experience challenges the idea that belief in spirits is intrinsically linked to religious beliefs, and reveals how practices of prayer may elude religious-secular binaries. This demonstrates how 'thinking about 'spirituality' and 'spirits' both exposes the limitations of this binary conceptualization and places emphasis on the ways that these terms work dynamically as part of processes of valuation' (Bender and Taves 2012, 3). Several children said that they did nothing during prayers. However, they did not see their lack of active participation as a form of non-compliance with the schools' strategies. Equally, children who prayed to deceased relatives or pets considered such acts as complicit with the wider social practice that was being enacted.

Luke's and Oliver's reflections also reveal how non-religious children can use prayer as a coping mechanism in relation to experiences of loss or bereavement. Their prayers might be interpreted as a form of talking therapy (Collins 2015), enabling them to continue relationships with loved ones who had passed away and ensure that they were 'all right' wherever they were. Thus, we see how this therapeutic dimension of prayer was available not

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only to the religious but also to many non-religious children in the context of collective worship.

However, not all children viewed prayer as inclusive and some non-religious children did not feel able to participate in this aspect of collective worship. Callum and Toby discussed how they understood collective worship and reflected on the use and salience of prayer during such times:

> Callum: I like don't do the prayers. I just like sit there. Cus I don't believe in God. I don't pray or anything. I'm just a boring kid
>
> [Interviewer]: So what do you do during that prayer time?
>
> Callum: I just sit there and just, everybody else has their heads down like with their hands in front and I'm like [pulls a face] and I just sit there like that [pulls bored expression with head in hands]
>
> [Interviewer]: and why do you do that?
>
> Callum: cus I don't get any of it. The only assembly that I like is ... I don't like any of them; no I don't like any of them, unless I get a certificate.

For Callum moments of prayer were intrinsically linked to belief in God and therefore participation would have been contradictory for him. Callum's experience would sit somewhere between 'irreligion' and 'indifference to religion'. Following Campbell (2013), the term 'irreligion' suggests 'a rejection of religion, which could take the form of a disengagement, indifference or a hostile rejection. 'Indifference' on the other hand suggests a position somewhere 'between the state of being without a religion and of rejecting religion' and 'implies a knowledge of the religious other as well as a dismissive stance towards that other' (Lee 2015, 29). Callum's reflections traverse these two categories. Although he rejects

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prayer, he does not do this in a hostile way: the act is meaningless for Callum and he is dismissive of the practice.

Prayer and Poems at Holly Oak

One of the fieldsites was a special school located in a predominately working-class urban area of the south west of England. Although this was a school without a religious character, the school had an official school prayer, which was read during each act of collective worship. However, the staff senior leadership team saw this as problematic, since many pupils either did not identify with a religion or were not Christians. They therefore removed any references to 'God', 'Amen', and changed its name from the 'school prayer' to the 'school poem' in order to be more inclusive. Having previously addressed God, given thanks for education, learning and friends and closing in 'Amen', the 'school poem' now read:

> Thank-you for today
> For working hard and learning well
> Thank-you for friends, fun, for everyone
> Thank-you for today

This renaming of the school prayer resonates with the assumption that the 'public sphere is a secular sphere' with the secular sphere being somehow a 'neutral sphere' (Dinham and Francis 2016, 5). However, despite this rebranding, the terms 'school prayer' and 'school poem' were both still used throughout the school, with some staff and children using them interchangeably and others preferring not use the term 'prayer'. Alex, one of the HLTAs (Higher Learning Teaching Assistants) explained that 'well it's not to do with God, it's not religious and so it's not a prayer'. However, many of the staff and children still used the term prayer. Tina, the RE

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coordinator whose responsibilities also included collective worship, explained that she had heard both terms used in school.

> Yeah, it used to be something like, 'thank you for today'... it was something like, 'thank you for today God, for working hard', or something like that. I know there was 'God' in there and at the end you say 'Amen'. But because we've got children of different faiths in the school, we just took that out, so it was inclusive...basically, I don't think they had an 'appropriate' prayer, so they came up with the poem, so then it was inclusive and then they were talking about puttin in the word 'God' or 'Amen' at the end but then they said because we have children of different faiths here, it wouldn't be inclusive, so that was taken out, so that everyone can say the same prayer or poem

Tina reflected on how tensions and uncertainties over prayer in assemblies and the use of the term 'prayer' itself resulted in teachers attempting to avoid it altogether. The effort on the part of some staff to change the school prayer into the school poem is revealing of the anxieties teachers have over whether assemblies can be accessible and inclusive for all pupils while including prayer. From this perspective, it would appear that the diverse nature of the school had a secularizing effect. The reference to God and inclusion of 'Amen' in the prayer was seen as at odds with the plural and diverse nature of the school and maintaining this 'sacred canopy' became untenable (Berger 1969).

The way teachers dealt with the legal requirement of collective worship reveals how boundaries between the religious and the secular are contested within everyday school life. This official boundary established by the senior leadership team reflected the anxieties felt by adults in relation to the place of religion in schools. However, such secularizing attempts were

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continuously disrupted by both children and staff at Holly Oak. Tina continued to explain the contradictory nature of this approach to the school poem.

> Basically, there's no consistent thing because people are scared. So, when it started, they said it's our school poem and then someone else said prayer and I said is it a prayer or a poem and basically it depends who's asking, do you know what I mean? So, if a non-religious parent came in we would say it's our poem, if Ofsted came in, we would say it's our prayer... and so the staff will say prayer or poem cus at the end of the day it's fear.

Tina's words reveal not only the difficulty of maintaining a shared 'sacred canopy' and how prayer is negotiated and rebranded in school as a result, but also comments on how such negotiations emerge out of anxieties or fear adults have over the category of religion. In discussing how the term 'prayer' would be used for Ofsted, the school inspectorate, but not for a non-religious parent, Tina demonstrated how the school attempted to uphold different boundaries of religion and non-religion at any one time. Aware that not all parents would be at ease with the legal requirement of collective worship, the school adjusted their language in order not to offend the non-religious.

Prayers at Sunnybank

Children at Sunnybank Community Primary employed tactics of recrafting prayers in order to negotiate their religious elements. Sunnybank Primary School is a community school situated in a rural/suburban working-class area of north of England. Although the local borough is overall mixed in terms of race or ethnicity, it is starkly spatially divided, meaning that the majority of the pupils in attendance at Sunnybank are white British. Despite not having any

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religious character or affiliation, religion – specifically Christianity - permeated school life in a number of ways. The school had good links with the local church, Christianity featured prominently in Religious Education lessons, children had weekly hymn practice (although no religious songs were sung during the period of data collection), there were displays and materials around the school related to Christianity, and most assemblies ended in a prayer which addressed God and concluded with 'Amen'. Unlike St Peter's, children at Sunnybank were not given an option as to how to participate and were simply informed, 'right now we will pray. Heads down, eyes closed and hands together… Dear God'. During an interview, Frank and Carl, Year Five pupils, were asked about their experience of prayer in assemblies:

> [Interviewer]: I've noticed in assembly you sometimes have time to pray. Can you tell me what you think about that and what you do during that?
>
> Frank: It's not to do with beliefs. Well, it is, it's like a shortened Christian belief. It's like a shortened Christian prayer. You just pray for what would be good for school. For example, because of how kids treat each other, not as you were saying before, the prayer would be about to do something. Or it could be to respect other people.
>
> [Interviewer]: So, it's more about the school?
>
> Frank: It's more about the school and how to behave properly. It's nothing to do with belief. Even though you say, "Dear God," and, "Amen."
>
> [Interviewer]: What do you do during them? Do you take part in it? The prayer?
>
> Carl: All we have to do is put our hands together and just at the end when Miss Hunter says, "Amen," you just go, "Amen." So, pretty much you're just listening to teachers.
>
> Frank: Some people in my class just sit up and are sat like that, watching. I just take part in it just because-
>
> Carl: Because you don't want to get in trouble.

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Frank: I don't want to get in trouble.

Carl: Yes, most people do that.

Both Carl and Frank reflected on the idea that vocalizing 'Dear God' and 'Amen' did not result or mean that you believed in God. Partly, participating in prayer was connected to school life, thinking about good behaviour and focusing on how to treat and act with others. In this way, prayer, for Frank and Carl, did not have any religious sentiment or religious belief invested in it. But we also see the boys' consciousness of the disciplinary power of teachers surveilling pupils' participation in prayers, and their reflection that most children take part in the prayer due to a sense of obligation or fear of getting in to trouble. The children's experiences of prayer in this instance resonates with thinking on how prayer can be used as a disciplinary technique to cultivate particular ethical subjectivities. Bandak discusses the anthropology of Islam and particularly the scholarship from Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2006) to examine how prayer becomes a method of training the religious self through the 'repetitive ordering of life' (2017a, 4). In this sense we can see how schools use prayer and more broadly, assemblies themselves as a 'repetitive ordering of life' and a way to instil, cultivate and perform values upheld by the school (Bandak 2017a, 2017b; Shillitoe forthcoming).

Discussion: Children's agency

When children express beliefs and practices that do not cohere with traditional or elite understandings of religion, these are often dismissed as ill-formed or lacking in maturity. Smith and Denton (2005)'s research on young people found that many of their teenage informants were unable to talk about their religious beliefs, practices and traditions and although 'impressively articulate' in other areas of their lives, 'the vast majority simply could not express themselves on matters of God, faith, religion, or spiritual life'. This, Smith and Denton argue,

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was a result of young people not being 'effectively educated' or having the opportunities to talk about their faith (2005, 33). However, treating young people's views in this way can result in their expressions of religion or spirituality being diminished in terms of their authenticity or relevance. As these teenagers' understandings and practices do not cohere with Smith and Denton's (adult) perception of what religious languages and knowledge should be, they conclude that this indicates teens' inadequate socialization within their respective religious traditions. They state that 'the net result, in any case, is that most religious teenagers' opinions and views – one can hardly call them worldviews – are vague, limited, and often quite at variance with the *actual* teachings of their own religion' (Smith and Denton 2005, 134) (italics our emphasis). Smith and Denton consider that their findings should not be taken to suggest that American youth are 'dumb' or 'deplorable' but that 'understanding and embracing the right religious faith and belief according to their tradition does not appear to be a priority in the lives of most US adolescence' (2005, 137).

Rather than dismissing their views in this way, what would it mean to take children's perspectives on religion and non-religion seriously as these are lived and articulated, rather than framing these as inadequate when measured by particular constructions of 'actual' or 'right' understandings of religion? To understand the realities of religion and non-religion in society means understanding children's experiences of these categories. Not being attentive to these 'generational blind spots' (Shillitoe forthcoming) and ignoring children's perspectives in favour of adult concerns, places age-based boundaries on our social analyses and ultimately skews our perspectives of our social worlds (Alderson 2016). Children and young people's articulations may not necessarily cohere with what is written in text books or spoken from the seat of religious authority, but this does not mean it is any less an expression of the social reality of religion. Rather attending to children's lived negotiations of religion, non-religion and spirituality invites us to consider how the boundaries within which 'the religious' and 'the non-

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religious' or 'the secular' are often demarcated by those in positions of authority are not experienced in the same way by children, whose understandings challenged these reified differences. Linda Woodhead argues:

> The idea of 'religious traditions' or 'world religions' as highly differentiated from one another, separated by clear boundaries, teachings and practices – and therefore prone to problems of encounter – is one which is most often defended by religious and political elites who have interests in preserving religio-political differences. By contrast, the everyday realities of religion lived by ordinary people are often much more diverse, mixed, and 'confused' – and hence less subject to 'problems' of encounter.
>
> (Woodhead 2014, 3)

Children's experiences of and expressions of religion and non-religion likewise invite us to consider how people live in ways that do not necessarily seek to amplify or demarcate differences between religion and non-religion, and to consider these 'diverse, mixed and "confused"' expressions as real experiences of lived religion.

It is likewise important to take non-religious children's experiences of collective worship seriously as examples of how particular forms of religion (and non-religion) are lived and negotiated in the everyday. Children at each of the schools we studied had different experiences and understandings of prayer and developed their own tactics of how to participate in such moments and create their own sense of coherence. Whether this was communicating with deceased relatives or pets or developing a personal relationship with God and making sense of complicated words used in prayers, children participated in prayer in their own way. Excluding children's experiences impoverishes our understanding of both religion and non-religion in society. The reflections of children at St Peter's and Sunnybank demonstrate the

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diverse ways non-religious children perceive and experience prayer during collective worship and how religion and non-religion are mediated through this act. Some children were indifferent or actively rejected such moments, whereas others created their own moments of spirituality. This not only reveals the complexity of non-religious children's experiences of prayer but also reveals the agency of children and their meaning-making.

The 'new paradigm' within childhood studies foregrounded children's agency and presented childhood as a social construction which encourages us to look at children's lived experiences and resist basing our analyses on our adult-centric assumptions (James and Prout 1997; James, Jenks and Prout 1998). This turn towards child-centred theoretical frameworks is also bound up with ideational changes shaping the broader religious and spiritual landscape in Western societies. Heelas and Woodhead et al. observe that the wider subjective turn in society which resulted in the emergence of new spiritualities also accompanied a wider cultural shift as we see 'child-centred' or 'learner-centred' turns in education, 'consumer-centred' in purchasing culture and 'patient-centred' in health care (2005, 5). However, in taking children's agency seriously in the study of religion, we need to consider the different forms that children's agency takes (Strhan 2019), and the ways in which the formation of children as agents is morally, spatially, temporally and materially complex (Oswell 2013), and takes on different modalities in relation to religion.

In public debates surrounding collective worship, recommendations have been made for replacing such acts with moments of reflection or 'collective spirituality' (Hull 1995; Cheetham 2004; Clarke and Woodhead 2015). Spirituality is here seen as a way to foster inclusivity, promote children's agency and encourage individual reflection (Cheetham 2004; Hay and Nye 2006), while religion can often be bound up with fears of indoctrination and divisiveness, implicitly predicated on an idea of the child as passive and vulnerable (Cheetham 2004; Copley 2005). However, while children are influenced by the social structures around

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them, they should also be acknowledged as actors in relation to religion in their own right (Hemming 2017). Research by Hemming and Madge exploring young people's engagements with religion (2011) demonstrates how young people create their own meanings and values in relation to particular rituals and acts. Hemming argues that 'recognising children as active agents opens up the possibility that pupils may resist or negotiate religious values and practices promoted and enacted in schools, through subtle or less subtle means' (2017, 4).

Seeking to deepen our understanding of the complexities of the ways in which children have agency, Oswell argues that 'it makes little sense to frame children's agency in terms of a simple binary, having or not having agency, capacity or power' (2013, 269). Oswell suggests that we need to consider agency in relation to the hierarchies under which children are placed and moves beyond more simplistic dichotomies towards instead understanding agency as 'relational'. Through challenging 'the myth of the individual child' we can observe how children always exist in a network of relations to human and non-human objects and it is within such relations that their agency is shaped in particular ways (2013, 263). Oswell (2013) draws attention to how one way of approaching children's agency is in relation to de Certeau's (1984) thinking on 'tactics' and 'strategies'. Strategies are the actions of institutions or those in power, whereas tactics are the operations of those who do not have such power and are therefore used as a way to resist or reconfigure the broader system of authority under which they are placed. Oswell (2013) builds on this and develops the notion of 'tactical interstitial agency' which draws our attention to how agency is enacted by those who are not in positions of authority and power and do not have the same access to resources to those that are (2013, 59). For example, at St Peter's collective worship was scheduled before the first playtime of the day. As a result, children would often come with their coats and toys ready for playtime. School staff saw this as problematic, as children would often play with the toys during worship. In order to avoid this, the teachers would ask the children to leave any toys on the bench by the door to the hall

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before taking their seat on the floor. This would occasionally frustrate some children and Shillitoe would observe with great interest the lengths children would go to resist such strategies and sneak their contraband into worship. Sliding Pokémon cards up their sleeves, hiding conkers in cardigan pockets and then discreetly getting these out once worship had commenced. At the end of one collective worship, Shillitoe asked Jenny, aged 9, why she took her cards into collective worship. She told her she found collective worship 'boring' and it was more useful for her to spend this time organizing her Pokémon cards ready for when trading would commence at playtime. Here children's agency was not only implicated by the adults around them but also by non-human actors. The presence of these objects and the strategies developed by the staff to stop them being used during worship shows the intricate interrelations of human and non-human actors in which children are located and how their agency is shaped by these networks.

Two other children from St Peter's, Chris and Sam, aged 8, discussed how they negotiated moments of prayer during worship and how they would reword parts as an act of resistance.

[Interviewer]: You have to write prayers for assembly?

Chris: Once, I wrote 'Dear Bob'.

[Interviewer]: Dear Bob?

Sam: I spelt 'God' wrong on purpose once in one of my prayers.

[Interviewer]: You spelt God- on purpose?

Sam: Yes. I made my G look like a J.

[Interviewer]: So, Jod?

Sam: Yes. (Laughter) Then I think the teacher thought it was just a spelling mistake.

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…

Chris: I wrote 'Dear Bob' on purpose.

[Interviewer]: Dear Bob?

…

Sam: And then you just write 'Goodbye' at the end, not 'Amen'.

[Interviewer]: So, you write 'Goodbye' and not 'Amen' at the end?

Chris: "Goodbye."

Sam: In my prayers, I just don't put 'Amen'. I don't even do 'Dear God'.

Chris: No, yes. 'Dear God, whatever, whatever, whatever. Shut up'.

These actions of Chris and Sam cannot be seen in terms of a simple binary of either having or not having agency. While their actions were limited, at the same time they also identified ways in which they could subvert the wider power structures in which they were placed. We can observe how Chris' and Sam's agency is therefore shaped by the networks of relations within which they are located and how they creatively work within them. The children are therefore neither completely with nor without agency. Their agency is defined through a 'logic of the hybrid' and the 'borderland condition' within which they are placed (Honwana 2005, 50 as cited in Oswell 2013, 59)

> Tactical interstitial agency, then, has a more creative, experimental relation to structures and recourses to hand. Children and young people, who so often are denied access to resources and to the means of accumulation resources, find strength through their creative bricolage, through their makeshift mash-ups and their making do.
>
> (Oswell 2013, 59).

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Mapping this 'generational division' onto children's agency allows us to observe the actions of children in light of the 'borderland conditions' within which they are placed (Honwana 2005, 50 as cited in Oswell 2013, 59). This approach to children's agency relates to feminist critiques of dominant notions of agency. Discussing the complexities of women's agency in relation to a women's piety movement in the Islamic revival in Cairo, Saba Mahmood (2005), for example, highlights how agency is often constructed in very narrow terms and is typically understood as a means to exercise resistance and subvert the dominant power structures at work. Drawing on the work of Butler (1990) and other feminist literature, Mahmood (2001, 2005) suggests that as our understanding of agency only pays attention to acts of resistance or non-compliance, we deny the existence of women as compliant and docile agents. In developing a more nuanced account of agency which is not confined to liberal assumptions of resistance and non-compliance, Mahmood (2005) deploys the notion of the 'docile agent'. The docile agent demonstrates how agency can also be compliant, accepting of wider social structures and prevailing cultural norms and hierarchies.

This idea of 'docile agency' is helpful to consider how children negotiated and reconstructed moments of prayer in collective worship. Many of the children were happy to participate in prayer and repeat the words and actions of adults. However, this should not be confused with these children having a lack of agency or autonomy. Although the children complied with adult's strategies, they nevertheless created their own meanings and individual experiences during such acts. For example, Callum was quite clear in his refusal to participate in prayer as he 'didn't get it'. Other non-religious children did participate in prayer but reconstructed such moments in order to create a sense of coherence with their own worldviews and beliefs. Initially, when Callum spoke of his experience during prayer, Shillitoe noted in her fieldwork journal 'Callum – non-compliant/resistance in prayer'. It was only a few weeks later when she was talking with Callum on the way down to lunch, that she realized she had

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misunderstood this refusal to participate in prayer. She said to Callum, 'So yes, you have to either pray or think about…' to which Callum quickly interrupted, 'No you don't. You don't have to do anything. It's up to you.' While on the first encounter, she assumed that Callum's 'irreligious' or 'indifferent' position implied resistance, his own later explanation suggests that his refusal to participate was actually a form of compliance rather than noncompliance. Callum did not see refusing to pray as at odds with the teacher's expectations. Children's agency in relation to religion can be compliant with adult-determined activities and it can also be resistant. Understanding the different forms that children's agency takes is essential to understanding both how they experience acts of collective worship and how they redraw the boundaries between concepts such as religion and non-religion.

Conclusion

Understanding the lived realities of both religion and non-religion and the relation between the two requires attending to the experiences of children, an often previously marginalized group in the study of religion, as they negotiate these categories in contexts such as everyday school life. While the concept of 'religion' has come under criticism for its Protestant Christian, Eurocentric, colonial biases, the binary opposition of religion and the secular (with 'the secular' here often signifying the 'non-religious') has also come under increasing scrutiny as we observe phenomena and practices which fall outside this spectrum and disrupt our preconceived ideas of what counts as religious (Bender and Taves 2012). With specific reference to prayer, Woodhead questions how to deal with practices which sit outside our definitions, reflecting that 'it is possible to stick with the established definition and exclude these from consideration as prayer, and there would be gains – such as clarity and comparability –in doing so. But there would also be a loss' (2015, 214). Prayer at the different schools we studied was diverse and fluid. Conversations with informants demonstrated how prayer in

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collective worship sometimes evaded what could be easily categorized as religious and revealed how both adults and children managed and rethought the categories of religion and non-religion during such acts. The children's experiences of prayer in these studies and more broadly, the inclusion of prayer in everyday school life, contributes to the growing scholarship exploring the 'social life of prayer' (Bandak 2017a, 2017b). Non-religious children's experiences of prayer as a communicative tool and its use by teachers to order schools as social and moral spaces demonstrate the different purposes prayer serves and how it moves between and beyond religious and non-religious boundaries.

The reflections from the children at these fieldsites demonstrate how their everyday engagements with religion and non-religion involved nuanced constructions and reconstructions. Consequently, when considering religious socialization, or non-religious socialization, it is important to consider the different spaces, places and agents that contribute to this, including the agency of children themselves (Kwaku Golo et al. 2019; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019). Specifically, when considering the rise of non-religion, it is crucial to pay attention to the everyday and often mundane encounters with religion as experiences that can shape and impact the socialization of non-religious children (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019; Dahl et al. 2019). Given that schools often become a particular site of contestation in relation to the place of religion in public life, we need to ensure that children's voices and experiences of religion and non-religion are heard in relation to these debates. As a growing number of scholars are arguing[9], we need to reposition the child as a significant focus within the study of religion and view them as social actors in their own right, with the ability to create meaning from the various networks and encounters they have. As we have seen throughout this article, some children found the category of religion problematic and desired to create a sense of

[9] See, for example, Ridgely (2012); Scourfield et al (2013); Hemming (2015); Strhan et al. (2017); Strhan (2019); Shillitoe (forthcoming).

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coherence between their own experiences and the concepts of religion and non-religion which were being presented to them. Some children tactically reconstructed certain acts in order to create a genuine sense of meaning from them, whereas others rejected them. It is clear that for some children, such as Maisie and Oliver, neither the term 'religious' nor 'non-religious' sufficed to express their own sense of identity.

Voas (2009) also found this ambiguity when trying to explain the fall in religiosity in Europe coupled with the prevalence of Christian belief, practice and self-identification. In trying to explain populations who are neither regular churchgoers nor consciously non-religious, Voas uses the term 'fuzzy fidelity' or fuzzy religiosity in order to convey the 'casual loyalty' towards certain traditions alongside the gradual decline in overall religiosity (2009, 155). While this concept may be useful to draw attention to this group who fall in between or outside of religion and non-religion, for the children in this study, although on the surface there appears uncertainty, ambiguity and indifference, closer attention also allows us to observe their senses of certainty, clarity and coherence. Attending to children's micropractices and listening to their thoughts and perspectives, we can find a great deal of agency and reflection where children tactically negotiate and reconstruct events such as prayer in order to make them personally meaningful. Prayer for children is religiously and non-religiously diverse and our analytic categories should reflect this heterogeneity, taking account of how children engage with these categories.

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