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Becoming Humanist: Worldview Formation and the Emergence of Atheist Britain

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It is widely accepted that the growth of "non-religious" identification and "non-belief" in God(s) in many societies is linked to changing religious socialization. However, existing research mapping these intergenerational changes has largely focused on religious decline or the loss of belief—"push" factors—rather than exploring the distinctive non-religious forms of life into which children are growing up, which may operate as "pull" factors. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted with children, their parents, and teachers in England, we demonstrate how children come to inhabit a "humanist condition" through socialization processes in which "pull" factors toward humanism play a significant role and even shape the nature of "push" factors. The significance of new worldviews also helps explain how participants combine humanism with diverse religious and non-religious beliefs and practices. We argue that socialization processes at home and at school are interwoven and can be hard to distinguish in practice.

Key words: humanist; worldviews; atheist; non-religion; socialization; childhood.

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Britain is, for the first time, becoming an atheist society (Lee 2023).[1] The sustained rise of those identifying as "non-religious" in Britain, as in many other countries where Christianity has been the cultural default (Day and Lee 2014; Lee 2015; Woodhead 2016, 2017), has been accompanied by declining belief in God(s) (Voas and Bruce 2019; Lee 2023). These growing populations are youthful, especially in contrast with Christians who are more likely to be older, and therefore look likely to increase further over the coming years, as they have children and pass their non-religion and non-belief to future generations (Voas and Bruce 2019; Woodhead 2016, 2017). Alongside this, Britain is becoming increasingly religiously diverse, with the fastest growing forms of religion associated with minority groups who, like the non-religious, are relatively youthful (Davie 2015; Woodhead 2017). As "no religion" replaces Christianity as "the new normal" in this changing landscape (Woodhead 2017), only around half the population now express "some kind of belief in some kind of God" (Voas and Bruce 2019: 27; Lee 2023;). We are, it is suggested, entering Britain's first atheist age (Lee 2023).

It is widely accepted that this rise of non-belief in God(s) and decline in religious identification is a generational effect. Individuals are, broadly speaking, not losing religion and belief in adult life; rather, each new generation is less religious than the one before (Crockett and Voas 2006; Gärtner and Hennig 2022; Stolz et al. 2023; Woodhead 2017). Thus, religious decline and the growth in non-religious identification and non-believing "seems to be driven by what happens to people *before* they reach adulthood, not after it" (Tervo-Niemelä 2021: 444; Gärtner and Hennig 2022; Müller and Porada 2022; Stolz 2020), inviting attention to what these drivers are. Alongside research interest in this generational effect, there are also growing calls to look beyond understandings of the "non-religious" and "non-believing" in terms of what they are not (that have dominated past sociological portraits of non-religion and atheism), toward more substantive, positive understandings of the experiences, commitments, and beliefs underlying non-religious and non-believing positions (e.g., Lee 2015; Taves 2019). Previous framings of non-religion mean that research mapping generational shifts has tended to focus on religious decline or the "loss" of belief in God across generations (e.g., Bengtson et al. 2018; Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013), rather than exploring the non-religious forms of life into which children are growing up. Moreover, studies of socialization have yet to take into account new "worldview" approaches which identify existential meaning-making processes associated with non-religious identities, such as humanist, romantic, or scientific sceptic (Taylor 2007; Lee 2015; van Mulukom et al. 2023).

This article presents research examining how children become so-called "non-believers," which included an investigation of the relative significance of

[1]We use the terms "atheism" and "non-belief," following other studies in this area, to refer to de facto or "negative" atheism in the sense of an absence of belief in God(s) and other traditionally religious phenomena rather than having no beliefs or necessarily having a clear sense of atheist identity. See Bullivant and Lee (2016).

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"push" and "pull" factors on those processes of formation. By "push," we mean anything that pushes you away from religion, for instance, religion becoming unpleasant or boring, or less salient; by "pull," we mean the draw of alternative worldviews. Thus we sought to explore when the "failure" of older generations to pass on religious traditions or beliefs to their children (push factors) is implicated in that formation, and when the salience of alternative worldview traditions (pull factors) is more significant. And are push and pull processes independent of one another or do they combine together in experience? We draw from a qualitative study of non-religious childhoods in England, providing original insight into how children are socialized in relation to non-religious worldviews, and how this relates to their non-belief in God(s). In light of recent research indicating a variety of non-religious worldviews in contemporary Western societies (Lee 2015; van Mulukom et al. 2023), we expected to find a number of worldviews at play in these children's socialization, for example, the humanist, agnostic or anti-existential worldviews which Lee (2015) identified in her study of the non-religious in southeast England. We were struck, however, by the pervasiveness of a humanist worldview across the different fieldsites and informant groups: children in middle childhood (age 7–11 years old), their parents, and their teachers.

"Humanism" is a term with many meanings, informed by its varied historical inheritances (Blankholm 2017; Brown, Nash, and Lynch 2023; Bullivant and Lee 2016; Fassin 2019). In this article, it means a worldview that centers humanity in its cosmology, placing emphasis on the agency and significance of humans, their broad equality as members of the same species, and broadly rejecting the idea of supernatural or divine influences within the world in favor of "taking up the mantle of reason, the tools of science, and the potentials of free thought" (Engelke 2015:72). When we refer to humanists, we mean those who share this worldview, whether they self-consciously identify as humanist or not. For clarity's sake, we distinguish between upper-case "Humanism" and lower-case "humanism." The former is associated with explicit discourses and organizations such as Humanists UK and Ethical Culture, and includes an identification with Humanist histories and traditions; the latter is an analytic category which identifies a worldview that does not necessarily include explicit association or identification with these organizations or histories, even if it continues to be shaped by their inheritance. We note the value of attending to worldviews outside of "official" spaces of and discourses about them, both for the study of worldviews in markedly individualized social contexts (such as the UK) in which institutions and identities tend to be decentered and, taking a cue from "lived religion" approaches, for garnering insights from "women, children, and other illiterates" whose religious and spiritual practices were not previously considered "proper" religion, that is, the religion of religious institutions and the usually elite male theologians associated with that (McDannell 2011:139; McGuire 2008).

This article explores, then, the role of home and primary school spaces in how children are growing up atheist. We reveal that their socialization as atheist entails both "push" factors—pushing them away from religion and belief in

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God—*and* "pull" factors which draw them toward humanism, and suggest that they are experiencing a phase of life in which humanism is a cultural framework for their relationships and activities. While previous theories about the decline of religion have tended to distinguish between the role played by parental socialization and education, we demonstrate in what follows that school and family contexts are, in practice, interrelated in shaping children's humanist form of life, with schools and parents both encouraging a "pull" toward humanism through their valorization of humanist epistemologies (science, empiricism, and rationalism), and ethics of autonomy and respect for others' autonomy. At the same time, we explore how this "pull" was often bound up with implicit "push" factors, with religion being constructed as in tension with science in Religious Education lessons for instance, or through the parents' perceiving religion as anti-autonomy, which meant that they had no desire to socialize their children into the faith that they had themselves been raised within. We propose that sociologists need to pay closer attention to the development of non-religious worldviews in general, and humanism in particular, and highlight the need to expand from the language of religious decline to include much more developed ways of talking about the formation of non-traditional "existentialities" (Lee 2019) in everyday life.

BACKGROUND: APPROACHING THE FORMATION OF ATHEISM AND HUMANISM

The growth in non-religious identification and non-belief across successive generations has prompted growing attention to how changing socialization in relation to religion fuels this shifting religious landscape in Western societies. Quantitative studies have demonstrated that parental religious socialization is declining in Europe (e.g., Stolz et al. 2016; Tervo-Niemalä 2021), while studies focused on the USA and Canada (Bengtson et al. 2018; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017) indicate that the growth of non-religious identification is increasingly driven by a rise in non-religious socialization. Feeding into declining religious socialization is its changing status: Stolz et al. (2016) argue that religious socialization is increasingly considered optional rather than a social duty. This reflects a broader shift in Western societies toward religious belief being seen as a matter of personal choice (Taylor 2007). Furthermore, studies of both religious and non-religious parents in the USA (Manning 2015; Smith and Adamczyk 2021) have underscored how the broader cultural value of autonomy and personal worldview choice shape how parents bring up their children in relation to religion.

Parental socialization in relation to religion takes various forms and may be active and explicit—for example, taking children to church or teaching them to pray—or implicit, as parents model for their children particular ways of engaging with and talking about faith (Smith and Adamczyk 2021; Stolz et al. 2023). Previous studies have identified a number of causal mechanisms related

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to socialization which may explain the generational effect of increasing non-religiosity and non-belief.[2] Parents' liberalism in terms of encouraging their children to respect others' beliefs has been associated with declining religiosity (Smith 2021; Stolz et al. 2016), as have parental religious heterogamy, inconsistencies in religiosity between parents (McPhail 2019) and divorce/family disruption (Copen and Silverstein 2007). Higher rates of religious transmission have been linked with emotional closeness between parents and children (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013), while increasing parental education has been linked with weakening religious transmission (Stolz 2020). Increasing secular leisure activities competing with religious attendance have also been linked with religious decline (McAndrew and Richards 2020; McLeod 2007), and religious plurality—for instance, in diverse urban contexts—has been thought to undermine the plausibility of religious belief (McLeod 2007). The secularity of the broader social context in which socialization takes place is also significant, with non-churchgoers more likely to be non-believers in societies where religious attendance is low, compared with more religious societies (Voas and Storm 2020).

Seeking to explain the generation gap in parent-child religiosity through an analysis of church-going in West Germany, Stolz et al. (2023) examine the relative significance of family disruption, liberal values, leisure culture, urbanism, pluralism, and a predominantly secular environment as predictors of religious non-transmission, and find—aside for modest effects of family disruption and secular context—no one specific predictor mainly responsible for the decline of religion across generations. They therefore suggest that "perhaps religious socialization fails because of a *general and societal* change in attitudes to both socialization and religion" (p. 18). A shift toward seeing religious belief and practice as matters of personal choice, for example, is related to a broader valuing of individual autonomy, which they note is an almost universally shared value in Western societies and therefore not linked to specific family attributes or contexts. They conclude that, in predicting (non-)religiosity, what matters is not so much families' individual characteristics but rather "the dominant worldview" of the broader social context in which socialization takes place "and the perceived social significance of religion" (2023:19). Alongside parental socialization, education has also been seen as playing a role in declining religiosity, as educational practices privileging autonomy afford children a greater sense of their own ability to question parental religious beliefs (Klingenberg and Sjö 2019; Stolz 2020).

The literature to date on this generational effect of growing non-religious identification has largely emerged from quantitative studies and has tended to focus on the "success" or "failure" of religious transmission. However, we know relatively little about *how* socialization in relation to non-religion and atheism takes place in lived experience, or about the interplay of processes through which

[2]Tervo-Niemalä (2021) and Stolz et al. (2023) both offer very useful overviews of these debates.

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socialization creates, sustains, or strengthens atheism. If, for instance, the dominant worldview of the broader social context is shaping how socialization in relation to religion is taking place, what does this look like in practice? In recent years, an emerging literature has begun to address these questions. The "Transmission of Religion Across Generations" project is providing important new insight into non-religious socialization by exploring the transmission of religion in five different countries. Publications emerging from this project have included a study of how a non-religious habitus developed over several generations within a single German family (Gärtner 2022), and a quantitative analysis of those who have never belonged to a religion in East Germany demonstrating the relative absence of religion in family lives (Müller and Porada 2022)—echoing Strhan and Shillitoe's (2019) qualitative study of non-religious childhood's in England, which also underscored the relative absence of religion in family life. Focused on the USA, Manning's study of non-religious parenting (2015) demonstrates the imperative of "personal worldview choice" for non-affiliated parents, and how they often continue to incorporate aspects of religion in their parenting. Joanna Malone's (2021, 2023) study of older non-religious adults in the UK and Abby Day's (2022) study of non-religious Baby Boomers in the UK, USA, and Canada use oral history to explore the place of religion in these generations' upbringing and in their own child-rearing practices.

This emerging literature, however, has largely drawn from retrospective narratives from adults reflecting on their childhood or describing their current child-rearing practices, and it has focused on socialization in family contexts. The historic marginalization of children's perspectives in the sociology of religion (Hemming 2015; Shillitoe in press; Strhan 2019; Strhan, Parker, and Ridgely 2017) means there has been little qualitative research exploring the formation of atheism with children themselves or studies focusing on their experiences in schools, other than Strhan and Shillitoe's study (2019) exploring the formation of non-religious identities in England. Their analysis revealed that primary schools represent a key site in which many non-religious children first encounter explicit ideas related to religion and belief in God(s), which can lead, perhaps paradoxically, to the articulation of non-religious and non-believing perspectives.

Alongside the absence of children's own perspectives, we also know little about how socialization takes place in relation to the alternative worldviews that studies of non-religion have identified, such as humanism (including scientism and rationalism), agnosticism, or subjectivism (LeDrew 2015; Lee 2015; van Mulukom et al. 2023). One exception is historian Callum Brown's study of how people living through the 1960s became atheist, which argues that a "new moral cosmos" of humanism has become the dominant worldview in Western societies (2017:161). Humanism, in Brown's account, refers to a moral framework centered on principles of human equality, bodily and sexual autonomy, and an ethic of care. Brown notes that conventional histories of Humanism trace its development through philosophical lineages beginning in ancient Greece, via Christian humanism, the European Enlightenment, to late modern secular

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moralists (2017:161). Yet there has been little attention, as he notes (2017:172), to the formation of humanism among those who did not get it from reading books or listening to Humanist thinkers—"upper-case Humanist" sources, in our language—which begs the question: Where *are* they finding it?

Brown's answer is that humanism was intuitively obvious to the people he spoke to, even before they came to identify as humanist: "Humanism was neither a philosophy nor an ideology that they had learned or read about and then adopted. There was no act of conversion, no training or induction which turned them into humanists" (2017:162). Instead, Brown traces the dominance of humanist values in Western cultures to 1945 and the extension of rights to those who had previously been denied them and the legal frameworks regarding human rights emerging from the Second World War, which became central to the United Nations and European Law (Brown 2017:168). Brown, Nash, and Lynch's history of Humanist organizations in Britain (2023) demonstrates that the Humanist movement played a significant part in these shifts, through, for example, their vocabulary of human rights being taken up in wider politics. However, Brown's argument that humanism appears intuitive to those who come to identify as humanist raises further questions. Modern humanism does not express universal human values: as historian Alec Ryrie notes, its ethics of "gender and racial equality, sexual freedom, a strong doctrine of individual human rights, a sharp distinction between the human and non-human realms – are, in a long historical perspective, very unusual indeed" (2019:202). While these values might "appear intuitively obvious to Brown," we need to ask how it is, in everyday life, that they become available and obvious (2019:202).

How, then, are these more diffuse, decentralized humanist and other non-religious worldviews being formed in practice? There have been a small number of studies within anthropology and religious studies of organized and self-identifying Humanist groups, individuals, and practices in the UK and USA (e.g., Blankholm 2022; Cragun, Manning, and Fazzino 2017; Engelke 2014, 2015). However, those who participate in such groups represent a minority in these settings and may not necessarily reflect the wider experiences of those who are not affiliated with these organizations (Lee 2015), even while their social and cultural contexts may be shaped by their histories (Brown, Nash, and Lynch 2023). Furthermore, we lack in-depth examinations of how children and young people today, many of whom are being raised by non-religious parents, become humanists and the forms humanism takes among these "cradle nones" (Bullivant 2022). Studies by Brown (2017) and Ryrie (2019) are indicative of interest in humanism in history. The need for empirical attention to humanism is even more acute in sociology. This is due in part to the great extent to which sociology has been shaped by secularization theories which approach secular forms of life through the lens of "subtraction" (Lee 2015; Taylor 2007:26–7), recording the "absence" of religion rather than the presence of alternative formations. Significant critical interventions identify the entanglements of humanist cultural histories with ethnocentric bias, human exceptionalism, and colonial violence (e.g., Asad 2015; Fassin 2019; Mahmood

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2018), but leave open important *empirical* questions about whether and how non-religious worldviews, including humanism, are formed on the micro-level and feed into the development of atheist societies.

METHODOLOGY

Our paper draws from a qualitative study exploring how children grow up "non-believing" in both home and school settings in three contrasting geographical "micro-climates" (Voas and McAndrew 2012) of (non)religion in England. Ethnographic fieldwork and interviews were conducted with children, parents, and teachers in three primary schools, with Shillitoe spending 6–7 weeks with each school in 2017–2018. Schools and participants are anonymized, and names replaced with pseudonyms. The first school, St Peter's, is a Church of England academy located in an urban area in southern England with a diverse religious and non-religious population. The second fieldsite, Waterside Primary Academy, is in a suburban middle-class setting in northern England. The third fieldsite, Sunnybank Community Primary School, is in a predominantly rural setting in northwest England, where a low proportion of the population identify as non-religious. Alongside participant observation, paired interviews were carried out with 30–40 children per school aged 7–10 years old (N = 115), with the parents/carers of 13-15 of these children per school (N = 55) and 4 teaching staff per school (N = 12). Interviews provided insight into how the children and parents spoke about and experienced (non-)belief and provided original data about the socialization children receive in relation to religion at home and in school. Parent interviews also provided insight into parents' own religious upbringing and how this informed their childrearing, while teacher interviews revealed how religion and belief are constructed in schools.

Children were sampled using a worksheet activity asking about their belief or non-belief in God. Before the activity, Shillitoe spent a fortnight in each fieldsite informing the children about the study, and gave a child-friendly presentation about the research to each class, in which she explained that no specific religious understanding or definition of "God" was being used. Worksheets were then distributed, and children who answered "no" or "not sure" to the question "do you believe in God?" were invited to take part. Very few children self-identified as atheist: in using the term "atheism," we refer to "negative" atheism in the sense of the absence of belief in God(s) rather than a self-conscious atheist identity. Institutional ethical approval was obtained and we were sensitive to ethical issues relating to research with children throughout. Parental and child consent was obtained for the children's participation.

During the ethnographic phase of data collection, recurring patterns were noted and coded. In order to examine how and why atheism is formed in middle childhood, after data collection, all data were reviewed and re-coded according to the kinds of socialization children were experiencing in relation to theism, atheism,

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religion, and worldviews. To further examine the interplay of causal processes shaping the formation of children's non-belief, we analyzed all data relating to 15 children (five children per school), including child, parent, and teacher interviews, and fieldnotes, examining where, when, and with whom socialization in relation to religion and worldviews was taking place, and how children's experiences at home and in school related to each other, and compared this with the experiences of other children in the wider sample.[3] We also considered the significance and relation between "push" factors that encourage children away from religion or belief in God (e.g., absence of religious socialization, negative perceptions of religion) and "pull" factors that draw them toward other-than-religious worldviews. While the majority of children were clear in the interviews that they did not believe in God and a smaller number said they were unsure, their parents had diverse religious and non-religious identities (including Christian, Jewish, former Muslim, humanist, and agnostic) and theist and atheist beliefs.

The form and content of non-religious worldviews is an emerging and active field of research (Baker and Smith 2015; LeDrew 2015; Lee 2015; Taves 2019; van Mulukom et al. 2023). Few theories or typologies were available that would confidently anticipate what worldviews might be visible in the data. Initial investigations have established some diversity in the outlooks of those who identify as having no religion, no belief in God, or both. In her research with the non-religious in southeast England, for example, Lee identifies five distinct "existential cultures" or worldviews she found among her non-religious participants: (1) humanism, which understands humanity to be special and "a repository of existential, including moral knowledge" and which emphasizes the knowability of the world and valorizes scientific methods (2015:162); (2) agnosticism, which like humanism legitimizes scientific methods as a way of knowing the world, but which, in contrast, considers "that this knowledge of the world is profoundly limited" and valorizes unknowability (2015:163); (3) theism, which views "the origins and outcome of life in terms of a centralized, autonomous being" (2015:166); (4) subjectivism, which posits individual experience as a central way of knowing the world; and (5) the anti-existential, which involves "the rejection of existential philosophies and cultures in general" and emphasizes instead "the immediate – everyday needs, responsibilities, and pleasures" (2015:169). Lee notes that her non-religious informants rarely expressed these worldviews in clear, developed propositions. Rather worldviews tended "to emerge through fragments of articulated belief and also in accounts of real-world encounters of various sorts"; moreover, aspects of different existential modes and traditions were combined "in creative and self-contradictory ways" in the lives of individual participants (2015:172). Other scholars unpack humanist worldviews specifically into narrower types: LeDrew (2015) and van Mulukom et al. (2023) draw a distinction between humanisms anchored in concerns about social justice and in rationalist and scientistic outlooks,

[3]When we refer to "most," "all," or "few" children in this article, we are referring to our larger sample.

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respectively. van Mulukom et al. (2023) and her co-authors draw attention to non-human-centered materialisms (centering the environment, for example) alongside the humanist materialisms they also observe.

Though inductive in approach, we anticipated that our analysis would document and deepen our understanding of some of this worldview diversity, including how they are being socialized. Instead, our analysis indicated a pervasive humanism, much more consistent with Brown's (2017) argument that a humanistic culture has displaced—or is displacing—Western Christianity. Therefore, in what follows, we examine how this humanism is being socialized in childhood, and how this relates to the formation of children's non-belief in God(s). We approach humanism in our analysis, following Lee (2015:162–3), as a human-centered cosmology which centers human achievement, rational thought, and the scientific method as ways of knowing the world. In humanist ethics, humanity is understood as a special repository of moral knowledge, and decisions are based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human flourishing (Lee 2015:162–3). Emphasizing individual human rights, freedoms, and equality, humanism is, overall, "about respect for other people *qua* humans and it is this centrality of the human species that makes sense of the concept 'humanism'" (Lee 2015:162). Our analysis is also influenced by lived religion approaches; therefore, we hold the definition of humanism loosely in order to explore how grammars of humanism may be shifting or expressed by children in registers that do not correspond with established discourse about humanism.

FINDINGS: WORLDVIEW FORMATION IN CHILDHOOD

The (Relative) Absence of Religious Socialization in Family Life

Existing studies have demonstrated that religion often occupies a marginal place in family life among children who identify as non-religious (Müller and Porada 2022; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019). Our analysis of the interplay of push and pull factors offers further confirmation that the marginal role of religion in children's experience operates as a push factor. Lewis, a 9-year-old pupil at Waterside whose parents were Anglican, exemplified this in stating that religion only came up as a topic for discussion if he or his siblings had learnt about it at school: "it's not like a normal subject that we talk about in our house." We also identified an additional, related push factor in children's perception that religion did not matter to their parents. When asked how he thought his parents would identify in relation to religion, Callum, an 8-year-old pupil at Sunnybank, said, "I think my mum will pick 'no religion' because she doesn't have a religion. She only thinks about washing-up. My dad might be a Christian because he was christened, but he hasn't actually said it yet. My granddad might be 'none of the above,' because he doesn't actually do anything. He just sits inside and watches the football and the cricket."

Even the small number of children who were receiving active religious socialization through attending church with their parents picked up on cues suggesting religion was less important to their parents than other things. Steve, whose parents

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were liberal Anglicans, perceived his father as valuing snowboarding more than church, noting, “my dad loves nothing better than snowboarding, so he’ll give up church for snowboarding.” Furthermore, despite attending church with his parents, Steve’s mother Lisa indicated that they were not actively seeking to engage their children in traditional Christian practices at home, stating, “Do we educate them [about religion]? I don’t think specifically we do. We don’t read the Bible, we don’t pray. . . I wouldn’t know how to start doing something like that. . . ultimately, I see going to church as being the place where that happens.” Furthermore, the religious socialization that Steve experienced through church-going was something he found “quite boring,” as he put it. This was a description echoed by many children when they described occasional attendance at places of worship for weddings or christenings. Teddy from Waterside described a christening he attended as “really boring. All I had to do, sit there, stand up and sing songs and then sit back down again and watch something.”

Developing a Humanist Epistemology

This relative absence of religious socialization at home did not mean, however, that religion was entirely absent in the children’s home lives and it was sometimes discussed at home. However, rationalist and scientistic ways of understanding religion emerged here as a “pull factor,” shaping attitudes toward religion but reinforcing also an alternative, often taken-for-granted humanist worldview. We can see this exemplified in an interaction between Lisa and Steve, when Lisa was asked how she thought Steve would identify in relation to religion:

Lisa: I think Steve is a “not sure,” even though we do go to a . . . a Church of England church.
Steve: At school, what I said was “no religion.”
Lisa: You say “no religion”? Okay, then that’s the one I would choose for Steve. . . Steve and Amanda [Steve’s sister] have a very scientific brain, so they find it very difficult to – you know, the stories in the Bible. He finds it very difficult, and we’ve talked about this as well, you know, the parting of the [Red] Sea. That’s very difficult, as an adult, you know, as well as a child–
Steve: It’s quite hard to believe.
Lisa: You know, gravity wouldn’t allow that to happen, would it?

As well as expressing his sense of Christian teachings being implausible in this exchange with Lisa, in his interview with his friend Craig, Steve clearly articulated his sense of the implausibility of God, and we also see how his non-belief was further implicitly resourced by his father:

Steve: I don’t believe in God because I think it’s just a huge myth that’s been going around.
Craig: Like, it’s insanely impossible.
Steve: Yes. It’s like there’s this really weird religion, I think it’s called Pastafarian, and they just believe there’s a huge Spaghetti Monster. That’s what I’ve been told by Dad.

We do not know *what* Steve’s father told him about Pastafarianism. However, Steve’s comparing theism with a satirical portrayal of religion that emerged in opposition to the teaching of intelligent design in public schools in the USA

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suggests that, although only one family in our wider sample had a formal affiliation to a Humanist organization, humanist culture can end up circulating in diffuse forms, which may indirectly feed—as a "push" factor—into how children come to perceive theism as implausible. This is resourced by conversations with parents—including those such as Steve's father who was Anglican and theist—but also through peer interactions, as Steve and Craig's exchange illustrates.

Steve's comments about his (non)belief exemplify the complex entwinement of "push" and "pull" factors we found among the children. Humanist empiricism and ways of thinking about science—which the parents were often valorizing—acted both as a "pull" toward humanism *and* as a "push" factor, decreasing the salience and plausibility of religion for the children. Furthermore, this entwinement did not easily conform to simple binary ways of thinking about religion and non-religion. For example, although they were church-going Christians, Lisa said that she and her husband talked much more about science with their children than about their Christian faith: "When we're educating kids, we talk about a lot of things that you know the answer to. So, like, maths, we do a lot of maths at home. . . We do a lot of science things, we've been watching *Blue Planet*, haven't we, which we have to watch tonight. . . Religion is really difficult, because, you know, the idea of dying and going to heaven, . . . that's quite difficult for me to- I think I do believe in it. . . . Equally, I do believe that all of us, the four of us, are very much science-y, maths." Steve's comments in his interview with Craig indicated this valorization of science and maths as "pull factors" toward humanism: Steve stated "almost everything involves maths," while Craig expressed his wish to be "a professor of science or something which involves a lot of science and maths." Thus, while religion was not a matter of much salience or enjoyment for either boy, maths and science were—exemplified in Craig indicating it was the basis for their friendship: "me and Steve really get maths, like a lot, I think that's the reason why we're always best mates."

Other children's comments indicated how such valorizations of science, empiricism, and rationalism were both "push" factors away from belief in God *and* at the same time part of the "pull" of a humanist worldview, as they positioned science as an alternative object of belief. Louise, a 9-year-old pupil at St Peter's, explained her non-belief in God as related to her belief in science: "I don't believe in God. . . Basically, I would say I believe in science and the Big Bang theory," and she expressed a sense that theism was illogical: "People say he [God] didn't come from anywhere, he was just there always. Then I think, . . . everything has to come from somewhere. . . [I]f God comes from nowhere then how can he exist?" Demonstrating how science was something she was drawn toward, she said she found "the great scientists" inspiring, adding, "I'd like to be a scientist when I grow up. I'd really like to find out something new that has never been found out before."

Louise's parents, Alice and Rich, indicated how these "push" and "pull" dynamics were being resourced at home. Both emphasized their empiricism, with Alice stating "I like to think that I base my beliefs and thoughts on evidence."

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Demonstrating how it is difficult to neatly distinguish between socialization at home and school, it was primarily in response to their children encountering religion at school that Alice and Rich discussed religion at home. Alice's descriptions of these conversations revealed both how she and Rich were presenting scientific perspectives as the alternative to religious beliefs (a push factor, undermining the plausibility of religious belief), and how, at the same time, their discussions about science were contributing to Louise's valorization of science (pull factor):

Alice: *Because of the kind of people we are, we are very open to those kinds of conversations, so we talk about it [religion]. Because, also, we're both scientific people, we talk about scientific things quite a lot as well. Rich's background is physics, and Louise is interested in physics and stuff, so they've talked about the origins of the universe and all that kind of. . . .*
Louise: *I've decided I might want to be a physicist when I grow up*

Alice and Rich, like many other parents, reflected on how they would not want to force atheism on their children and wanted them to determine their own beliefs on the basis of evidence and reason. Rich criticized the idea of children inheriting an "unbelief in God that's given to you by your parents rather than a rationalization based on evidence. The child needs to work that out for themselves." As Alice and Rich articulated their own non-belief in the interview with Louise present, we glimpsed how these parent–child exchanges normalized non-belief and also saw how, in responding playfully to her parents, Louise was keen to burnish her empiricist and non-religious credentials:

Louise: *My religion is. . . what about Star Wars Mega Dragons. . .?*
Rich: *I don't think that's an official religion yet.*
Alice: *There should be. I'd sign up to that. [laughter][. . .] Although, of course, I totally accept my children's current viewpoint about the world, I also realize that they're massively influenced by us and by what we say, because we talk about this sort of stuff quite a lot.*
Interviewer: *You do? Does this come up in conversation?*
Louise: *There's no evidence for God. . .*
Alice: *We have had discussions about God [. . .] especially because Louise and Elena go to a church near their school,[4] so they pray.*
Louise: *Well, I don't necessarily pray.*

This valorization of science, empiricism, and rationality, interwoven with and shaping non-belief—which many parents expressed—was also prominent in interviews with children. Kevin, a pupil at Sunnybank, commented, "if they've got no evidence, how do they know if it's real?," to which his friend Mason responded, "Yes, and if God created the whole of the world, then who created God? I think the Big Bang is more scientific and logical." Only a few children named this empiricist epistemology as "humanist." Hayden, a 10-year-old pupil

[4]St Peter's School regularly held services for the children at the local Church of England church.

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at Sunnybank stated, “I feel like I’m a humanist because I like science, and . . . I always like to back up my answer.” He articulated his atheism in terms that clearly expressed the “push” away from theism as being intertwined with the “pull” of the appeal of science, stating that the reason he did not believe in God “is because I really like science, and because I like science, I always want something to back up my answer, so that’s why I don’t believe in God.”

The simplistic idea that religious and scientific worldviews are, on the one hand, opposed and, on the other, the main two options available is widespread but, as discussed above, scholars increasingly draw attention to a diversity of existential orientations and traditions. In this context, the predominance of humanist tropes is striking. For example, while some children said they were unsure whether they believed in God, they did not express the kind of “agnostic” worldview that positions human knowledge of the world as limited in its capacity to answer metaphysical (and other) questions (Lee 2015). Rather, their uncertainty involved weighing up evidence for and against the existence of God or a sense that this question could not be answered yet, but expressing a classic humanist faith that humanity’s collective knowledge advances and our understanding would improve over time (Lee 2015:163). For example, discussing the origins of the universe, Henry from Waterside said “in the future” scientists might understand what had happened, “but now, we’re not 100% sure.” His friend Louis concurred, stating that scientists “might not have found this new material, and then in the future they did. Then it would just be like a whole different world.”

These epistemologies were being shaped in more pronounced ways at school than they were at home. Indeed, for children where there was little discussion of either religion or science at home, the language they used to articulate their belief in science (and non-belief in God) appeared to be almost exclusively resourced by school. Harriet, a mother at Sunnybank, for instance, said she did not discuss religion with her children, and noted that her son had come home and told her he believed in evolution, commenting, “He came home and he had this opinion, and I was just like, ‘Okay.’” At all three schools, the children’s empiricist epistemologies were habituated through the timetable and rhythms of the school day, with morning lessons revolving around the three “core subjects” of the national curriculum in England—maths, science, and English—and, if necessary, time taken from other curriculum subjects in the afternoon to further focus on these.[5] Children’s enjoyment of maths and science, exemplified by Louise, Steve, and Craig, was encouraged through activities such as “Brain Gym,” which was an activity at Sunnybank where children could be awarded up to ten minutes extra playtime, and “Times Tables Rockstars” at Waterside, where children competed with other children on “times tables challenges.”

[5]While Religious Education (RE) is a compulsory part of the curriculum in state-funded schools in England, it receives significantly less lesson time than the "core subjects," with Waterside only rarely teaching RE during the period of our fieldwork, and St Peter’s spending the most time, with one lesson per week.

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With this central positioning of science and maths in the curriculum, it is not surprising that children grow up valuing science and with empiricist epistemologies. However, it was from RE lessons that the children's articulation of their atheism *as related to* empiricist ideas and, relatedly, their understanding of religion and science as opposed, seemed to stem. This was exemplified in lessons in which the children learnt about theistic creation stories, which were contrasted with the Big Bang and evolution. At St Peter's, for example, children were taught in one RE lesson that some Christians believe in a 7-day creation, and others believed this was "just a story" and that "God is behind the creation and the Big Bang," while "scientists believe" in the Big Bang. Following this explanation, the teacher read out statements about the creation story and invited the children to stand in different parts of the room depending on whether they agreed with the statements or not, so that children identified themselves in support of or in opposition to those beliefs. The children also had lessons encouraging them to understand belief in God as a phenomenon that was either supported by evidence or—as most of the children we spoke to came to conclude—*not* supported. As Mrs Fordham, a teacher at Sunnybank, said, "They're forming their own views and opinions and . . . basing it on science. . . When we do, 'Is God Real?' [in RE], it's from a scientific point of view: where's the evidence?" Rather than pulling toward an agnostic emphasis on the limits of knowledge, or subjectivist emphasis on individual experience as validating knowledge (Lee 2015), these classroom activities fed into the "pull" of a humanist emphasis on the knowability of the world and its basis on evidence; this could then sometimes manifest as a critical stance, "pushing" away from religious belief as lacking evidence. Children's comments sometimes revealed a lack of understanding of what theists might understand as "evidence" in support of their belief. For example, Minnie, an 8-year-old pupil at Sunnybank, commented that, "if there is proof is God is real, then obviously you would believe in him," and said, "when I was younger, my mum said God was real, so I believed in God then, but then when I started coming to school and learning about RE, I just thought maybe he isn't real, because there isn't a photograph of him." Her friend Amber responded, "there isn't proper proof of God yet." Minnie replied that if proof was found, "obviously I'll believe in God then."

The teachers often equated non-religion and science when we asked whether non-religious worldviews were taught in RE. For example, Mrs Aspin (St Peter's) said, "the further up the school we go. . . we've been looking at the science view as well, I mean, you know, that can be opposing the religious view." Children's accounts were consistent with this, and demonstrated further how this draw toward science operated as a pull toward a humanist worldview partly through its manifestation as a push away from religion, as children came to perceive scientific viewpoints as intrinsically non-religious through the way the curriculum is presented. For example, Louise said, "In the last few years, I haven't been liking RE because they're constantly talking about religious stuff. I know it's called Religious Education, but there are other beliefs, like the Big Bang theory and stuff. But this year, I was kind of a bit more glad because in the creation story, they

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also did it about the Big Bang. They didn't just do creation story and, like, Jesus and God and stuff, because that's what they always do. They never seem to do stuff that other people believe in. I know that I'm not the only person who doesn't believe in God. Loads and loads of people in my class don't, but they never seem to talk about that; they just talk about the religion." Louise's comment that they learnt very little about non-religious perspectives in RE was echoed by many other children. Mason, a pupil at Sunnybank, said "the thing I don't really like about RE is that I think . . . there was only one [RE] lesson I can recall out of the whole of the school that was about, like, humanists and non-religious people." Bethany, also from Sunnybank, likewise said, "we learn about all the different religions, but we've never learned anything about non-religion."

Because scientific epistemology is reinforced throughout the broader curriculum, the equation of non-religion and non-belief with science in RE lessons meant that non-religious worldviews were occupying a paradoxical position. They were marginalized compared with teaching about Christianity and "world religions," with little classroom time, as Mason and Louise describe, but also at the same time privileged in being treated as normalized, self-evident outlooks, not requiring the kind of explanation through RE that religions might (cf. Lee 2015:199). This representation of religion as special and needing explaining may itself, we suggest, act as an implicit push factor. Several children expressed this idea of non-religion as normalized. For instance, when asked how they might identify in relation to religion, Yasmine and her friend Cameron (Sunnybank) replied:

Yasmine:	*I don't know if I'm a normal person, a Christian, a Muslim. . .*
Interviewer:	*What's a normal person?*
Yasmine:	*You don't have a religion, you're just a normal person.*
Cameron:	*You have no religion.*

In contrast to ideal typical understandings of humanism, children were able to combine this empiricist epistemology with supernatural or religious beliefs or ideas. Most children identified as non-religious but some, such as Minnie, identified as Christian, and many spoke about their belief in supernatural, mythical, or fantasy figures, such as Santa Claus, unicorns, or ghosts. Lewis and Dan, for example, said that they believed in ghosts and Santa, but did not believe in God or Jesus. Dan said, "I believe in Santa, because people have actually got proof, like videoing. . . I don't believe in Jesus. . . There's no proof." Zoe, a pupil at St Peter's, said, "I've always thought of myself as having no religion but believing in some things that most people believe in [. . .] Like Easter Bunny and things like that. And Santa." In contrast, most parents did not express a belief in supernatural or spiritual beings, but some, such as Lisa, held theist beliefs or expressed a belief in some kind of higher power or "something more" than the immanent.

It is also worth noting that while the children were being socialized into humanist epistemologies and, as we will explore below, humanist values, few parents

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were *actively* socializing their children in relation to a self-conscious tradition named as "Humanism," and there was little explicit focus on "Humanism" in RE. The only children who self-identified as "humanist" were at Sunnybank, where the children had learnt about Humanism in RE. When children did have the opportunity to encounter the idea of Humanism at Sunnybank, it appeared to support their confidence in naming their non-belief. Callie, a pupil at Sunnybank, spoke about how she began to identify as a humanist in ways that reveal how conversations at school and with parents were interwoven in how she came to name her worldview. She said, "when I became the age of seven, we were all talking about God and I didn't believe there was a God, I just thought it was made up like a myth. I didn't believe it and then I said to my mum, 'Is there a religion that I can have because I don't want to be nothing.' That felt to me like I'm not special. . . My mum said there's a humanist, so I became a humanist when I was eight or nine."

Ryan, also from Sunnybank, said he began to identify as a humanist after learning about Humanism in RE, and commented, "I am happy about being a humanist but I didn't really know about humanists until we learned about it [in school]. I was a bit, you know, wobbly before we thought about humanists because, like, I didn't really believe in God in the first place, but I just. . . it's a bit hard to say." Like Callie, Ryan expressed his desire for a substantive rather than a negative identification, stating, "I prefer to say things like what I am, rather than what I'm not." It is worth noting also that, while Ryan's humanist identification was crystallized at school, his desire to articulate his position also had drivers at home. Ryan's mother Jane was a Christian, but both she and Ryan said that they did not discuss religion with each other. However, Ryan said that he spoke to his dad—whom Ryan said would identify as humanist—"a lot about what I believe, and God, and all that stuff." Jane also commented on this, noting Ryan's dad was "devout" in his atheism and that he and Ryan often had "really intense" discussions about philosophical issues such as theodicy, indicating that, while Jane's Christianity was not being passed on, Ryan and his father were co-constructing their humanisms.

Autonomy and Humanist Ethics

In seeking to understand the rise of non-religious identification, existing studies have demonstrated that the value placed on autonomy in wider culture informs how both religious and non-religious parents engage their children in relation to religion and belief (Manning 2015; Smith and Adamczyk 2021), suggesting that valuing autonomy may feed into declining religiosity. While autonomy has become a widespread value in Western societies, it has a particularly strong association with humanism, which can be traced back to its Enlightenment lineage and the understanding of humans as both rational and autonomous emphasized by thinkers such as Kant (Fassin 2019; Kant 1998). Yet, in seeking to understand the formation of non-religious worldviews, we currently know little about how ideas of "autonomy" operate in practice in relation to ideas about religion and belief in

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children's socialization, and how this might relate to the "pull" of humanism and/or a "push" away from religion.

Ideas of autonomy and self-determination permeated how all the children, parents, and teachers in our study spoke about religion, including theist and atheist parents, and those with religious and non-religious identities. Lewis, for example, emphasized that parents should allow their children freedom in these matters: "if your mum and dad believe in a god, they shouldn't force you to believe in a god, [. . .] they shouldn't force you to be a Christian. They should let you make your own decisions." Demonstrating his own sense of autonomy in relation to religion and belief, he said, "I think my mum and dad said that I was christened, but I don't really want to be a Christian, because I don't believe in anything." In contrast, Lewis's mother Nancy identified as "Church of England" and believed in God, and described how she and her husband used to take the children to Sunday School when they were younger. This decision was not, in her account, motivated by religious beliefs or teaching, however—as we might perhaps expect from a theist worldview—but rather because it amplified her children's autonomy. She said, "I think it was important for them to be introduced to that to allow them to make up their own minds. Not because I wanted them to follow a certain path or Nick wanted them to follow a certain path, but just because I think unless you're exposed to something, you don't know whether you want it or not, do you?. . . How could they make their own mind up?" Thus, we see how autonomy could be present in homes where parents identified with a religion as well as in non-religious homes, enabling if not encouraging a broader humanist morality that centers this value. Laura, the mother of Callum at Sunnybank, considered herself non-religious and also indicated how the value of autonomy pervaded her parenting. She said, "One of the things . . . that both me and my husband believe quite strongly about is not just following what other people tell you to do, and to actually think for yourself about the world. . . . That idea of questioning and understanding why other people believe certain things but not being afraid to challenge them. . . . Not having to just follow people blindly without questioning why you do certain things. It is a conscious thing. . . We've always made sure that we talk to our children in quite a grown-up way, suitable for their age, encouraging them to question the world, and to question authority."

Other parents explicitly identified religion as antithetical to their value of autonomy. Neera, whose son Ben was at St Peter's, described moving away from the Muslim faith of her upbringing while at university, and she contrasted her desire for her children's freedom with her understanding of religion. She commented, "The thing with religion is when you have that whole collective mentality. It's always about, 'what do people think of me?. . . How am I viewed by God?'. . . It's always trying to get affirmation from lots of different sources, because you're constantly looking for that, aren't you? I just want the children to think, 'Yes, actually, I'm okay. I made a choice,' and just the freedom to make choices. I think sometimes religious beliefs can restrict that freedom."

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While many of the parents, like Neera, saw religion as in conflict with their values of self-determination, they did not necessarily share their own negative views of religion with their children. Danny, whose daughter Sophia was at Waterside, was critical of religion throughout the interview. He described religion as "the root of all war" and the Catholic Church as "probably the biggest criminal organization around" and as "brainwashing, saying there isn't a Big Bang theory," before moving on to theodicy, commenting that God cannot be "all for peace and stuff" while "killing thousands of people in the tsunami." Yet he also emphasized Sophia's religious freedom, stating that if she wanted to do her first Communion, "I'd support that. . . I want Sophia to be independent."

Although these parents were concerned to avoid any of their own anti-religious attitudes hindering their children's worldview autonomy, the parents' valuing of autonomy could act as both a "pull" toward humanism *and* at the same time as an *indirect* "push" factor. Even though Neera and Danny were not actively discussing their negative views of religion with their children, their sense of religion conflicting with the humanist values they held meant they had no desire to pass on the faith of their upbringing to their own children, and this resulted in the minimal presence of religious socialization in the home. Several parents were reflexive about how their own views of religion as anti-autonomy fed into the strong value that they placed on developing their children's own sense of autonomy, as part of the pull toward humanist ethics—so that a "push" away from religion experienced by one generation transformed into a "pull" factor toward a shared humanist ethic for the next. Laura, for example, described her sense of religion being anti-autonomy as a "push" factor away from religion in her own life: she described how attending a Church of England school had shaped her sense of religion as opposed to freedom and as "very patriarchal. The idea of biblical narratives and women's role in biblical narratives really worries me. That's something that I've always felt doesn't fit with how I think about the world," and she said that she felt there was "a tension, isn't there, with following a particular faith and being told how to think about the world?" Thus, the negative appraisal of religion was bound up with the value of autonomy that shaped her parenting in affirmative ways: "I essentially don't feel that I want my children to follow a path that is set out for them, that they just have to accept."

Explicit forms of Humanism were presented by parents within the same framework of choice: something children should be free to consider and explore for themselves. Mason was one of the children at Sunnybank who self-identified as "humanist," and his mother Natalie likewise identified as humanist and was one of the few parents who was consciously making Humanism available to their children. She noted that they had books about Humanism that Mason could engage with and commented that she and her partner John talked with Mason while watching the news about why a God would allow suffering. At the same time, they did not want Mason to passively accept their Humanism, but to determine his own stance:

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Natalie: *I've got a few books on Humanism and it is one he can read if he wants to, but he doesn't have to. . . No, we're not pushing him for or against, really, are we? We do encourage him to question things, because he's quite "rules and regs" at school. . . I'd always encourage him to question, even if he questions us and he thinks we're wrong [. . .]*

John: *I want him to make up his mind . . . because I hear him copying some things that I say, and I think I'm quite political. I'll suddenly start talking about things, and when he repeats it, I'll say, "Well, why do you think that?" I want him to think, believe it himself, or not at all.*

Similarly, for Laura the moral ideal of autonomy she was seeking to instill in her children was interwoven with the pull she felt toward a humanist epistemology and had an ethical imperative. Discussing why she was drawn to the categories "humanist," "rationalist," and "spiritual-but-not-religious," she said she liked the idea of "being intellectually engaged with the world without having to follow a particular structure. Something like the idea that we are not just individuals, isolated in our own little worlds, but also that we do connect with other people in a wider sense that's not necessarily just religious." Criticizing the legal requirement that all schools in England should promote "Fundamental British Values," she said that schools should promote "common values, humanist, being a human. . . The idea of humanism. We share these values to get on with each other. You might be of a particular faith. You might be from a particular country. It doesn't matter. They're things that help humans get on with each other, aren't they?"

While the valorization of science was prominent in these interviews, humanist epistemology can also inform a distinctive appreciation for the humanities as part of the accumulated body of human knowledge of the world (Fassin 2019). This appreciation was also interwoven for some parents with the humanist ethics that they were seeking to pass on to their children, that is, draw their children toward them. When asked what worldview he was seeking to instill in his children, Greg, the father of Amy, said he hoped his children would have a sense of "the evolution of human history. There is a pile of books that I just give them to read which would give them a really fantastic overview." He described how Amy's older brother was developing this historical understanding through podcasts about ancient mythologies, and was developing "this idea . . . that humans believe in the concept of gods even though they're not real. . . It's kind of like, for him, just part of the human narrative to believe in gods." This valuing of human knowledge was also connected with a humanist ethic of respect for fellow humans, as well as for the knowledge they had produced. Asked what he saw as the most important values when raising his children, Greg said, "One would be respect for each individual human. I think I'd also instill a value around knowledge. I think there is . . . a responsibility . . . to make the most of the access to all that learning."

Interwoven with autonomy were principles of respect for the freedom of others to determine their own beliefs and identities and for worldview diversity. This was visible in school as well as the home contexts described above, and formed part of the humanist framework shaping children's experience. An emphasis on

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each child's individual autonomy—and the autonomy of others—permeated everyday school life, seen, for example, in the language used to encourage children to reflect on their behavior—to consider whether they were "making the right choices"—and in the idea that children should be enabled to have "a voice." Mr. Horton, a teacher at St Peter's, said that it was "just common, day-to-day practice whereby you treat all the children as equals. At the same time, they're all individuals, they all have a voice and you respect their voices regardless." These ideas were also strongly visible in how both teachers and children spoke about RE, which appeared to reinforce a narrative of religious belief as a matter of individual choice. While public debates about RE often hinge on concerns that the subject may be indoctrinating children into a religious viewpoint, teachers spoke about RE as affording children autonomy. Ms. Buck, the headteacher at Waterside, said that educating children about different religions enabled choice: "how do you have choice if you're not sharing the different beliefs?" Miss Logan, a teacher at Sunnybank who identified as Christian, also articulated this, emphasizing—like other teachers—ideas of tolerance and autonomy as principal aims of the subject. She stated, "Teaching tolerance for other religions, I would hope that's something that we're teaching children. Educating children to live in a multicultural society. Helping them to question themselves, as well, and what their thoughts on religion are. . . I think children have to make up their own minds about what it is that's out there. . . Hopefully we are giving them the tools to question for themselves and make their own minds up." While the children did not always like RE, they shared this idea of it enabling understanding of different religions, and some children saw it as enabling them to make present and future choices. Lea from Sunnybank said that she thought the aim of RE was "to learn about different religions. . . Because you might not be a religion, and you might want to change to be a religion. It's not just about when you're little. . . You can believe when you're older."

The "pull" of this humanist ethic of respect for individuals' different religious beliefs and identities was reinforced through "respect" being positioned as one of the core school values at each of the three schools. "Respect" was also central to how the teachers talked about RE. Mrs. Hampson (Waterside) described a lesson in which she had encouraged the children to think about belief and non-belief in God(s) and why people might hold these different beliefs, linking this to the idea of respect: "It just comes back to that respect of – it doesn't matter, everybody is entitled to believe but let's try and understand it and gain some knowledge and just respect it, in general, and why people believe things." The children also described this ethic as permeating RE in ways that suggested they had come to share this ethic. When asked what they learn about in RE, Izzy, an 8-year-old pupil at Waterside said that "people can believe in anything they want," and her friend Teddy added that their RE teacher "always says, 'not everyone is the same. People are different religions.'"

A liberal ethic of respect for difference is widespread among younger generations—including both religious and non-religious—in Western societies,

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and we imply no intrinsic relation between non-belief and liberalism (Katz et al. 2021; Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2014). However, we observed a largely taken-for-granted liberal humanist idea of respect for others' religious beliefs and identities interwoven in how the children spoke about their own non-religious identities and non-belief. Will, a 10-year-old pupil at Waterside, said "I don't believe in anything that any religions really believe in" and emphasized that the main aim of RE should be promoting respect for religious difference, commenting, "all you need to do [in RE] is like, you know what they do, and just respect them [. . .] All you need to know, is literally, like it's all right what they believe." Henry from Waterside also expressed this liberal humanist ethos, commenting "I don't mind it [religion]. I don't care if anybody else is this religion. They can be it, but I've decided not to because I just don't have that idea." He added, "if someone was being rude about Christians, I wouldn't like them," revealing how he was not drawn toward those who transgressed this ethic of respect for others' religiosity.

CONCLUSION

While the demise of humanism has been widely declared in social theory, philosophy, and other disciplines (Fassin 2019; Wentzer and Mattingly 2018), our study demonstrates that humanism remains an important *empirical* phenomenon in everyday life, and we propose that a better understanding of how humanism is lived, experienced and resourced stands to advance understanding of how processes of atheization and non-religionization take place in everyday life. While previous research has demonstrated that changing patterns of religious socialization are contributing to the formation of non-religious and non-believing identities, our study emphasizes the need to expand beyond the language of religious decline by highlighting humanism as one distinctive other-than-religious worldview that children are being socialized into, and which operates as a "pull factor" toward new ways of being in the world alongside "push factors" away from the religious ways of being which were more common to their parents' generation. This socialization into humanism, we argue, feeds into the development of the children's atheism by creating a sense of humanist epistemology as having priority over theist ways of knowing and believing, while at the same time, British humanism's liberal ethics (Engelke 2014) reinforce among children a sense widely shared in Western societies that religion is one option among others (Taylor 2007), albeit an option that is to be respected.

Overall, our research demonstrates that children's socialization as atheists is influenced by two types of factors: not only those that push them away from religion, but also those that pull them toward humanism. It shows also that these two types of factors are often intertwined. Furthermore, while previous theories about the decline of religion have tended to distinguish between the role played by parental socialization and education, our research demonstrates that, in the formation of atheism, these are harder to distinguish in practice than in theory.

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Rather, they are mutually reinforcing and interrelated, as children come home and discuss what they have been learning about with their parents, prompting parents to also reflect on these issues and share their beliefs and values with their children in relation to what the children are encountering.

In their history of organized Humanism in the UK, Brown, Nash, and Lynch (2023:229) note that education has been "an area of longstanding concern" for Humanist campaigns, and that, with church schools still making up roughly a third of the total in England and Wales, the Humanist movement "looks set fair for sustained activity." Yet, the experiences of children in our study indicate that despite—or perhaps, in part, because of—the continued place of religion in school curricula, a humanist worldview is nevertheless already being made available to children in England through schools, which intertwines with the humanist epistemologies and values that their parents are also resourcing. This worldview is not, as we have noted, expressed in terms of developed propositions or creeds in the way in which a religious tradition or organized Humanism might be. Rather it is seen in fragments and accounts of everyday encounters through which children, their parents, and teachers express principles of autonomy, individual rights and freedoms, values of respect and equality, and an epistemology that valorizes rationality and science—as a characteristic and achievement of the human mind—as ways of knowing the world.

While humanism was the most prevalent worldview among our participants, as a qualitative study, we make no claims about wider generalizability and we would not want to claim, as Brown does, that a "humanist condition" has come to dominate Western societies and cultures (2017:169). To do so risks reproducing binary ways of thinking about religious and non-religious outlooks and traditions, whereas our interviews indicate that humanist experiences and perspectives can be held together with other modes of existentiality, including the religious, as Lisa and Nancy exemplify. What our findings do show is the significance of "pull factors" in understanding processes of religious change and decline and how these intertwine with "push factors." While the absence of religious socialization (push factor) was clearly significant in understanding the formation of the children's atheism, to our participants themselves the expressions of humanism presented in this article (pull factor) were often more significant in their own narratives of non-belief than negative appraisals of religion. Indeed, negative appraisals of religion were marginal in many participants' accounts, especially children's. Moreover, expressions of humanist culture often undergirded non-religious identification—that is, representing oneself as other than religious.

It is worth noting that, while our study did not focus on them, there were, of course, atheist children attending the schools we studied, who were experiencing the same socialization in relation to humanism at school as our non-believing children. While we cannot claim this with certainty, we would speculate that they may have shared many of the epistemological stances and values as their atheist classmates and that their faith is sustained through religious socialization at home. Mrs. Fordham, for instance, commented that the faith of Muslim children at

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Sunnybank was supported by the active religious socialization they were receiving outside of school, and said that the Muslim children were "very very strong [in their faith]. They will also practice it as well. They go to mosque. . . They know things. They've got a much deeper knowledge of the world. . . And it's few and far between that you'll get a Christian child who has the same conviction with their faith by the time they leave primary school." Given that we currently know little about religious—as well as non-religious—children's experiences in relation to their faith in primary schools, her comments point to the importance of further research examining differences and similarities in how children of "all faiths and none" respond to and locate the significance of the dominant worldviews they encounter in school. Our findings raise questions, too, about if and how worldviews are being resourced in other areas of school life and the curriculum, as well as how worldviews continue to change over later childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. It is possible that these provide contexts in which children encounter alternative existentialities such as the agnosticism and postmodernism documented in sociology (e.g., Davie 2015; Lee 2015) and the disciplines of the humanities themselves (e.g., Fassin 2019). In general, just as "lived religion" and "lived non-religion" scholarship has demonstrated the importance of understanding religion and non-religion in everyday life, so we suggest the need for further attention to how humanism and other non-traditional existentialities are lived and resourced, and the place of power in shaping their contemporary expressions.

Another set of questions concerns "humanism" and other non-traditional existentialities more directly—not only about their prevalence but about their contours. Our approach to "humanism" is quite broad, compared, for instance, with particular Humanist movements documented in intellectual histories. This reflects the emerging and exploratory nature of this field of sociological analysis, and the need to better understand the nature of newer existentialities or worldviews. At the same time, our use of "humanism" reflects lived experiences and aims to help expand our theoretical language and toolkit beyond portraits of religious decline and explore the "substance" of the other-than-religious forms of life that children and young people are growing up into and themselves helping to shape. This language also serves the need for "non-binary" methodologies (e.g., Blankholm 2022; Lee 2016), since traditional as well as non-traditional worldview identities, beliefs, and practices were combined in various ways in participants' lives. With a growing population of "cradle nones" receiving little, if any, religious socialization at home, important research questions remain—as does the need to honor the desire expressed by several children, such as Callie and Ryan, to talk in positive terms about what and who they are rather than what they are not.

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