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Affective Engagements with Religion and Citizenship in English Primary Schools

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Abstract

This article draws on qualitative data from the 'Becoming Citizens of "Post-secular" Britain' study to examine different ways in which religion becomes interwoven in affective citizenship in school worlds. Focusing on the 'affective atmospheres' associated with Religious Education (RE) and collective worship in two contrasting primary schools in England, our analysis highlights how Christianity remains privileged to different degrees in both. We investigate the children's emotional and embodied engagements with the aspects of religion they encounter through RE and collective worship – ranging from interest via boredom to feelings of injustice – and reveal how these problematize current policies for English schools as failing to mirror shifting landscapes of non/religious diversification. We argue that the children's responses can be interpreted as an expression of their lived citizenship in relation to the new non/religious pluralism they are growing up within and shaping.

Introduction

The question of how schools should engage with a growing plurality of religious and non-religious worldviews is an ongoing feature of public debate in religiously-diversifying liberal societies. This reflects broader tensions in how states deal with religious diversity, in which they are often 'caught between rising demands for greater religious freedom or equal treatment from religious minorities … on the one hand, and the emergence of nationalist, sometimes xenophobic mobilizations against these demands on the other' (Burchardt 2020:

2). At stake here are fundamental questions about how formal and informal conceptions of citizenship enable or constrain particular religious and non-religious identities (ibid.). Yet while schools are an emotive site in debates about citizen-making and 'managing' religious diversity, we know relatively little about how aspects of religion and citizenship become interrelated through everyday micro-practices and affective forces in schools, or how children experience these processes.

Contemporary interrelations between citizenship, schooling, and religion are located in religious landscapes that in many contexts are undergoing significant changes. Many western democracies, including England, have seen a rapid rise in those identifying as 'non-religious,' especially amongst younger generations (Woodhead 2017; Beaman 2022). At the same time, accelerated migration in these societies has fuelled increasing religious plurality, with the fastest growing forms of religion associated with religious minority groups, who, like the non-religious, are a youthful and growing proportion of the population (Woodhead 2017). Thus, England is becoming both more non-religious *and* more religiously plural. However, the geographies of this vary considerably, from London, with the highest religious diversity, to the North East and South West, which are the least religiously diverse regions (ONS 2022).

Within this shifting landscape, religion remains deeply interwoven in schooling in England, representing one of the most controversial ways in which religion and the state interact. The prominence of faith groups in schooling has risen through neoliberal marketization policies promoting parental choice (Fancourt 2022), with faith schools representing 37% of state-funded primary schools (Long et al. 2024). Religious Education (RE) remains prominent in the curriculum, and all schools are legally required to provide collective worship. Moreover, alongside growing non-religious identification, many children participate in forms of everyday religious education in places of worship, homes, and other community settings, which shape their engagements in schools in complex ways.

Despite ongoing public debates in this area, the relationship between religion and citizenship has been a somewhat marginal area of study in the sociology of education. Previous empirical research on religion and schooling has explored the Catholic-dominated school sector in Ireland, including the affective dimensions of children's engagements with each other and religion (e.g. Kitching 2020a, 2020b), the effects of religiously-segregated schooling in Northern Ireland (e.g. Connolly et al. 2002), young people's attitudes towards religious diversity and sexual diversity across diverse school contexts (e.g. Arweck 2017;

Singleton et al. 2021; Ezzy 2023), children's belonging, connections, and attachments in relation to faith and belief in England and Australia (Hickey-Moody 2023), and the experiences of queer religious youth in schools (Taylor and Cuthbert 2018). There have also been studies oriented towards policy analysis (e.g. Arthur 2015; Richardson 2015), socio-legal analyses (e.g. Jivraj 2013; Sandberg 2022; Fancourt 2024), theoretical and philosophical analyses of religion in education (e.g. Gearon 2021), and studies of the content, practice, and tensions implicated in RE (e.g. Conroy et al. 2013; Smyth et al. 2013; Berglund et al. 2016; Benoit 2019; Franken and Hirsch 2022). Studies over the past decade have also explored the impacts of counter-terrorism policies and how the 'threat of terrorism cuts into pedagogical environments and practices' (Zarabadi 2020: 69; Holmwood and O'Toole 2018; Lundie 2019), while earlier research examined faith schools and community cohesion policies (e.g. Hemming 2011; Dwyer and Parutis 2013).

Over the past decade, a small but growing number of studies has begun opening up how religion and citizenship are lived, embodied, and intertwined in children's lives and school worlds (e.g. Keddie 2014; Hemming 2015; Kitching 2020; Hickey-Moody 2023). Building on these studies, this article aims to provide a window into how the often-contested relationship between religion and the state take place within the 'affective atmospheres' of school worlds, focusing specifically on children's experiences of RE and collective worship. The concept of 'affective atmospheres' draws attention to the 'feel', 'mood' or 'ambience' of spaces (Anderson 2009), highlighting how historically structured affective registers are interwoven with spatial and material elements (Zembylas 2022: 557). We argue that attending to affective atmospheres of religion offers new ways of understanding how pupils embody particular feelings for and about religion, and how these foster belonging or exclusion. We begin by outlining the policy context in relation to religion and citizenship in England and the conceptualizations of affective citizenship and affective atmospheres which inform our analysis. Drawing on qualitative data on RE and collective worship in two primary schools, we examine how Christianity remained privileged in both. We then show how children's affective engagements with how religion was located in their schools highlight the fact that current practices fail to mirror growing non/religious diversity, and argue that this can be understood as an expression of their lived citizenship.

Religion and citizenship in English education policy

Questions about citizenship and religious diversity play out in terms of how religion influences access to schooling, the recognition and accommodation of non/religious groups,

how non/religion shapes children's belonging, and whether and how certain groups are privileged above others through these arrangements (Hemming 2015). In England, religion – and especially Christianity – remains privileged in a number of ways, including the large proportion of state-funded schools with a religious character, commonly known as 'faith schools'. The introduction of academies since the late 1990s as part of neoliberal agendas created new opportunities for faith schools, which currently constitute around a third of all state-funded schools in England, of which the overwhelming majority are Christian (Long et al. 2024). Yet despite the rhetoric of parental 'choice' underpinning neoliberal policies, in practice, school locations limit choice, with church schools distributed geographically in uneven ways, with a high proportion in rural villages (Hemming and Hailwood 2018).

As well as the disproportionately high numbers of church schools compared with the broader non/religious landscape, Christianity is also privileged in RE frameworks. The 1944 Education Act made confessional 'Religious Instruction' a legal requirement for all schools, which evolved in the 1988 Education Reform Act to 'Religious Education,' reflecting a move away from confessional Christian approaches towards teaching about 'world religions' (Conroy et al. 2013). Yet the 1988 Act still required that locally-agreed RE syllabuses 'reflect the fact that religious traditions are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religious represented in Great Britain' (Education Reform Act 1988, Section 8.3). On these terms, RE is a compulsory aspect of the basic curriculum in England. All schools in England and Wales are also legally obliged to provide daily collective worship which should be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character' (Education Reform Act 1988, Section 7).[1] These arrangements have been contested (Hemming and Hailwood 2018). For example, three humanist parents and their children challenged the Government's exclusion of non-religious worldviews from GCSE Religious Studies (R. (Fox) v. Secretary of State for Education 2015). Mr Justice Warby commented in his judgement that 'the state must accord equal respect to different religious convictions, and to non-religious beliefs'.

Also relevant is the Equalities Act 2010 which makes it unlawful for schools to discriminate against pupils by treating them less favourably because of religion or belief. However, as Hemming and Hailwood (2018) note, the legislation does not apply to collective worship, and schools with a religious character are also exempt from the legislation in

[1] As Hemming notes, pupils or schools can receive exemption only through application to their local SACRE (2015: 7).

relation to religion and belief (for instance, in relation to school admissions and the provision of education to pupils). The influence of equalities legislation can also be seen in school inspection frameworks. Ofsted routinely inspects state-maintained schools in England in a number of areas related to religion and equality, including whether schools ensure 'an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all pupils, irrespective of … religion or belief' (Ofsted 2022a). Relevant also is the requirement that all schools in England actively promote Fundamental British Values, including 'mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' (Department for Education 2014). The Fundamental British Values policy and its definition of 'British Values' emerged in close entanglement with anti-extremism policies such as the Prevent strategy, which have been criticized as excessively targeting Muslims, enmeshed in a wider climate which has seen the political mobilization of anti-immigrant rhetoric and sentiment – especially in the period leading up to and since the Brexit referendum (Vincent 2018, 2019).

These 'inchoate moral codes' (Kitching 2020b: 13) surrounding religion in education policies – emphasizing respect for religious diversity, Christian-centrism, neoliberal market logics, liberal ethics of tolerance, and anxieties around religious extremism – raise important empirical questions about how teachers make sense of these requirements in how they position religion in everyday school life. They also invite attention to how children experience the aspects of religion they encounter, and what this means for their belonging.

Approaching citizenship

Contemporary conceptualizations of citizenship have moved beyond traditional understandings based on rights, responsibilities, and legal status. Feminist approaches from the late 1990s onwards developed understandings of citizenship as a fluid, multilayered sense of 'feeling at home' in a community (Yuval-Davis 2006: 197). As a process of articulating who belongs, citizenship encompasses culture and politics, and 'lived citizenship' is bound up with individuals' belonging to (or exclusion from) smaller and larger communities, their participation in different groups and contexts, and the ongoing struggles for inclusions and rights this entails (Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016: 60; Lister et al. 2007). Affective approaches to citizenship have also opened up how forms of feeling are interwoven with and mobilized in developing a sense of belonging, including intensified anxieties in relation to accelerated migration and tensions surrounding national belonging and identity (Di Gregorio and Merolli 2016; Fortier 2010, 2017).

Affective approaches have also drawn attention to how forms of citizenship become visible and imaginable through 'affective atmospheres' (Anderson 2009), shifting attention beyond individualist conceptions of the citizen-subject towards how we form bonds and communities through structures of feeling and patterns of repetition which 'haunt who we are and how we can act in the world' (Vrasti and Dayal 2016: 1003). Atmospheres 'traverse distinctions between peoples, things, and spaces' (Anderson 2009: 78) and 'exceed the bodies that produce them to create transindividual and trans-spatial intensities that surreptitiously affect all those who are present' (Vrasti and Dayal 2016: 1002). Questions of privilege and in/exclusion are deeply interwoven. As Ahmed (2014) describes, atmospheres can be 'walled' and 'angled,' experienced differently by different people in ways that make some feel included or excluded, thereby 'making spaces available to some more than others.' Affective atmospheres may be produced by 'habituation or intentional design' – with both elements present in schools – and are infused with 'distinct parameters for what is appropriate and what is not, who can speak and who cannot' (Vrasti and Dayal 2016: 1003).

Within education, Raymond Williams' work on 'structures of feeling' has had a longstanding impact within critical and sociological theories of education in terms of highlighting the significance of emotions and feelings in shaping educational cultures (Williams 1977; Menter 2022). Moreover, the past decade has seen a particular flourishing of affective approaches, which have offered new ways of conceptualizing the place of affect and emotion in school worlds and children's lives (e.g. Coleman and Ringrose 2013; Zembylas 2014; Dernikos et al. 2020). In relation to citizenship and education, Vincent (2019) highlights how the concept 'affective citizenship' evokes how schools express both an understanding of 'students as future adult citizens and … students in the present tense, as "citizens" of their school' (2019: 42-43). She notes that '[t]hese two foci are often overlapping, as can be seen in the rise in programmes in character, values, and moral education … which exhort students to develop particular values to guide their behaviour in school and in later life' (ibid.; Mills 2022). In this sense, students both already *are* and are *becoming*-citizens, and this is always an affective process in which children's bodies and actions act together with those of adults, objects, and spaces in shaping citizenship. Describing how attending to 'affective atmospheres' deepens understandings of how democracy circulates in schools, Zembylas argues that the concept helps theorize 'how educators and students come to feel, engage with and embody political concepts' (2022: 557).

Engaging with and contributing to this increased attunement towards affective dimensions of citizenship, a small but growing number of studies is opening up new insight

into how children's belonging, inclusion and exclusion in relation to religion is shaped through embodiment and affective processes. For example, Kitching (2020a) draws out the material, felt, and embodied dimensions of how children relate to religion, each other, and injustice in the Catholic-dominated Irish school sector. Hickey-Moody's study (2023) of faith and belief amongst children in culturally diverse areas of England and Australia foregrounds the affective qualities of the relationship between faith, belief, and belonging in children's lives. Strhan and Shillitoe's study (in press) of non-religious childhoods in England also attends to how non-religious worldviews are shaped through affective and aesthetic processes and interwoven with children's desire for belonging. In conversation with these studies, in what follows, we seek to deepen understanding of how feelings for and about religion become embodied through particular 'affective atmospheres' associated with RE and collective worship, which represent important – and often-contested – sites at the intersection of religion and the state.

Methods

This article draws on data from a larger study exploring the significance of religion in how primary schools in Britain foster citizenship – at national, local, and global scales, as well as how these intersect. The project included ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with children, parents, and staff in four state-funded schools in contrasting areas (two in England, one in Wales, one in Scotland). Institutional ethical approval was obtained,[2] and informed consent was obtained for all participants, including parental and pupil consent for children's participation. All names, school names, and locations are pseudonyms. One term's (11 weeks, 3 days per week) ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in each school, focusing on children in Years 4-6 (aged 8-11), observing everyday school life, focusing on RE, History, Philosophy, collective worship/assemblies, and classroom interactions. Data collection included semi-structured interviews conducted in pairs or threes with 26-30 children in each school (n=108) exploring non/religious identities, values, peer interactions, and perceptions of citizenship. Child-friendly activities and visual research methods, including photography and drawing activities, also enabled the children to articulate ideas about community, identity, and belonging. Interviews were also conducted with the parents of 12-15 children in each school (n=53) and 5 teaching staff per school (n=20) exploring religion, citizenship, and values in each school.

[2] University of York ELMPS/452122

Emerging themes were recorded throughout and beyond the data collection period. An initial descriptive analysis of fieldnotes and interview transcripts was conducted for each fieldsite which informed our coding framework. Full thematic analysis was conducted in NVivo, using an interpretivist framework. What follows draws on ethnographic fieldnotes and interviews with children and staff in our two English fieldsites – Faircroft and St Jude's – although analysis was also honed through relational comparison with our Welsh and Scottish schools. While our wider project examines different ways in which religion is an aspect of citizenship (including peer relationships, and religion's interrelations with other 'sacred' values in schools), here we focus specifically on children's experiences of RE and collective worship as the two areas of school life where religion was most prominent – and most critiqued by pupils.

Faircroft is a community school in a large city in northwest England. 35.6% of households in the area were deprived in one dimension, and the area was ethnically and religiously diverse, shaped by accelerating migratory flows, as well as longer-term histories of migration from former British colonies. The school is nestled between terraced streets with a large outdoor area sectioned off for different age groups, with plenty of playground equipment. Each classroom has a mezzanine level where numerous children go with teaching assistants to learn English, and which were also used for children who might need some time out. Demographically, the area is mixed, with 64.1% of residents White, 12.2% Asian, 11.8% Black, 3.9% mixed or multiple ethnic groups, and 8% other ethnic groups, including 9.0% Arab. 72.4% of residents had one or more UK only identity, and 25.4% had a non-UK identity only. 49.4% identified as Christian, 11.6% as Muslim, and 29.7% as 'no religion'. The percentage of children eligible for free school meals was 47.3%.[3] St Jude's' Church of England School is in a rural village in southeast England. The village is adorned with large houses, with a mix of architectural styles ranging from cottages to large Georgian houses. Countryside surrounds the school with horse riders regularly seen out of the school windows. The school is made up of the original Victorian school house, with extensions added over the years. The area where the school is located is majority white (93.6%), with 2.1% Asian ethnicity, 1.6% Black, and 1.9% from mixed or multiple ethnic groups. 93.2% have one or more UK identity, and 4.9% have a non-UK identity. 52.5% in the area identify as Christian and 40.2% identify as 'no religion.' The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals was 18%.

[3] The national average is 24.6%.

Affective atmospheres of diversity

At Faircroft, the atmosphere was shaped by the acknowledgement and celebration of 'diversity.' This was anchored physically in material objects such as wall displays as well as through embodied practices, such as discussing 'diversity' in class and listening to teachers in assemblies celebrating 'diversity.' At the start of fieldwork, on first entering the Year 5 class she was working with, Malone noticed a whiteboard filled with ideas about 'diversity' which the children had been discussing in their philosophy lesson (figure 1). There was a cupboard decorated with flags representing the children's nationalities (figure 2), and signs such as 'Welcome to Class 5' in English and Arabic, with words like 'hello' and 'welcome' displayed in different languages. As the children entered class, one boy who had just returned from visiting family in Sudan was proudly showing off some Sudanese money, and other children were interested, asking how much it was worth in pounds – to which he kept replying, 'about 10p' to the surprise of everyone who asked.

[insert figures 1 and 2 here]

This atmosphere of celebrating 'diversity' shaped how teachers and pupils engaged with RE. The curriculum included teaching about a range of religions, with teachers encouraging children to share their experiences as an important resource for developing understanding. Teachers articulated clear rules for how children were expected to engage with – while still demonstrating respect for – beliefs they did not share. Many children spoke about how much they enjoyed RE. Amy described RE as 'one of my favourite lessons because you get to learn a lot of all different religions,' and Zofia said, 'I like RE because we get to learn from other people's point of view.' Kaleb linked his enjoyment to an ethical principle of non-judgement, commenting that he liked RE because: 'They teach us all about different cultures and religions to help us know them before we judge.' Several children said they saw RE as enabling them to learn about different cultures and histories, for instance:

Aadesh: I love RE.

Rick: Oh RE!

Li: I like that you get to learn about other people's cultures.

Rick: Especially about history.

Savannah said, 'I like that we learn about, like, some children that are a different religion come up at the front of the class and tell us a bit about themselves.' Yet while many children spoke about how they felt happy to discuss their faith in class, some expressed hesitancy, revealing how this atmosphere of comfortable self-expression was not shared by all. Aadesh said he would not want to be 'alone' in talking about his Hinduism. While some children criticized aspects of RE, most – including both religious and non-religious – expressed an affective stance of enjoying the subject. Tomas, for instance, said he liked the subject because 'they … tell us information about all the religious… And I just like how it explains other people's beliefs and the other gods.'

In a lesson exploring Christian places of worship, affective registers of enjoyment and interest were visible through the animated ways children asked questions. Discussing the font, several children asked what 'being baptised' meant, and Aadesh asked if all churches have a pastor. When the teacher showed an image of a pulpit with a banner depicting a lamb, several children asked what it was, with some commenting it looked like a prayer mat. One boy shared that in his Ethiopian church, their holy day is Saturday and that his church has a priest who is nice and gives him presents on his birthday. This atmosphere of animated interest was not felt by all children though, with some looking bored towards the end. One child had her head on the desk. The teacher said that this was rude, and told her to listen and be respectful of all religions, demonstrating what was being constructed as the 'right' affective stance of interest and engagement, and how children whose stances were at odds with the prevailing atmosphere could be chastised.

This broader atmosphere of interest in religion extended beyond RE, with several children commenting they discussed religion with friends outside class. Fatima said, 'I'm actually really curious about my friends' religion. So, I ask them, like, what are their traditional foods? […] I ask them, what do they wear on special occasions? … Where does this religion come from? Do you have any gods? If so, who are they? How many do you have? Like, I'm really curious.' Sam also spoke about how he had learnt about Muslim practices from friends: 'Aasim and Kaleb are Muslims. And when we were learning about Muslims they were showing us all the prayers and things. They think it's really important, which I do believe it is', while Harry said, 'I'm really into different religions.' Here we see how although some pupils were not themselves engaged in religious practices, their interest in religion was being fostered by the school's affective atmosphere.

The ongoing privileging of Christianity

Alongside this atmosphere in which interest in/respect for religious diversity were markers of 'good' citizenship, there was also an ongoing privileging of Christianity at Faircroft which children experienced as in tension with this ethic. This emerges from the contradictory ways religion is positioned in English education policies, with on the one hand, a duty to respect diversity of religion and belief, and on the other hand, Christianity still institutionally privileged through the legal requirement that collective worship should be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.' This tension was clear in the celebration of Christian festivals. When asked about the fact that Christian festivals were the only ones celebrated collectively, Miss Quinn, the Year 5 teacher, commented that this was 'likely because it's a Christian school' – although Faircroft was a community school – while at the same time acknowledging that the privileged place given to Christianity did not mirror the children's religious diversity.

As the children were inhabiting – and co-constructing – an affective atmosphere imbued with respect for and awareness of religious diversity, they experienced the ongoing privileging of Christianity as jarring. Despite enjoying RE, Aadesh commented, 'there's one thing I hate … it's rarely been my religion.' He and Rick commented that 'all the plays' and 'all the histories' they engaged with were 'always about Christians.' Fatima and Savannah noted the dominance of Christianity in RE and assemblies. Fatima said, 'I think we should, like, stop with the Christianity for a minute, and then continue on with, like, and learn a bit more about Islam, or Hinduism, or Buddhism… Because there are some kids in the class that, they're not Christians.' Savannah, who identified as Christian, commented:

> Savannah: … when we do singing in assembly, we do, like, songs that are related to Christians more likely. And some kids in our class are … getting upset, because they feel like they don't fit in, because … nearly all the songs we do and sing in assembly are all Christian related.
> Fatima: Yeah, and some of the kids literally have to tell the teachers that they can't sing some of the songs.

Fatima suggested that they could sing songs from non-Christian faiths translated into English to help everyone understand.

Both girls reflected on how the dominance of Christianity was expressed materially and emotionally through differences in how Christmas and Eid were presented. They said that doing the Christmas story every year was boring, while Eid was only covered briefly in RE.

> Fatima: We just do lessons about them [Muslim festivals]. We don't have…
> Interviewer: Assemblies and things.
> Fatima: No. That's all we do. Just go…We just have sessions about why Eid is important, and…
> Savannah: Well, in assemblies, sometimes people go, 'Well, to all the Muslims, I hope they had a happy Eid,' … and then they just move on. […] I feel like it's, kind of, unfair for the Muslim kids […] Because all they get is a 'Happy Eid', and … then for five years, they're going to talk about Christians. But I don't think that's fair.

Their comments reveal how they experience RE as positioning 'religion' as an object of learning, in contrast with their sense of assemblies as symbolising collective belonging, and in which the privileging of Christianity and minimal acknowledgement of other faith traditions is felt as unfair.

Fatima described Faircroft as a 'Christian' school, and Lalia did too, and said the fact that Muslim beliefs were never discussed in assemblies, in contrast with Christian beliefs, 'kind of makes me unwelcomed,' evoking the 'walling' of affective atmospheres Ahmed (2014) describes. Lalia described her affective response to teachers' expectations for how children should comport their bodies during prayers in assemblies:

> Lalia: So I kind of get annoyed … because, like, in assemblies, they [the teachers] keep on saying to close your hands and do that, and I hate it because they're saying, 'Do this,' and they keep on saying, 'Amen.' But I don't mind that because it's their belief.
> Interviewer: So when they ask you to pray and stuff, do you join in?
> Lalia: No. …
> Interviewer: Okay so, what do you do instead, Lalia?
> Lalia: I just do what Miss asks me to do, like sit and wait until it's done, or I would cover my ears because I don't want to hear it, because I don't want my God to think I'm going to join in with them.

Lalia's comments convey her feelings of being marginalized through the prayers and how she crafts her own response internally and through embodied gestures. Yet her comment that she

does not 'mind that because it's their belief' also expresses her internalization of the pervasive affective stance of respecting others' beliefs.

Most teachers did not seem especially conscious or concerned that hymns or prayers might make some children uncomfortable, revealing how affective walls are felt by those excluded by them but can be 'imperceptible to those with the right of access' (Vrasti and Dayal 2016: 1002). Miss Quinn commented that when she was new to the school the previous year, some children in her class 'weren't singing along,' and she had told them:

> Just look like you are participating. Because at the end of the day it is a community gathering. People are singing as a group. And no-one is going to stand over you with their ear like this and double check that you are singing. So just look like you are participating. Be a part of the group. But you don't have to actually vocally partake if you don't want to.

Mrs Rossi however demonstrated how this normative Christianity could be an affective wall angled against some staff as well as children. She commented that singing hymns would make her uncomfortable: 'As a non-religion person, I wouldn't sing a song like that. So, I imagine a person from a different religion... you cannot really sing a song if you don't believe what it says.' She explained that the prayers reflected the legal framework and were, 'mandatory in each school,' and added that the hymns reflected the fact that the school leadership were not diverse in terms of religion – especially in comparison with the children.

Reflecting on how material spaces of the school worked to form the affective atmosphere, it is worth noting that in contrast to the collective Christian prayers in assemblies, there was no dedicated prayer space for the significant number of Muslim pupils, meaning ad hoc arrangements were made for children who wanted to pray. One afternoon, for instance, three Year 5 girls asked the teacher if they could go and pray, but there did not seem to be anywhere for them to go. The teacher told them to go and see if there was an empty room, but the room they found was locked, and as they were looking for a room, one of the girls said, 'maybe we should just pray at home.' In the end, they were told to go and pray in the Year 6 classroom, which was empty while Year 6 were in PE. Thus, we see how despite the atmosphere of celebrating religious diversity, in practice, Christianity was privileged – and pupils *felt* this as unfair.

Default Christianity

While Faircroft was a community school, St Jude's was an Anglican school with Christianity very tangibly present from the 'prayer corners' in every classroom (see figure 3) to daily Christian collective worship , frequent RE lessons, and regular school services in the village church. Yet despite this more overt Christianity, most pupils expressed little sense of religion as something that mattered to them. This reflected the fact that the children here were mostly non-religious, or Christian – with most not attending church regularly other than with the school – and a small number of Muslim children. While Faircroft children were interested in religion, most St Jude's children did not see religion as something they were interested in or discussed much. Libby, for instance, said, 'you just don't really think about it [religion].' This affective sense of religion not mattering to them was also expressed in the fact that they were sometimes unsure about their own religious identities. Meg said, 'I've been baptised, but I don't know what that makes you.' Moreover, children were also often unsure about friends' religious identities. Iris and Rami, for instance, were Muslim but other children speculated that they might be Jewish because they did not eat pork.

[insert figure 3 around here]

This lack of interest in religion was part of an affective atmosphere in which many aspects of Christianity were felt as 'banal' and taken-for-granted – able to achieve 'the status of the ambient' – in contrast with Islam and other minority faiths (Oliphant 2021: 18, Strhan and Shillitoe, in press). Nathan, for example, identified as 'sort of Christian' and when asked what this meant, said 'it's just like a normal person.' This feeling that Christianity was 'normal' was interwoven with the 'othering' of non-Christian faiths. This could make children who belonged to these feel uncomfortable, revealing how this 'ambient' Christianity (Oliphant 2021) was angled against some children. Rami, for instance, said he felt uncomfortable talking about his Muslim faith in school because 'once someone asked me, "Why are you Muslim?" It's going to put me on the spot and make me feel weird.'

In contrast with Faircroft, where discussions about equality and diversity amongst staff and pupils included religion, at St Jude's there was little focus on religious diversity and much more emphasis on gender equality, with a classroom display focusing on girls' involvement in football, or teachers speaking about engaging with a balance of male/female authors. While Faircroft staff articulated strong awareness of the school's religious diversity, when the headteacher at St Jude's, who was relatively new to the school, was asked how the school promoted respect for religious minorities, she was not aware that there were any:

> Interviewer: … I know there are a few children who are of a minority religion. How does the school … promote respect for those children? …
> Mrs Sweeney: I don't know if it is. I'm not even sure there's even minority… What ones? Do you know if there is?
> Interviewer: Yeah there is a couple that I've spoken to.
> Mrs Sweeney: Oh that's good that you've come across them. I haven't got to the point of actually even knowing that.

Teachers were often unaware of children's religious identities or beliefs, and said children were reluctant to discuss these in class. Mr Smith said about his class, 'I kind of don't really know what people's faiths are, if there are any. Actually, it doesn't seem to be something that anybody wants to publicise … I'm kind of assuming that's because there's very little religiosity.'

As well as the reluctance of some minoritized children to speak about their religion, Christian and non-religious children articulated a Protestant construction of religion as something personal, individual and private. Nancy, for example, said she would not want to tell her classmates whether she was a Christian or not 'because it's my private information.' This atmosphere of reluctance to speak about religion contrasted sharply with Faircroft, where most children were eager and proud to discuss religious practices – including their own. Alfie commented, 'even Rami and Iris don't talk about it [religion] that much. Actually, they never talk about it. I've never heard Rami say that he's Judaism or something like that.' Non-religious children were also reluctant to talk about their own (non)belief, and some commented this was to avoid offending others. Hazel said, 'since I don't have religion, I don't want to offend people and say my opinion about their religion, because they might think it's really special to them.' Thus, we see how interwoven with the atmosphere of default Christianity was a dominant sense of (non)religion as personal and private, and for most, not a matter of particular interest.

Critiques of Christian-centrism

Few children at St Jude's liked RE, and this was connected to their affective stance of religion as lacking salience. Maisie said 'it's talking always about religious stuff… And it's not very interesting for me.' Beth said, 'I'm none of those [religions], so it's just boring. Where in our life are we going to need this?' As at Faircroft, the children also criticized the

repetitive focus on Christianity. George, for instance, said he mostly did not find RE interesting but had enjoyed learning about Hinduism: 'in Year 3, we were doing Hinduism or something, and I found that quite interesting. But I don't like learning about … Christianity, because it's a Christian school, we learn about it all the time'. Sienna commented, 'I don't like it [RE] because it's kind of like collective worship, once you've done something there's nothing else to do on it. You just learn about God over, and over, and over, again, doing the same things.' Geoffrey and Elliot clearly articulated these affective registers of boredom and a sense of lack of connection with religion:

> Geoffrey: I find it [RE] quite boring. …
> Elliot: Yeah, same.
> Geoffrey: Because it's like all about religions, and because … I don't really believe in it. …
> Elliot: That's what I said, I don't really know what I am. … And we did the same thing about 10 times. ... How many times have we done Christianity again?
> Geoffrey: 3000. …
> Elliot: Too many.
> Interviewer: And what about when you learn about different religions? Is that something you're interested in?
> Geoffrey: Not really. ...
> Elliot: Yeah, same. I just don't like it in general.

Daily collective worship here was led by the headteacher or local clergy, who sought to create a distinctively Christian atmosphere. The headteacher would begin by lighting a three-wicked candle, and with each wick, said 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.' There was usually a talk, a Bible story (which might involve pupil participation), and a song – not necessarily a hymn – and collective worship always closed with prayers. Staff leading collective worship often articulated a taken-for-granted Christian/Anglican 'us.' In one assembly, discussing local churches, the headteacher said to the children, 'we [the school] are Church of England, which means we are Anglican.'

Children's comments about collective worship revealed how they experienced the Anglican ambience with emotional registers of boredom and dislike[4]:

[4] This echoes Shillitoe (2023) and Strhan and Shillitoe (in press).

Interviewer: Could you tell me what you like about assembly or collective worship?
Nancy: Nothing.
Sienna: I don't like anything about it. [...]
Nancy: End of.
Sienna: I'm not being rude, but it's not the funnest thing in the school. [...]
Nancy: Sienna, you're not being rude, that's a hundred per cent no, it's not.
Interviewer: Why don't you like it then? […]
Nancy: Basically... I don't really like it because you go over and over and over the same thing about the same religion of God, the same thing, don't judge him before you walk a mile in their shoes. It just gets boring.

Some children were disruptive in collective worship, and others signalled their refusal in other ways. Ella commented that some children said the prayers wrong on purpose, and Maisie said she heard 'a kid singing gibberish,' although both were critical of these tactics as disrespectful.

While mostly not themselves practising Christians, the ways teachers here situated the school's pervasive Christianity as justified from the perspective of 'heritage' reveals the ongoing privileging of Christianity as part of national identity. Mr Smith said, 'It's a fundamental part of British history, the fact that we were a strongly Christian nation. Obviously, a lot of education came out through the Christian churches in this country… There are a lot of C of E schools around the place. As long as it's not pushing beliefs down people's throats, then I'm quite supportive of that.' Yet alongside this privileging of Christianity, teachers also signalled to the children that these Christian aspects of school life were ultimately less important than others. Although it was timetabled to take place daily, collective worship was often skipped due to staff illness or prioritizing other things, and RE was often cancelled so children could focus instead on 'social emotional learning' and 'self-regulation' techniques, through a daily activity called 'zones of regulation.' These practices were aimed at encouraging self-awareness and reflected broader neoliberal grammars of acquiring individual learning skills and self-management.

Overall, the ways in which Christianity was interwoven in the affective atmosphere at St Jude's meant that the children were being addressed as implicitly 'Christian' subjects, with Christianity presented as taken-for-granted and part of 'national' heritage and culture. However, at the same time, this Christianity was felt as boring and something that did not

resonate with most of them, while they also experienced their own beliefs and (non)religiosity as something 'private' which they felt uncomfortable discussing, and which were being positioned as less important than other areas of school life.

Conclusion

In the context of often-politicized debates about the place of religion in education, this article has explored how religion is an aspect of affective citizenship in everyday school worlds, in which the intimate scales of children's bodies and emotions are interwoven with and shaped in relation to national educational laws and policies. The everyday practices through which children learn to embody particular affective stances in relation to religion – from interest in and respect for religion to boredom and lack of interest – take place within and feed into distinctive school atmospheres, which can be 'angled' and 'walled' against particular non/religious identities. While our focus has been on RE and collective worship as the sites in which pupils engage most explicitly with religion within schools in England, important questions remain for future research beyond secular Christian school contexts. Given the highly emotive ways in which particular ideas of religion are being mobilized in contemporary far-right religious nationalisms across a range of different global contexts, further research is needed to investigate how particular ideas of religion as heritage and national culture circulate in affective atmospheres within and beyond different educational institutions such as schools and universities, and their role in the 'moody force fields' which 'make and shape collective publics' (Closs Stephens 2016: 182).

Reflecting on how religion gets 'culturalized' (Astor and Mayrl 2020) and 'heritagized' (Astor et al. 2017), Burchardt notes that the ongoing presence of religion as 'culture and heritage' in the seemingly 'secular' west is typically 'taken for granted' (2020: 159). This 'taken-for-grantedness', he argues, is ingrained at the cultural level through 'its embeddedness in national self-understandings, while on the institutional level it stems from the fact that heritage regimes are often bureaucratized and guided by established rules and procedures'. Teachers' comments and actions in the two schools we studied demonstrate to different degrees this institutional and cultural embedding of Christianity's taken-for-grantedness – for instance, Mrs Rossi's comment that the prayers at Faircroft were 'mandatory' or Mr Smith's comment that Christianity's privileged status was justified through it being 'a fundamental part of British history.' Burchardt argues that secularization and growing religious diversity 'call this taken-for-grantedness into question, make it visible, and problematize it' (ibid.). While the teachers mostly did not question the policies they were

enacting, our analysis demonstrates that children were problematizing Christianity's taken-for-grantedness through their affective responses – from boredom and lack of engagement with the 'banal' Christianity they encountered at St Jude's to a sense of injustice at the asymmetrical privilege accorded Christianity at Faircroft. This suggests the importance of future research examining similarities and differences in how pupils come to problematize 'taken-for-granted' positionings of culturally-privileged religion or other worldviews they encounter at school through their affective, embodied responses. Moreover, it also suggests the importance of attending to how and why children's feelings for and about religion may be shaped in subtly different ways from those of adults around them, as they grow up within different social landscapes of religious and other forms of diversity (Strhan and Shillitoe, in press).

Overall, our findings reveal the contradictory ways in which moods for and about religion are constructed through the organization of space, bodies, objects, and wider education policies. At St Jude's, children were critical of the dominance of Christianity because, for most, religion was something they felt as unimportant and as a private, personal matter. The disruptive behaviour in collective worship from some pupils and lack of engagement in RE lessons from others were an embodied means of problematizing the school's pervasive Christian atmosphere, a pervasiveness which contributed to Muslim pupils' feeling singled out for their faith. Faircroft's dominant affective atmosphere of respect for 'diversity' meant pupils felt the privileged status of Christianity in RE and collective worship as jarring, and expressed a desire for change. This did not, however, entail the exclusion of Christianity but rather a more generous, affirmative engagement with plural voices and perspectives, so that children could see their own and others' worldviews affirmed.

While young children are often a focus of citizenship-making in relation to policy and wider public debates, they are often not recognized as active in their own citizenship practices. However, our analysis shows how children's affective stances of critique, feelings of injustice, or boredom resist aspects of how Christianity is positioned in their schools, and their responses raise important questions about how current RE and collective worship policies might better mirror landscapes of growing non/religious plurality. Moreover, we argue that the ways in which children enact and express their senses of belonging to smaller and larger communities and their participation – or non-participation – within these should be understood as an important expression of their everyday lived citizenship in relation to the 'new diversity' of non/religion (Beaman 2022). Given the ways in which religion is

increasingly weaponized in debates about culture and difference across many global settings, this article supports the need for further sociological attention to lived citizenship in relation to the growing diversity of non/religion and belief, and – in particular – how this is shaped and expressed through the affective, feeling worlds of children and in educational contexts.

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