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Institutionalising Nonreligion? Locating non/religion in a Welsh Primary School

Abstract

This article explores institutional manifestations of non/religion in a primary school in south Wales. According to the 2021 Census, south Wales has some of the highest levels of ‘religious nones’ in England and Wales. Yet little is known about what non-religiosity looks like in these areas or the role institutions play in shaping non-religion. Drawing on empirical data, we analyse how religion and non-religion interact within the school environment to open up how non-religion becomes institutionalised through the lens of the ‘infrasecular’ (della Dora, 2018), whilst recognising the residual traces of Christian cultural forms which persist. We show how religious repertoires continue to influence everyday school life whilst new forms of belonging and values provide insight to new configurations of the ‘sacred’ in a non-religious place.

Introduction

There are sharp increases in those identifying as ‘non-religious’ in many western democracies alongside declining participation in organised Christianity and growing religious diversity. This has stimulated burgeoning literatures on secularisation, non-religion, the secular, and post-secular,¹ as well as public and academic debates about the causes and impacts of these changes (Beaman, 2022). In England and Wales, while the steep decline in Christian identification has been the focus of national media coverage,² the Census 2021 results also highlight regional variations, from areas of significant religious diversity to areas with comparatively high proportions of ‘religious nones’. Amongst the latter, the Census demonstrated an increase in

people reporting they had ‘no religion’ and a decrease in people reporting their religion as ‘Christian’, and south Wales had the highest levels of non-religious identification overall (ONS, 2022).

These strong geographical variations in the extent of non-religion are, as Voas and McAndrew (2012) argue, something of a puzzle. Analysing regional patterns of declining religiosity, they note that while structural socio-economic drivers such as economic activity, education levels, and ethnic diversity play an important role in determining levels of non/religiosity, local environments are a further influential factor. They highlight the need for qualitative work to explore these ‘microclimates’ and deepen understanding of how these influence cultures of non/religion. Despite south Wales being the most non-religious region of England and Wales, we know little about the characteristics of non-religion here.

The past fifteen years have seen growing literatures on secularisation (e.g. Kasselstrand et al., 2023), the postsecular (e.g. Beaumont and Baker, 2011; Cloke et al., 2019), and on non-religious identities, practices, and beliefs (e.g. Lee, 2015; Smith and Cragun, 2019). Yet as Kasselstrand et al. (2023) argue, the institutional or meso-level, is often overlooked in the secularisation literature, and is also largely absent in studies focusing on individuals’ non-religiosity. Arsheim et al. (2022: 7) note, there has been little research examining how ‘people who identify as non-religious [...] fare in public institutions’, nor about how religion and non-religion might be present in seemingly ‘secular’ institutional spaces. Exceptions include Knott and Franks’ (2007) and Knott’s (2006) analysis of how religion and secular values exist in secular institutional spaces – a medical centre in the south of England and a high school respectively. Knott and Franks argue that educational landscapes are an important window into the contemporary interrelations of the non/religious and the secular, and how educational policies may ‘reflect the progressive separation of religion from the world,’ thereby acting as

agents of secularisation (Knott and Franks, 2007: 225). Building on this insight, this article highlights the importance of exploring institutions in relation to religious decline and change.

Within sociology, the role of institutions, or how things become ‘institutionalised’ has long been a topic of debate. In what follows, we approach institutionalisation as a process of norms and values becoming ‘embedded’, ‘internalised’ or ‘habitualised’ by individuals within an organisation (i.e. a primary school). As Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe, shared habitualised actions become institutionalised over time and thus become taken-for-granted. However we know little about how non-religion becomes institutionalised, or the significance of geography and locality for shaping this.

We follow the usage of non-religion referring to ‘any phenomenon...that is primarily understood in relation to religion but which is not itself considered to be religious [...] non-religion is a phenomenon understood in contradistinction to religion’ (Lee, 2015: 32). Growing non-religious populations globally have sparked growing research interest in non-religion, and this literature has sought to move beyond how secularisation theories approached non-religion as the mere absence of religion (Lee, 2015), towards understanding the ‘substance’ of other-than-religious ways of life and cultural values (Strhan et al., 2024; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2025). As well as research with non-religious individuals, there is also growing research attention to how non-religion is dealt with in law-making and political debate (e.g. Beaman and Steele, 2018). There is also an emerging literature attentive to non-religious children’s experiences which has explored the often taken-for-granted presence of Christianity in schools in England (e.g. Benoit, 2021a; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2022, 2025; Shillitoe, 2023; Strhan et al., 2025) and in Ireland (Kitching, 2020). However, important questions remain about how school settings may shape the ‘substance’ of non-religion (Lee, 2015), and whether and how particular

religious residues might remain influential on and entangled with non-religious cultures and norms.

Building on this scholarship, alongside the growing number of studies exploring children's upbringings in relation to religion (e.g. Lowe and Page, 2024; Scourfield et al., 2013), this article investigates the place of non-religion in an institutional setting. We draw and build upon Veronica della Dora's concept of 'infrasecular geographies', which attend to the multilayered relations between religion and non-religion, 'characterised by the contemporaneous co-habitation and competition between multiple forms of belief and non-belief, as well as by hidden layers of collective religious subconsciousness which underpin contemporary Western European societies.' (della Dora, 2018: 44). The 'infrasecular paradigm' was developed as a response to the need to recognise spatial, material, and fluid religious and non-religious phenomena in society that terms such as 'postsecular' fail to capture. Although della Dora's original concept refers to material aspects of religion, looking specifically at the making and unmaking, and desacralisation and resacralisation, of religious buildings, we argue that the 'infrasecular' is a helpful conceptual lens in relation to religious practices, forms, and rituals. It is also useful for understanding 'shifting perceptions of the sacred' (della Dora, 2018: 46). The infrasecular can help us to understand the 'inbetween' space between the binaries of religion and non-religion, and the collective memory of religious forms in local communities. We use this complexity captured through the concept of the 'infrasecular' to show how children's non-religious identities develop alongside residual and habitual religious forms experienced by adults.

Drawing on ethnographic and interview data from a primary school in south Wales, we analyse how religion and non-religion interact within this largely 'secular' school.³ Despite the lack of engagement with religion in the school day, we argue there are lingering religious forms

coupled with normative ‘cultural Christianity’, which contributes to an ongoing ‘detheologised’ (Vincent, 2018) existence of Christianity in this very non-religious setting. Alongside high levels of non-religiosity, other forms of belonging and values institutionalised within the school offer insight into new configurations of the sacred, such as a sense of ‘Welshness’ as an important identity marker and a form of diversity. We argue that exploring schools as ‘infrasecular’ spaces opens up how religion and non-religion continue to be interrelated and are institutionalised in ways that are often unremarked upon and taken-for-granted. As della Dora suggests (2018: 48), the ‘infrasecular’ helps capture ‘the complexity of a society in which the secular and the religious coexist, overlap and compete’. In what follows, we argue that there is *both* an institutionalisation of non-religion happening *and* at the same time residual legacies of Christian forms which coexist, overlap and compete.

Non/Religion in Wales

Much of what we know about non-religion in Wales has emerged from historical studies tracing the influence and subsequent decline of Christianity. Historically Christianity, most notably Nonconformity, had a strong presence in Wales, playing a key role in developing a sense of local community and Wales as a nation (Chambers and Thompson, 2005a). This declined throughout the 20th Century. Christianity and Welshness have been historically intertwined, leading to particular forms of ‘Welsh’ Christianity acting as a key identity marker for many, with Nonconformist ministers playing a key role in civic life on national and local scales (Morgan, 1971). The disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales in the 1920s, and the increased prominence of the Church in Wales and Nonconformist religious institutions was a way of differentiating from the English, strengthening a sense of a Welsh religious and national identity (Jones and Heley, 2016; Morgan, 1971).

The diminishing role of Welsh-medium Christian institutions and Chapels at the heart of community life in the 19th Century in the south and west of Wales has been noted (Chambers, 2011). Further, with the industrialisation of Welsh society, Welsh-medium churches suffered due to the increase in English language in these areas and associated commercial spheres. These changes did not lead to the complete disappearance of Christianity's role. Chambers and Thompson (2005b) suggest that Welsh religious institutions continue to be active in civic life, helping address social issues such as homelessness and unemployment (see also Davis et al., 2021). Christianity in Welsh society is therefore not a story of straight-forward disappearance but continues in new ways with more of a civic religious focus in its societal roles (Chambers and Thompson, 2005b).

Alongside these changes, non-Christian religions have had a continued presence and growth (e.g. Islam, see Gilliat-Ray and Mellor, 2010). Growing religious diversity in the 20th and 21st centuries has been embraced by political leaders of the Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament. In 2002, the *Interfaith Council* was set up by the then National Assembly for Wales (Chambers and Thompson, 2005a). The Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament positions itself as inclusive, emphasising openness and welcoming religious minorities, adopting initiatives to open-up discussions and cooperation between the different religious traditions in Welsh society today. For instance, to celebrate St David's Day 2023, Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament commissioned a series called 'A Welsh Story' which focused on the stories of Welsh people from diverse backgrounds. This inclusive positioning also extends to the Welsh Government's 'Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan' (Welsh Government, 2022), and their 'Nation of Sanctuary – Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan' (Welsh Government, 2019).

Educational Policy in Wales

The message of inclusion and valuing diversity is a central component of educational policies in Wales (Knight and Crick, 2021), including an openness to religious diversity (see Williams,

2021 who sets out multiple recommendations for improvement in this area).⁴ As of 2022, ‘Religious Education’ was changed to ‘Religion, Values, and Ethics’ (RVE) in the Curriculum for Wales, and includes teaching about ‘non-religious philosophical convictions’. The guidance also stipulates that there is no right to withdraw from RVE, making it compulsory for all pupils.⁵ Yet alongside this pluralistic approach and recognition of the growth of non-religious populations in the new RVE curriculum, schools in Wales are still required to provide collective worship, which should be ‘wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character’ (Education Reform Act 1988 Section 7). Shillitoe’s research (2023) on collective worship in English schools reveals that teachers are often ill-equipped or lack guidance for implementing the legal requirements. Yet we know little about how teachers working in highly non-religious areas negotiate these legal requirements, and what this means for how children learn to engage with religion.

Studies addressing religion and schooling in Wales remain few. Examples include Scourfield et al’s (2006) research on school children’s sense of place and identity within Wales, which touched on how religious identities can be significant in shaping children’s sense of belonging, Scourfield et al’s (2013) study of Muslim childhood in Cardiff which found occasional tensions between children’s religious identity and school procedures. Hemming’s (2018) study on rural church schools, shows the role of (non)religious identities, and included schools in Wales. But we know little about how *non*-religiosity in Wales is lived and experienced – either in schools or wider Welsh society – despite high levels of non-religious identification making this an important site for investigation.

Methods

The data discussed in this article are part of a wider multi-sited ethnographic study undertaken in four primary schools across England, Scotland, and Wales, exploring how children aged 8-11 understand what it means to belong to different communities, how this relates to

non/religious beliefs and values, and what it means to be a good citizen within and beyond the school environment. Our sample included a community school in north-west England, a community school in south Wales, a Church of England school in south-east England, and a community school in the central belt of Scotland. Institutional ethical approval was obtained and informed consent was gained for all participants. Consent for children's participation was obtained from both parents and pupils. All names are pseudonyms.

We focus here on Ysgol Dyffryn – an English-medium community school in a small, former mining town in south Wales with a mixture of working-class and middle-class families, with low levels of religious identification/practice. The school was built in the 2010s after the old Victorian building was knocked down, and was large, bright, and welcoming, with an expansive outdoor area and forest school. The town is made up of a mix of large Victorian houses and newer housing estates. Demographically, the area is majority white (97.8%), and only 3.3% of residents in the wider local area were born outside of the UK. 65.2% identified as 'Welsh only' in terms of national identity (ONS, n.d). The area was predominantly English speaking and 83.4% had no skills in Welsh (i.e. could not understand, speak, read, or write in Welsh) (ONS, n.d). 68.1% were unemployed and had not worked in the last 12 months. In terms of religion, over half identified as having no religion (ONS, n.d).⁶

Ethnographic fieldwork involved Malone spending 11 weeks (3 days a week) in each school volunteering as a classroom assistant, working with three classes in Years 5-6 at Ysgol Dyffryn (ages 9-11). Staff at Ysgol Dyffryn were welcoming, and she quickly became acquainted with school life, regularly helping with daily tasks such as reading with children and filling out their reading journals. Participant observation focused on everyday school life and was especially attentive to the place of religion in the school. Data collection also included semi-structured interviews with 27 children exploring their non/religious identities, beliefs, practices, peer interactions, and experiences in school. Children were also invited to take photographs

representing their experiences of belonging in the school. Interviews were conducted with 12 parents, and with five staff members.

We analysed the data iteratively, inductively and deductively, and emerging themes were discussed by all members of the project team and recorded throughout and beyond the period of data collection. An initial descriptive thematic analysis of the fieldnotes and interview transcripts was conducted for all fieldsites, which fed into the development of the coding framework, which was undertaken by all four authors in a series of meetings. The full systematic thematic data analysis was then conducted in NVivo. What follows focuses on how non-religiosity as well as continued religious forms permeate through the school environment at Ysgol Dyffryn.

Absence of Religion and Lack of Knowledge About Religion

Given the legal requirement that Welsh schools should teach about religion through RVE and that pupils should be receiving acts of collective worship, a striking finding from Ysgol Dyffryn was both the (relative) absence of religion in the school and the pupils' lives in general, and the children's broader lack of knowledge about religion. Engagements with and understandings of religion were experienced differently by adults and children. For some adults, there was a sense of nostalgia at the loss of religion, but this was not the case for children, as there was very little religion for them to 'lose'.

When children were asked in interviews whether they had a religion, some had little idea whether they did, or which religion they might belong to, and there was a general uncertainty from some about what 'religion' was. An interview with Logan and Ezra (both aged 10) exemplifies this. When asked if they had a religion, Logan answered, 'I don't know what that means.' Malone then presented them with a list of religions typically found on a survey (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Other, and None)⁷ and emphasised that

there were no right or wrong answers, and they could ask for further explanation if they did not understand. Logan picked ‘Islam’ and Malone asked whether he was sure, as to her knowledge – having spoken to the class teacher – no children in the class were Muslim. When Logan changed his mind to Judaism, Malone commented that this was not a test. Logan then said he was not Jewish and eventually picked ‘none’. Ezra also chose ‘none’. These were not the only children who were unsure what ‘religion’ was or whether they had one. Knowledge and articulation of their non-religious identities did not come easily for these children.

This lack of knowledge around religion was also evident when Malone was helping a group of children make decorations for the class Christmas tree. There was a pot of Christmas-themed sequins, and when one boy pulled out an angel-shaped sequin, he asked what it was. Malone said it was an angel, to which he replied ‘An angel? What has that got to do with Christmas?’ He asked the others at the table whether they knew of angels being associated with Christmas. One girl said ‘Yes, they are Christmassy because some people have angels on top of the tree instead of a star.’

This example is revealing of how the religious heritage of Christian festivals was lost or unknown by some children. This was echoed by the fact that several parents said that although they celebrated Christmas at home, the religious element was not discussed, rather Christmas was considered a ‘tradition’. This resonates with studies that have demonstrated that rising non-religiosity is due to an absence of religious socialisation, most notably by parents (Voas, 2010). Yet this lack of knowledge about religion amongst non-religious children was not apparent in our other fieldsites, especially those in more religiously diverse schools.⁸ The idea that this lack of knowledge about religion is mostly down to lack of parental socialisation therefore fails to account for how schools and local environments also play an important role alongside that of parents (see Benoit, 2021a; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2025).

This lack of knowledge about religion was both noticed and shared by teachers. Miss Evans (Year 5/6 teacher) stated that she did not think children would be able to articulate what religion they were if they were asked or know what a prayer was. At the same time, Miss Evans herself had limited knowledge about religion. When discussing a student teacher who had been in the school a couple of years earlier, she said:

Miss Evans: That year, they had a student who had a hijab. I am not sure what religion she was, though. I don't want to be offensive.

Interviewer: It'll be Islam probably.

Miss Evans: Islam, yeah. I am not sure, and she was fasting. That is Islam, is it?

This lack of knowledge about Islam from a teacher raises questions around engagement with and knowledge of religious difference, and how these have little salience in a predominantly non-religious microclimate. It may also be reflective of the largely Christian cultures which remained 'so deeply imbricated in our routines that we end up not seeing them – a sort of 'background noise'' (della Dora, 2018: 48) – in contrast with Islam. The children's lack of knowledge about religion is therefore perhaps unsurprising, and whilst the formation of non-religious cultures might be shaped through declining individual religiosity, it is also due to a lack of engagement with religion at an institutional level. The underlying collective memory of Christianity which seemed more apparent in adult's lives, did not translate into children's experiences, and their knowledge remained largely undeveloped. This institutional lack of engagement with religious diversity strikingly contrasted with the school's engagement with equality in relation to race and ethnicity, which was a focus of lessons (e.g. about the civil rights movement), assemblies, diversifying learning materials (e.g. books), and school displays.

Over the 11-week period of fieldwork in the school, RVE was not taught once, despite it being a legal requirement. Collective worship, another legal requirement, was also something Malone did not witness during her time in the school. This was something all staff who were interviewed recognised, citing the new curriculum change as impacting upon the priority given to RVE in comparison to subjects like numeracy and literacy. This resonates with other research which has underscored the lack of significance and resources, including curriculum time, afforded to Religious Education (Conroy et al., 2013; Benoit, 2021a). While the fact we didn't witness the teaching of RVE limits what we can say about the impact it *might* have had on children's knowledge, and further research here would be helpful, the fact of its absence and perceived unimportance to school staff is revealing of how religion was being situated in a non-religious area.

Yet alongside acknowledging the lack of religion in the school day, during informal staffroom chats, several staff lamented children's lack of knowledge about aspects of Christian culture such as the Lord's Prayer or Christmas carols. This was often expressed with a sense of 'loss', with these Christian forms seen in a nostalgic light by adults – which may, as Levitt (1995: 531) suggests, reflect the idea that Christian rituals and events are seen as a 'right' for children, linked to ideas around the 'magic of childhood' which get 'left behind as children prepare for the adult world in secondary schools'. Here, again, we see the mismatch across generations between knowledge and engagement with residual Christian forms. Some parents also expressed surprise that their children did not know the Lord's Prayer, although they were not teaching it at home. One parent, Sue, highlights this, when talking about the Remembrance Day Parade held in the town, in which the school plays a key role:

We went to the Remembrance Parade, and they started doing the Lord’s Prayer and [my daughter] didn’t know it. And I’m like, “How do...that is a Christian prayer. What happened?” Because, I mean, we all learned that in school.

Sue was asked whether she expected her daughter to have learnt it in school, to which she said she did. She explained how the school, rather than her parents, taught her the Lord’s Prayer and said she expected the same for her daughter. This illustrates an ambiguity over whose responsibility it was to teach children aspects of Christian culture, with teachers feeling it should come from home whilst (some) parents felt it should come from school. Moreover, interviews with parents revealed that there was broadly a lack of religious socialisation at home, with many explaining that they never talked about religion or felt they did not know enough about religion to discuss it with their children. This echoes the relative absence of religious socialisation that Strhan and Shillitoe (2019, 2025) found amongst the non-religious families they studied in England. What is apparent in this context, resonating with della Dora’s notion of the infrasecular, is the coexistence and overlapping nature of religion and secularity. Importantly, though, we see here a generational difference between the experiences, knowledge and engagement of the Christian forms and cultures between adults and children. Apart from Miss Evan’s lack of knowledge about Islam above, it was adults (teachers and parents) whose expectations around religion revealed ‘hidden layers of collective religious subconsciousness’ (della Dora 2018: 44) rather than the children.

The Lingering Presence of Christianity

Despite the lack of knowledge about religion and absence of RVE and collective worship, there was nevertheless a lingering presence and institutionalisation of Christianity in the school, highlighting how religion and non-religion may cohabitate and coexist (della Dora 2018). Teachers were unaware of the ongoing circulation of forms of cultural Christianity, and we

suggest that this reflects an ongoing ‘detheologised’ presence of Christianity in a very non-religious setting which is ‘too subtle in its imbrications with secularity and universalising values discourse even to be noticed’ (Jivraj, 2013: 324). This could also be understood as the infrasecular’s lingering ‘religious subconsciousness’, which often remains deeply embedded in societal norms (della Dora, 2018: 44).

This dynamic can be seen with the celebration of the Harvest festival and Christmas, as well as more civic-religious activities such as the school’s active role in the Remembrance Sunday Parade. Resonating with findings by Benoit (2021a) and Strhan and Shillitoe (2025), these were not viewed as ‘religious’ or ‘Christian’ events by staff or children. Yet Christianity was still interwoven here in terms of which events were celebrated. In contrast, there was no mention of non-Christian religious festivals such as Hanukkah or Diwali during fieldwork. These continued normative engagements with Christian repertoires, and lack of engagement with non-Christian faiths, fails to reflect the increasing presence of minority religious traditions within Welsh society – something the new guidance for RVE is keen to recognise.

Yet while there was no explicitly ‘religious’ content in assemblies, the coming together of the whole school for assemblies retained many structural elements of Christian collective worship, as remembered by parents and teachers. We might approach assemblies, as Shillitoe (2023) argues, via a Durkheimian lens as ritual spaces that inculcate particular forms of the sacred (Lynch, 2012).⁹ While the Christian ‘form’ of the assembly as a ritual space is retained, the ‘Christian’ content however has been translated into more generic material concerning values, virtues, and belonging alongside more practical information sharing about school events.

Assemblies and the Changing Place of the Religious and the Sacred

The changing nature of school assemblies provides insight both into the decline of institutional Christianity in the school, and into what newer forms of sacred and cultural values are central

to contemporary citizenship. Mrs Hughes (Year 6 teacher), when discussing how the children had little knowledge of Christianity, acknowledged that the changing nature of assemblies meant that the school may be acting as an agent of secularisation. During the interview, Malone commented on the recent Census results, discussing how south Wales had the highest levels of ‘religious nones’. Mrs Hughes commented that the school had ‘probably contributed to’ the area becoming so non-religious through the ‘lack of assembly’. She expanded, stating: ‘I do think because if they’re coming to school and they are having an assembly and they are praying – I doubt if anyone would know the Lord’s Prayer. We used to say that every assembly’. In one assembly, Mr Jenkins (headteacher) gave a memorial service-like address to remember the life of Queen Elizabeth II, who had recently died, in a contemplative and religious-like manner, discussing her ‘values’ and what we could learn from her life. Thus while Christianity had in the past been explicitly institutionalised through religious elements of assemblies, such as prayers, this no longer happened. However, the ritualised forms of bringing the school community together in a solemn manner, discussing an ‘important’ issue, and quiet reflection, can be seen as a secularised form of Christian collective worship, which was also present to differing degrees in our other fieldsites.

Assemblies also served to foster certain individualist liberal values which played a central role in developing pupils as citizens. Resonating with Mills’ (2022) research on character education in schools, as well as Strhan’s (2017) study of how a school sought to foster neoliberal ethics of self-discipline, hard work, and resilience, Ysgol Dyffryn had five ‘learning dispositions’ which were positioned as key skills all children should develop to help them not only in school life but for the future. These were being cooperative, resilient, curious, independent, and reflective. In assemblies, the headteacher would discuss these at length, giving examples when children had showcased such skills and rewarding them. When asked what they thought made

a good citizen in interviews, children would often reel off these dispositions in a list-like fashion.

In one assembly, Mr Jenkins (headteacher) had been discussing the learning disposition ‘independence’. Afterwards, in a moment strikingly resonant with how prayers would have featured in Christian collective worship, Miss Evans’ asked her class to close their eyes and think about times when they had, or had not, been an independent learner and then to share their reflections. Previously Christian ritualised forms then, we argue, continue to be present but secularised within the school – for instance, prayer becoming moments of quiet personal reflection on how successfully one had exhibited the ‘secular’ virtue of independence.

Mr Jenkins sums up how assemblies were framed when asked what the purpose of assembly was in the school:

Well, collective worship is the overarching principle, but I think the word ‘worship’ can be misinterpreted. Are we allowing children the chance to reflect as a group? And to listen to key messages, and to allow them some quiet thinking time, to think about themselves, and our school, and their families, and their friends. So, that would be my guiding principle about what I feel our assemblies should look like. They're used for other reasons, celebration, reward, collective singing, Welsh culture, and heritage is a big thing.¹⁰

While the format of assemblies was, chiefly, secular, Christian residues remain institutionalised and shape the expression of non/religious cultures. With the ongoing and accelerating decline of institutional Christianity in Wales, and the lack of other forms of religious diversity within the school’s local community, a handful of cultural markers related to Christianity continue to play a role in daily school life.

Welsh Identity in Ysgol Dyffryn

Rather than a sense of belonging centred around Christianity, Welsh national identity often became the focus of assemblies and other school events and was used to develop a sense of togetherness. This was much more pronounced than any focus on English, Scottish, or British identity at our other fieldsites. For example, during the 2022 football World Cup, children were allowed to dress in red or wear Welsh football shirts to watch Iran vs Wales in the school hall. The headteacher emphasised the importance of supporting and celebrating Wales, a message repeated by several other teachers, even after Wales lost. Moreover, Mrs Hughes commented that English children in the school were not allowed to wear England shirts if England were playing. Thus, this sense of embodied national identity was only applicable to ‘Welshness’.

This connection to Welshness could also be seen in the photography activity, with several children taking pictures of Welsh flags which they described as important because they signified their being Welsh. School initiatives such as the *Criw Cymraeg* (a pupil group promoting Welsh language in school), the *Eisteddfod* (a celebration of Welsh arts, language, and culture), and celebrating St David’s Day were all significant in developing a sense of Welsh identity amongst the children. The Welsh language featured in the school through daily Welsh language lessons, taking the register and lunch orders daily in Welsh, and requiring pupils to ask to use the bathroom in Welsh. It is important to note that despite this sense of ‘Welshness’ being evident in some ways, many children expressed dislike at learning Welsh in school, finding it hard or not seeing it as useful. Whilst Christian symbols and practices no longer resonated as central to pupils’ collective belonging, this sense of Welshness offered a common thread between pupils and staff in ways religion simply could not. Indeed, this common focus on Welshness is supported by the Welsh Curriculum and expected within school environments (Roberts, 2023). Roberts shows how stereotypical visions of Welsh national identity prevail within the new curriculum, with other national identities virtually absent from official

documentation or correspondence relating to the new curriculum. How then did this emphasis on Welsh identity and lingering presences of secularised Christianity relate to engagements with religious diversity?

Engagement with Religious Diversity

Religious, ethnic, and national diversity of pupils and staff was low at the school. Pupils did not encounter religious difference in the same way as children from our other fieldsites, feeding into the relative lack of significance religion held in everyday life for pupils. In our other fieldsites, children's knowledge of religious difference, and religion in general, was much higher than at Ysgol Dyffryn, resonating with Madge, Hemming, and Stenson's (2014) finding that young people in more diverse schools had more knowledge about religion. This is not to say all children interviewed identified as non-religious: some identified as Christian. Although none attended church with their parents, a handful attended with grandparents. Further, those who did identify as Christian tended to keep this identity private to avoid being made fun of by others. However, children broadly articulated a shared value of the importance of respect for other people's beliefs, as exemplified by Charlie (aged 10) who said, '[y]ou can believe in what religion you want to be in, and you can't be bullied for it, otherwise that wouldn't be very kind.'

As noted, the new Curriculum for Wales emphasises the importance of recognising both religious and non-religious diversity through RVE lessons, and the interview with the headteacher explored questions around RVE and the role of religion in the school day. He opened a document on his computer to talk through the plans they had for developing the RVE curriculum. This included six 'world religions' that would be focused on throughout Years 1-6, with pupils learning about key features of each religion, including place of worship, holy books, symbols, rites of passage, festivals, clothing, and food. Mr Jenkins also mentioned the

non-religious focus in the curriculum plan, including non-religious views on creation (i.e. ‘Big Bang’), and a recognition of the diversity of non-religious views and beliefs including veganism, vegetarianism, and humanism. Yet, as it stood, none of these were *actually* being taught. This was something the headteacher acknowledged, explaining that these topics were the expectations of their RVE curriculum going forward, but caveated, ‘I’m not sat here pretending that we’re doing it’. Sandberg (2022) highlights how the wording in the new curriculum put forward by the Welsh Government as ‘having regard to’, rather than ‘teach in accordance to’ the Agreed Syllabus, means that RVE may not necessarily have a set role in the curriculum, and may be more dispersed over the academic year. Mr Jenkins also explained the school’s initiatives to increase children’s awareness of diversity globally and key figures in history from diverse backgrounds (e.g. Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela). In contrast, other teachers commented that the curriculum-based learning was not always effective in enabling the children to *really* understand diversity in society. Several teachers said that having visitors to the school from diverse backgrounds would enable the children to get a more tangible experience of diversity.

Whilst religious diversity was low in the school, it was not completely absent. There were two Year 5 pupils who were Jehovah’s Witnesses and the ways the school engaged with them indicated that despite the idea of celebrating religious diversity, the school’s practical handling of religious difference was problematic. During assemblies where the pupils were practising for their Christmas concert, these two pupils would leave. Benoit (2021a) has highlighted how this physical practice of leaving assemblies, leaving the majority norms and practices of the school, can have an ‘othering’ effect on religious minorities. On one such occasion, Malone noticed the two pupils with a teaching assistant going over numeracy and spelling work. In this situation, the children were removed due to the content of the assembly but were not given equivalent activities to do, or quiet time to reflect, rather they just continued with academic

work that other children were not undertaking. Likewise, when Years 5 and 6 watched the film *Elf* in the school hall one afternoon with snacks provided by the staff as a Christmas treat, the Jehovah's Witness pupils were not involved, and Mrs Jones (Year 5 teacher) explained that, although it was 'awkward', there would be no alternative for them.

Unease around these two pupils was evident in some of the parents' remarks. For instance, when asked if there was anything she thought the school dealt poorly with in relation to religious difference, Gwen explained how the Jehovah's Witness children told her daughter that Santa was not real, something Gwen was not pleased about. Mrs Jones also discussed how the pupils' class teacher had raised concerns about what she could or could not do in class, and whether she could have a Christmas tree, worried about offending the pupils. Mrs Jones then stated, 'it's not just Jehovah's Witnesses, we've got other religions in the school, but they don't cause any problems or issues, I think everyone just respects them.' Mrs Jones' comment suggests that the presence of Jehovah's Witnesses causes 'problems' or 'issues', due to their presence shifting the institutionalised Christian and non-religious norms, whereas other religious traditions do not. It is important to note, however, that what these other religious traditions were was never explicitly discussed or expanded on. Because they were in classes that were not participating in the research, we did not have the opportunity to speak to the Jehovah's Witness children themselves, as such their voices are absent. Important issues around children from religious minority backgrounds being voiceless has been highlighted by Benoit (2021a). Indeed, Gwen's comments highlight imbalances of power and what is 'expected' of children from a religious minority background – i.e. an expectation that 'they' should continue to abide by the majority rules. Here we are referring to the Jehovah's Witness pupils in the school who were specifically singled out.¹¹ Even though Gwen herself said the issue around Santa was not religious, for her it *was* due to the children's religious identity that there was an 'issue'. We see here then how when it came to engaging with religious diversity

in Ysgol Dyffryn, whilst on paper religious diversity was presented as something to be accepted and supported, this was not necessarily reflected in practice.

Conclusion

This article has sought to ‘break open’ the seemingly secular space of a school in a ‘microclimate’ of high levels of non-religious identification, and to identify how religion and non-religion are expressed in and shaped by an institutional setting in ‘infrasecular’ ways (della Dora, 2018). Our portrait of how, when, and where religion is *both* present *and* absent in this space points towards the broader contradictory ways in which religion is interwoven in broader social and institutional landscapes. On the one hand, ‘religion’ was perceived as a category of social difference to be respected. Yet the small number of pupils with a minority religious identity were sidelined and considered ‘problematic’. At the same time, although there was a relative absence of religion in the school and in most of the pupils’ home lives, coupled with low religious diversity within the local area (which contributed to pupils’ lack of engagement with and understanding of religion), secularised Christian repertoires continued to permeate everyday school life. These lingering Christian residues were interwoven and habitualised (Berger and Lukmann 1966) within the institutional environment of the school (i.e. assemblies) and through the traditions prioritised (i.e. Harvest and Christmas), albeit in a ‘detheologised’ way (Jivraj, 2013).

The lack of understanding about religion amongst the pupils, and some staff, raises questions around how prepared children are for life in a society that is becoming both increasingly religiously diverse and more non-religious. Furthermore, the lack of RVE means that not only were pupils not learning the beliefs or religious practices of others, but this also, arguably, removes occasions to allow children to understand their own non/religious worldviews (see also Benoit, 2021b). Strhan and Shillitoe (2022) argue there is a need for opportunities for children to understand their own worldviews and that there is a sense of ‘epistemic injustice’

when non-religious children are not given the chance to do this. Williams' (2021) report on inclusivity of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic themes within the Curriculum for Wales highlights the need for engagement with ethnic minority perspectives, leading to a more enriching curriculum. In the report, Williams' (2021: 9) states that '[t]here is a tendency to believe that a focus on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic themes is not a priority in areas with low density ethnic minority populations'. The same could be said for teaching about religious and non-religious diversity – whilst recognising the ways in which religion, race, and ethnicity often intersect. Although our findings emerge from one primary school, their resonance with Williams' (2021) report suggests the need for greater engagement with religious and non-religious worldviews may be widespread in Wales.

Overall, our analysis highlights how institutions – perhaps especially schools and other educational institutions – play an important and often overlooked role in secularising processes in which common knowledge around religious practices and norms have broken down, so much so that teachers themselves recognise the changes in children's religious literacy and understanding. At the same time, shifts in parental practices also play a role in contributing to this increasingly non-religious environment, with religion in the home often absent in practice and in conversation (Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019, 2025). Yet many parents, and teachers, expressed a sense of nostalgia and loss, coupled with their concern for how this would set children up for later-life, citing the need for tangible experiences of religion and religious diversity.

This article offers an approach for understanding institutions as 'infrasecular' spaces, in which non-religious norms are interwoven with religious repertoires in multilayered ways. We have built upon della Dora's concept of the 'infrasecular' by focusing less on material forms of religion, but on lingering and residual Christian practices and rituals. The institutionalisation of non-religion can thus happen in spaces where these different threads of religious and non-

religious cultures intertwine and co-exist. This provides important insight into how although south Wales sees relatively high levels of religious ‘nones’, undercurrents of Christianity remain in unremarked-upon or taken-for-granted ways, and are perceived as ‘not religious’. While schools provide an important window into how non-religious cultures become institutionalised, with the rapid growth of non-religious populations in many places around the world, further research is needed into how the ‘infrasecular’ plays out in other meso-level spaces where religion and non-religion remain interrelated with cultural residues of religion.

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¹ Whilst ‘post-secular’ is a contested term, it allows a recognition of changing religious landscapes which see both a decrease in religion measurable across several variables alongside the ongoing significance of religion in public institutions, and the increasing diversity of religious, spiritual and nonreligious worldviews (Hemming 2015).

² See Russell and Farley (2022) and Duncan, García, and Swan (2022).

³ This school was ‘secular’ in so much as it did not have a religious character, and religion did not have a presence in everyday school life. However, collective worship of a Christian character in all schools remains the law in Wales and England – as such, the school is not entirely ‘secular’ in its composition.

⁴ Education in Wales is a devolved issue, meaning that the Welsh Government has governance over education rather than Westminster.

⁵ See Sandberg (2022) for more in-depth discussion of this curriculum change in Wales and specificities for schools with and without a religious character. It is also important to clarify that in England, parents have the right to withdraw their child from RE.

⁶ Using the ONS Census Map, we report results from the Middle layer super output area (MSOA) which are ‘medium-sized, aggregated areas of statistics, contained within local authorities’ rather than the town itself, to protect its anonymity. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps/choropleth/identity>. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

⁷ We recognise this is not an exhaustive list of religions and that some of these might not be classed as ‘religions’ per se, but these are the ones children would most likely be familiar with within a school setting.

⁸ Whilst this article focuses on our Welsh site primarily as the lack of religious knowledge was somewhat an anomaly compared with the other schools, the scope of this article means we are unable to discuss our other fieldsites in depth. A more comparative approach is taken in forthcoming publications.

⁹ Shillitoe (2023: 187) uses Lynch’s idea of the sacred as being ‘historically, socially and culturally contingent’. Like Shillitoe, we see the sacred as something which can be found in the ‘everyday’ and as a concept which is not in binary opposition with the profane. The sacred then exists ‘across religious, non-religious and spiritual dimensions and [manifests] itself within various assemblages of spaces, places, objects, divine beings and persons as well as the interactions which occur between them.’ (ibid:187).

¹⁰ It is important to note how assemblies and collective worship are often conflated and used interchangeably. For Mr Jenkins, the school’s collective worship and assemblies are the same – he starts by discussing collective worship and how this is encompassed within the assemblies they have in the school.

¹¹ The contrasting roles between parental socialisation and what happens in schools is something explored in future publications.