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Introduction

SHAUN AND AVA were nine-year-old pupils at Sunnybank Community Primary School. As they sat at a table drawing pictures of the things that they saw as important in their lives, Rachael asked them, 'I was wondering if you could tell me about what you believe in.' Shaun replied, 'I believe in chocolate', and Ava said, 'I just believe that unicorns are real and Pegasus. Pegasus and unicorns.' Shaun went on, 'I believe that chemicals in the universe created Earth and that we evolved from fish to monkeys and then to humans. I believe in evolution . . . I don't believe that God made the earth and made humans. . . . Because if you really look into it, it just isn't true, and I really know it.'

Rachael asked Shaun if he'd always not believed in God. He replied that he 'used to think God was real', but when he was six years old, he'd asked his mum whether she believed in God, and she'd replied that she didn't, because she didn't believe God created the earth. Shaun carried on:

SHAUN: So then I started thinking, and I just thought God really doesn't exist. I think my mum is talking the truth.

AVA: Nobody can have superpowers; it's just nonsense.

SHAUN: I asked my dad as well, and . . . well, his religion because he's part-Pakistani—he said that people believe in . . . Allah, that Allah is another way of saying God—that's what he told me—and that Jesus was just a helper of God, he wasn't his son . . . I was thinking of ways to think if he was real, if he wasn't. But then I thought, I don't think he really is. So then I just thought he's not real.

Shaun said that he then asked his mum:

SHAUN: 'What are you if you're not a Christian? Are you just a non-believer?' Mum said, 'if you don't believe in God or you don't believe

in Allah then you're . . . atheist'. So when I was about seven, I started calling myself an atheist.

AVA: I don't believe in God really, but until my parents tell me or until I get christened, then I'll be an atheist too.

As non-religious nine-year-olds, Shaun and Ava are not unusual for their generation. Indeed, Britain and many parts of Europe and North America have seen sharp rises in those saying they have 'no religion' in surveys alongside declining institutional Christian belief and belonging. This has been especially pronounced amongst younger generations. In the US, for instance, the General Social Survey of 2018 reported that a third of those aged eighteen to twenty-nine cited 'no religion' as their own 'religious preference'.¹ This rise of 'no religion' in many western societies is taking place at the same time as increasing religious plurality also feeds into rapidly shifting religious landscapes (Beaman 2022). Yet despite growing public and academic interest in 'non-religion', we know little about the beliefs, concerns, and experiences of this new generation of children for whom being non-religious is the 'new normal' (Woodhead 2016) or about *how* their non-religion and non-belief are being formed in everyday life.

Drawing on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted with children, their parents, and teachers in different parts of England, this book addresses this gap through examining how children are growing up non-religious, and what this means—both for the children themselves and for how we think about the nature of 'non-religion' and 'non-belief' in landscapes of growing religious diversification. Moreover, looking beyond the negative aspects of *non*-religiosity or *non*-belief, the book examines the positive, substantive dimensions of what these children believed in and cared about, and how their ways of knowing the world were created and sustained through particular spaces, places, and relations with others.

Approaching the Formation of Non-Religion and Non-Belief

The rise of those identifying as 'non-religious' in many former liberal Christian democracies has been rapid, accompanied by declining institutional religious belief and belonging (Woodhead 2017). In Britain, 'no religion' has overtaken

1. As Stephen Bullivant notes, the figures are even higher for the 2021 General Social Survey, with 44% of 18- to 29-year-olds identifying as nones, but the pandemic conditions of 2021 mean that the very sharp rise between 2018 and 2021 should be treated with caution (2022: 8).

Christianity as the majority identity, while only around half the overall population now express ‘some sort of belief in some sort of God’ (Voas and Bruce 2019: 27). This growth of ‘non-religious’ identification reflects changes taking place in many countries around the world, although the pace and form of these shifts vary (Lee et al. 2023). In the US, around a quarter of adults now say they have no religion, but this growth of the US ‘nones’ has been relatively recent (Bullivant 2022), while Sweden, for instance, secularized historically early compared with many other societies (Kasselstrand et al. 2023). Belief in God(s) is also waning in most places with rising populations of the ‘nones’, with this decline tending to follow on from falling religious identification as part of a ‘secular transition’ (Voas 2007; Lee et al. 2023). This decline in belief in God is evident in a wide variety of countries, with the European Values Survey and World Values Survey (1981–2020) revealing a number of countries having a decrease of more than 20 percentage points over the years measured by the surveys, including Britain, Belgium, Spain, Australia, the United States, Iceland, South Korea, Norway, and New Zealand (Kasselstrand et al. 2023: 66). And some of these decreases have been dramatic, as Isabella Kasselstrand and her colleagues note: in Britain, belief in God declined from 82 to 48 per cent between 1982 and 2018, while in Sweden, it declined from 60 per cent in 1982 to 36 per cent in 2017.

The decline of religion is hardly a new story in sociology. Indeed, secularization theory—situating the declining significance of religion as a consequence of modernization—can be traced back to the early nineteenth-century writings of Henri Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. However, the recent rapid growth of non-religious populations in many parts of the world has fuelled renewed scholarly and popular interest in the reasons for this change. Within this literature, it is now widely accepted that the rise of non-religion is due to a ‘generational effect’ (Gärtner and Hennig 2022). More people are self-identifying as ‘non-religious’ not because adults are losing their religion, but because each new generation is less religious than the previous one, with older generations of Christians gradually being replaced by those raised with no religious affiliation (Voas and Bruce 2019; Stolz et al. 2023; Kasselstrand et al. 2023). Moreover, this population of the ‘nones’ looks set to increase further over the coming years, as they have children and pass on their non-religion to the next generation (Woodhead 2017). This suggests that the growth in non-religious identification is increasingly ‘driven by what happens to people *before* they reach adulthood, not after it’ (Tervo-Niemelä 2021: 444), which begs the question: what is happening before adulthood that drives these changes?

Much of what we currently know about the growth of the ‘nones’ across generations has emerged from studies which have tended to frame these

processes in terms of the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of religious transmission. Existing studies have demonstrated that waning religion and belief in North America and Europe is linked to both a decline in parents seeking to bring their children up as religious and an increase in parents giving their children choice in relation to religion, which leads them to disaffiliate as teenagers (Stolz et al. 2016; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017; Tervo-Niemelä 2021). A large-scale mixed-methods study exploring the transmission of religion across three generations in Germany, Hungary, Italy, Canada, and Finland, led by Christel Gärtner, has revealed the relative absence of religion in family life in East Germany (Müller and Porada 2022) and has examined how a non-religious habitus develops over three generations in a German family context (Gärtner 2022). Focusing on the United States and Canada, Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme (2017) demonstrate that feeding into the rise of the ‘nones’ is an increase in ‘irreligious socialization’, while Christel Manning’s (2015) qualitative study of how unaffiliated parents in the US are raising their children underscored the imperative of ‘personal worldview choice’ for these parents, and how their parenting often incorporates aspects of religion in ways that challenge binary categorizations of their practices as *either* religious *or* secular.

Examining the generational effect of declining religiosity through an analysis of churchgoing in West Germany, Jörg Stolz and colleagues (2023) assessed the relative significance of different factors often presented as key predictors of religious decline: family disruption or divorce, parents’ liberal values, secular leisure activities competing with religious attendance, urbanism, pluralism, and the secularity of the broader environment in which children are growing up. They found—aside from modest effects for family disruption and secular context—no *one* specific predictor is mainly responsible for religious decline, and therefore suggest that ‘perhaps religious socialization fails because of a *general and societal* change in attitudes to both socialization and religion’ (2023: 18). For instance, seeing religion as a matter of personal choice is part of a broader cultural valuing of autonomy, which as they note, is ‘almost universally shared in western societies’ rather than associated with particular kinds of family attributes. They conclude that perhaps what matters most in determining (non)religiosity is not so much the families’ characteristics but rather ‘the dominant worldview’ of the broader social context in which socialization takes place ‘and the perceived social significance of religion’ (2023: 19). As well as parents’ impact, previous studies have also identified education as contributing to declining religiosity, as educational practices increasingly afford children autonomy to question

parental religious beliefs (Stolz 2020; Klingenberg and Sjö 2019).² Yet we know little about *how* children engage with the aspects of religion they encounter in schools or the role this plays in shaping their non-religiosity.

Taken together, these studies indicate that what happens during childhood is crucial to understanding the rise and formation of non-religious and non-believing worldviews. However, we currently lack crucial investigations based on data from non-religious children themselves about their own experiences and perspectives. The literature to date has largely drawn from retrospective narratives from adults reflecting on their own childhoods or describing their current child-rearing practices, or has examined teenagers' experiences, and it has primarily focused on family contexts. The historic marginalization of children's perspectives in the sociology of religion means there has been little qualitative research exploring the formation of non-religion and atheism with children, especially children within 'middle childhood' (aged seven to eleven)—the period during which children are becoming conscious of their non-religious identities and worldviews, as Shaun's comments suggest. Moreover, we know little about children's experiences in schools or about the interplay of processes in homes, schools, and other spaces which create, sustain, or strengthen their non-religiosity. If, as Stolz and colleagues (2023) argue, what really matters is 'the dominant worldview' in which children are growing up, then what *is* the dominant worldview that children are encountering and what are its overarching values? When and where, in practical terms, do they encounter it, and how does it feed into their non-religion and non-belief and changing locations of the sacred and spiritual in contemporary social life? And how do they contribute to shaping its textures?

Addressing these questions, this book is in conversation with a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature examining non-religion, atheism, irreligion, and other forms of 'religion's others' (Smith and Cragun 2019). This literature seeks to move beyond how previously dominant sociological lenses were shaped by secularization theories that viewed non-religion through the lens of 'subtraction' and

2. A number of studies have indicated that education in broad terms, such as length of compulsory schooling, can have a negative impact on religious and paranormal beliefs (e.g., Mocan and Pogorelova 2014). National education policies regulating the place of religion within schooling may also play a role. In contexts such as England, where children in state-funded schools receive Religious Education and schools are legally mandated to provide acts of collective worship, primary schools represent a key site in which many children first encounter ideas related to belief in God(s) (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019).

portrayed non-religiosity and secularity in terms of the ‘absence’ of religion (Taylor 2007). While secularization accounts, as Lois Lee puts it, were ‘preoccupied with how far people and societies have moved away from their supposed religious pasts’, this work on non-religion ‘shifts attention to the ways in which people and societies may move towards non-religious presents’ (Lee 2015: 14). Seeking to explore the ‘substantive’ nature of non-religion (Lee 2015), this literature is deepening understanding of non-religious, secular and non-believing identities, imaginaries, and practices, and their place ‘in the formation of subjectivities and societies’ (Lee 2019a: 45). The term ‘non-religion’ in this literature is generally taken, following Lee’s definition, to refer to ‘any phenomenon—position, perspective, or practice—that is primarily understood in relation to religion but which is not itself considered to be religious. Alternatively expressed, non-religion is a phenomenon understood in contradistinction to religion’ (Lee 2015: 32). In North America, this ‘non-religiosity’ often tends to be termed ‘secularism’ or ‘secularity’, and the non-religious as ‘secular’.³ Within this field, the terms ‘unbelief’, ‘non-belief’ and ‘non-believing’ refer to a lack of belief in traditionally religious phenomena, such as belief in God, rather than the idea of having no beliefs (Lee et al. 2017; Blankholm 2022). In what follows, we follow these established uses of non-religion and non-belief, and when using ‘secular’ and ‘secularity’ analytically, we refer specifically to ‘the subordination of religious authorities and concerns to other ones’ (Lee 2015: 190).

The fast-growing literature on the non-religious includes an emerging body of work exploring non-religion and atheism amongst teenagers and young adults.⁴ Yet although children’s involvement or non-involvement in religion is often the subject of highly politicized debates, their voices are generally absent within these. Thus, in providing insight into children’s perspectives on the place of (non)religion in their lives, school worlds, and wider society, this book aims to enrich understanding not only of the formation of non-religion and atheism but also—and perhaps more importantly—of how non-religious children are growing up and making their way in the world, and to learn from them about their values, priorities, and experiences in relation to religion.

3. Lee (2015: 190) notes that the term ‘secular’ is used in such a variety of ways—including the absence of religion, antipathy to religion, religious pluralism—as to often be confusing, and argues that distinguishing between non-religion and secularity enables examination of both phenomena with greater clarity.

4. See, for example, Catto and Eccles (2013); Hemming and Madge (2017); Singleton et al. (2021); Nynäs et al. (2022).

While non-religion and non-belief are ‘troublesome words’, in a sense ‘pulling us back to what they are trying to get away from’ (Engelke 2017: 135), the book demonstrates how what is at stake in the act of negating these—also troublesome—contested terms (God, gods, belief, religion) is deeply revealing of what does and does not matter to children, as well as of the changing place of religion in contemporary social life.

Studying Non-Religious Childhoods

This book presents the findings of multi-sited ethnographic research which set out to explore how, when, where, and with whom children are growing up non-religious and non-believing in three contrasting areas of England, and how they live their lives in relation to religion. As well as understanding the factors contributing to the children’s turning away from religion or theism such as the absence of religion in their upbringing, we also wanted to explore the relations between the children’s non-belief and substantive other-than-religious worldviews, such as the humanist, agnostic, subjectivist, or anti-existential worldviews that Lois Lee (2015) identified in her study of the non-religious in south-east England, or the indifferent or the spiritual-but-not-religious worldviews that Andrew Singleton and colleagues (2021) found amongst non-religious teenagers in Australia.

Addressing these questions required spending time with children and observing how they engage with aspects of religion and asking them about their beliefs, experiences, and the presence (or not) of particular elements of religion in their lives. Moreover, gaining deeper insight into the place of religion in their homes and schools and how children’s views relate to their family and school contexts required talking to their parents and teachers as well. Grant funding from the ‘Understanding Unbelief’ research programme enabled us to carry out ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with children, their parents, and teachers in three state-funded primary schools,⁵ involving six–seven weeks’ participant observation in each school in 2017–2018. A detailed description of the research methods, sample, and interviews is included in the appendix. Institutional ethical approval was obtained and ethical issues were taken seriously throughout the research. Both child and parental consent were obtained for child participants, and all respondents and schools have been anonymized and names replaced with pseudonyms.

5. Primary schooling in England is for children aged 4–11.

To explore how the children's experiences were shaped by particular contexts, the research was conducted in schools located in contrasting geographical 'microclimates' of (non)religion in England (Voas and McAndrew 2012). The first school, St Peter's, was a Church of England Academy⁶ located in an urban area in southern England, with a diverse pupil population in terms of race, ethnicity and religion. Although the school did not have faith-based admissions criteria,⁷ its religious character was tangibly present: wall displays, school mottoes, school letters' headers and footers, strong links with the local church, and the presence of prayers, hymns and Christian teachings in assemblies all clearly communicated the Christian character of the school. There was also a strong focus on diversity and inclusion in the school ethos—including religious diversity—and the children interviewed made it clear that you did not have to be Christian to attend. Religious Education lessons were taught weekly here.

Waterside Primary Academy was located in a largely middle-class suburban setting in northern England, chosen to enable insight into suburban cultures of non-belief beyond stereotypes of 'godless suburbs'. Formerly a community primary school, it had joined a multi-academy trust which included both faith and non-faith schools. Religion was much less visible here than at St Peter's or Sunnybank, with a small cupboard and a wall display area for Religious Education down one corridor. Other curriculum subjects often took precedence over Religious Education, and while the school held regular assemblies, these were sometimes weekly rather than daily occurrences, and did not typically feature references to religion. Songs in assemblies tended to be pop songs or songs from films rather than hymns. There had recently been tensions at the school with some non-religious parents due to a local evangelical group having come into the school to lead some assemblies. The local vicar occasionally led assemblies but this was limited to festivals such as Easter and Christmas.

Our final fieldsite, Sunnybank Community Primary School, was located in a predominantly rural setting in north-west England, in a largely working-class area where a relatively low proportion of the population identified as non-religious. While not a faith school, there were aspects of Christian material culture around the school, such as crucifixes or plaques referring to angels. The school had links with the local church, which pupils often visited for Religious

6. Academies are state-funded independent schools which are run free from local authority control, often operating as part of academy trusts. Many are run by faith groups.

7. This was due to its former status prior to becoming an academy as a voluntary-controlled school. See chapter 3.

Education. Assemblies took place most days and these included prayers. The region the school was located in was divided in terms of race and ethnicity, and local tensions, racism, and hate crime had led the local authority to establish various initiatives to promote social cohesion. The local schools in the area largely mirrored residential divisions in terms of their pupil intake, with the student population at Sunnybank mainly white British, while other nearby schools were mainly South Asian and British South Asian.

Ethnographic methods are effective ways of working with children and allowed us to observe how aspects of religion were interwoven in the children's school worlds both within the formal school curriculum and through more implicit occasions, such as registration and play times. Shillitoe⁸ spent most of her time during participant observation with Key Stage 2 children (aged seven to eleven), acting as a teaching assistant, and observing daily school life, with a particular focus on Religious Education (RE), Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE), and collective worship or assemblies. Alongside participant observation, paired interviews with children (aged seven to ten) in each school (115 children in total) enabled us to ask about their experiences in relation to religion and belief across different spaces, as well as observing how they interacted with each other in discussing religion. During the interviews, the children had drawing materials and craft materials to hand and as we asked them about things that were important to them in their lives, they often drew images or made Play-Doh objects to represent these things. To gain further insight into their experiences at school, we also asked the children to take photographs of things and places that were important to them in their schools.

We sampled children using a worksheet activity in which they were asked about their (non)belief in God. Prior to the activity, Shillitoe had spent a fortnight in each fieldsite informing the children about the study and answering any questions they had. For instance, at St Peter's, when walking to lunch with Fatima, a Muslim child from Year 5, Fatima asked her, 'for your project, when you say, "God", do you mean our God, Allah, or your God?' Such interactions helped inform how we presented the study to the children. A child-friendly presentation about the research was given to each class, in which it was explained that no particular definition or religious understanding of God was being used, and there were no right or wrong answers. Following this, worksheets were distributed, and children who gave the answer 'no' or 'not sure' to the question, 'do you believe in God?' were invited to participate. In describing the children as

8. Referred to as Rachael in interview excerpts.

‘atheist’ in this book, we are therefore referring to a de facto ‘negative’ atheism in the sense of an absence of belief in God(s), rather than a self-conscious atheist identity. Indeed, relatively few children self-identified as ‘atheist’.

Interviews were also conducted with the parents/carers of thirteen to fifteen children in each school (55 parents/carers in total). Depending on the parents’ availability, these were sometimes conducted with the children present, and explored parents’ beliefs, values, and the place of religion in their own upbringing and how these related to their children’s upbringing. While the children were all atheist in the negative sense of atheism outlined above, their parents had diverse religious and non-religious identities (including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, humanist, and agnostic) and theist, atheist, and agnostic beliefs. However, like the children, the parents often articulated a sense that typical religious identification labels used in surveys did not accurately convey their stances. For instance, when asked how she would identify, Monica, a St Peter’s parent, said:

I would say ‘atheist’, but it always sounds such a horribly harsh word. . . . I appreciate nature and amazing wonders . . . but I can’t really put it into any box, if that makes sense. I guess I’m a free thinker. I think, if anything, that would be it. I expect to be treated the way I would treat someone else. This is something my dad’s always said: ‘Treat others how you expect to be treated.’ In other words, just be nice to people and live a moral life.

We also conducted interviews with four teaching staff in each school (12 teaching staff in total), exploring how religion and belief were located in the school.

During the ethnographic phase of data collection, we analysed data thematically, identifying and reflecting on emerging patterns. Following data collection, the data were reviewed and re-analysed according to the kinds of socialization the children were experiencing in relation to theism, atheism, religion, and worldviews, and the interplay of factors across different spaces and relationships shaping their non-belief. This latter phase of analysis was also further developed through the ‘Becoming Non-Believers: Explaining Atheism in Childhood’ project, funded by the Explaining Atheism research programme, working with Lois Lee. This project drew on Lee’s earlier proposal that recognizing new ways of life amongst the non-religious implies that ‘the change societies have experienced is one of cultural transformation rather than cultural decline’ (2015: 182). This contributed to the distinction we make between ‘push’ factors that encourage children away from religion and belief in God (e.g. the absence of religious socialization, negative perceptions of

religion) and ‘pull’ factors that draw them towards other-than-religious worldviews, and to the identification of and conceptual approach to humanism in the argument we present in this book.

The form that non-religious worldviews take is an emerging area of research,⁹ with initial studies revealing some diversity in the outlooks of those identifying as having no religion or no belief in God, or both (Strhan et al. 2024: 9). In her research with the non-religious in south-east England, Lee identifies five worldviews she found amongst her participants: (i) humanism, which understands humanity to be special and ‘a repository of existential, including moral knowledge’ and which emphasizes the knowability of the world and valorizes scientific methods (2015: 162); (ii) agnosticism, which like humanism legitimizes scientific methods as a way of knowing the world, but which, in contrast, considers ‘that this knowledge of the world is profoundly limited’ and valorizes unknowability (2015: 163); (iii) theism, which views ‘the origins and outcome of life in terms of a centralized, autonomous being’ (2015: 166); (iv) subjectivism, which posits individual experience as a central way of knowing the world; and (v) the anti-existential, which involves ‘the rejection of existential philosophies and cultures in general’ and emphasizes instead ‘the immediate—everyday needs, responsibilities, and pleasures’ (2015: 169). These worldviews, as Lee notes, are not necessarily expressed in clear, developed propositions: rather worldviews tend ‘to emerge through fragments of articulated belief and also in accounts of real-world encounters of various sorts’; moreover, aspects of different existential modes and traditions—including both religious and non-religious—can be ‘combined in creative and self-contradictory ways’ (2015: 172). We anticipated that this research would explore the variety of worldviews children hold alongside their non-belief and the role these play in shaping their non-religion and atheism. Instead, as we spent time reflecting on the children’s accounts of their non-belief and of what was important to them in their lives, we found a pervasive humanism, much more consistent with Callum Brown’s (2017) argument that a humanist ‘moral cosmos’ has displaced—or is displacing—Christianity in many western societies (Strhan et al. 2024). This book, therefore, aims to bring to light what that pervasive humanism looks like in children’s lives, how it is formed, and how it is expressed in ways that do not necessarily correspond with established humanist discourses.

9. See, for instance, Baker and Smith (2015); LeDrew (2015); Lee (2015); Taves (2019); Van Mulukom et al. (2023); Singleton et al. (2021); Watts (2022).

Overview of the Volume

This book tells the story of how and why children in England are growing up non-religious and non-believing, and what this means to them. In doing so, it reveals that their non-religiosity and non-belief take shape and are expressed in relation to their being drawn towards a humanist form of life. This humanism centres the agency, significance, and achievements of humans, rational thought and the scientific method, and moral principles of equality and respect (Lee 2015). The book reveals how the children ‘figure out’ (Irvine et al. 2019) their non-religion and humanism through relationships with their parents, peers, school contexts, and wider cultural forms, and opens up the ethical dimensions interwoven in their forms of life, especially the centrality of values of ‘respect’ and ‘equality’ (Beaman 2017a).

We begin in chapter 1 by centring the children’s reflections on what it means to them to be non-believing and non-religious, and the relative salience of these matters in their lives. This chapter engages with the Christian—and broadly Protestant—‘genealogies of belief’ (Day 2011) that have shaped sociological portraits of non-belief and non-religion, before moving on to explore the children’s narratives of their non-belief, and how their non-belief in God is bound up with their valorization of science, empiricism, rationalism, and other human-centred ways of knowing, and is also held alongside a range of other beliefs, including beliefs about life after death and in supernatural and magical figures. We argue that their different modes of belief challenge narratives that equate non-religion or secularity with disenchantment, and situate the different contours of their belief as broadly located within a lived, ‘lower-case humanism’ (Strhan et al. 2024). Chapter 2 focuses on the parents’ perspectives, hopes, concerns, and practices in relation to (non)religion and beliefs in their family contexts. We demonstrate the relative lack of discussion about religion or belief amongst parents and children in most of our families—even where the parents were religiously affiliated and attended church—combined with a variety of stances towards religion, belief, and spirituality. Underlying the different positions taken by the parents was a shared sense that as parents, it was not for them to decide their child’s (non)religious identity or belief, but rather to support their children in working out for themselves who they are and their place in the world.

Chapter 3 turns to explore the significance of schools in shaping how children were growing up non-religious. While religion continues to feature prominently in education frameworks in England, we argue that schools are nevertheless

making a humanist form of life available to children, which feeds into how the children think about what it means to be non-religious and non-believing. This chapter explores how central aspects of a humanist worldview—principles of autonomy, and the valorization of science, rationality, and empiricism—were interwoven in school life, and also considers how children were responding to the forms of religion they encountered in school. We argue that the prevalence of this humanist worldview is not because of Humanist or Secularist organizations’ intentional influence over schools, but rather because these values cohere with wider educational frameworks. These values also cohere with the parents’ values and how they were seeking to raise their children, meaning that the children were—across home and school—being provided with resources to ‘figure out’ their own humanism and atheism (Irvine et al. 2019).

Chapter 4 builds on a growing literature exploring non-religious and atheist embodiment, which has challenged stereotypes of atheism and non-religion as primarily intellectual. This chapter approaches the children’s non-belief through the lens of ‘aesthetics’, understood not in the sense of the beautiful in relation to the arts, but rather an Aristotelian notion of *aesthesis*—a means of organizing our sensory experience of the world (Meyer 2012). We explore the aesthetics of the children’s non-religiosity, atheism and humanism and the interrelations between these through focusing on the sensations, affective registers, media and materiality implicated in its formation. We examine the feelings through which the children—and some of their parents—situate themselves as other-than-religious, for instance, indifference to religion or boredom, but also sometimes stronger emotional registers, such as disgust or disturbance. We then examine the ‘substantive’ aesthetic formation of key contours of the children’s humanism, including their enjoyment of science and nature, and modes of magical belief, and highlight the importance to the children of these immanent attachments and affective registers of enjoyment.

The final chapter examines the ethics and values bound up in the children’s non-religion, and draws together the ways in which an ethics of authenticity, respect, and individual autonomy in relation to religion is privileged by children, parents and school staff. Through comparing how the children and parents talk about ‘choice’, ‘respect’ and ‘equality’, we demonstrate that liberal humanist ethical sensibilities in relation to religion are shifting somewhat amongst the non-religious in England, as moral critiques of religion expressed by parents are giving way amongst their children to an ethic that is primarily articulated in terms of respect for religious—and other kinds of—difference,

within a wider social context of growing religious plurality. We conclude by suggesting that we may be seeing a ‘new humanism’ emerge amongst these children, which while expressing concern for human freedom and flourishing also seeks to challenge racism and other forms of dehumanization, and acknowledges a sense of responsibility to and interconnectedness with non-human beings (Gilroy 2000, 2005; Pinn 2015; Blencowe 2016). Finally, the conclusion reflects on the book’s key contributions and the questions following on from this, especially in relation to how we approach humanism empirically and conceptually, and the importance of further mapping the lived textures, contours, and social impacts of humanism and other forms of religion’s others.

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