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Lived Non-Belief: Non-Religion, Religion, and Relationality in Older Adults' Worldviews and Identities

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the lived reality and experiences of 'ordinary' non-believing older adults recruited from the community, rather than through non-religious organisations. It highlights how the worldviews and identities of non-believing older adults are deeply bound up in social relationships and social contexts over their lives. They are emergent and intersubjective, meaning worldviews and identities are experienced, developed, and co-produced in relation to others and to wider contexts and ideas. Whilst research on non-religious and non-believing populations is growing, older adults are largely ignored and empirical data with this age group is scarce. Their inclusion in studies is often based on the premise that older adults are only significant in telling us something about death. This thesis presents an exploratory study in 'lived non-religion' which offers important empirical data to investigate what it means to be non-believing for these older adults, how they understand it, and what role it plays in their daily lives. Through this we can understand non-belief as a messy and complex lived reality, bound up in relationships, negotiations with others around religion and non-religion, and subsequent choices that produce performances of a religious or non-religious nature. It shows that people do not exist in 'pure' religious or non-religious states, nor change from religious to non-religious in a linear or clearly defined fashion, as over-generalised secularisation arguments imply. Rather, non-believing older adults have connections to several religious and non-religious cultural forms which can have a transformative impact upon their non-believing worldviews and identities. The findings move us beyond binary understandings of belief and non-belief, and religion and non-religion, towards a more interconnected and complex understanding of lived non-belief.

I present findings from life-history interviews with 37 adults over the age of 65 living in Canterbury and Liverpool. Through their stories, we are given insight into the worldviews and identities of non-believers and the intricate ways in which these are related to social and cultural practices, values, and positions which can be religious and non-religious. Situations surrounding non-belief over older adults' lifetimes are varied and bound up in relationships with, and understandings of, the past, present, and the future. Despite varied experiences, liberal ideals have become the foundation stone for developing non-religious worldviews and encompass positions on religion and non-belief, as scholars who explore modern society and non-religion suggest. However, how these common and, sometimes ideological, liberal threads play out in practice is not monolithic. Where non-believing worldviews and identities might emphasise the importance of the personal autonomy of the individual, lived non-believing for these older adults is embedded in social relationships which can influence, but also constrain, participants in several ways. I show how the non-believing worldviews and identities of these older adults are not fixed or structured entities that exist in their lives; rather they are malleable, can change and are contextually contingent. This is demonstrated through exploration of key life events over participants' lifetimes, the contexts around these events, and the social relations bound up in them. These life events highlight the ways in which participants conform, perform, challenge, and negotiate religion and non-religion around them through their non-believing worldviews and identities.

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Preface

In 2016-2017, I was a research assistant in a Health and Social Care department, participating in several research projects focusing on an ageing society. I undertook seed-corn funding research with older adults to explore what role religion, belief, and/or spirituality had for 'positive ageing' (Malone and Dadswell 2018). Whilst this project was primarily aimed at 'religious' older adults, something that struck me was the fact that several non-religious and non-believing older adults signed up for the research to talk about something that mattered to them and to share their experiences. What became clear was how their non-believing and non-religious outlooks were important to them, but that perhaps they had not been presented with many opportunities to speak about this and it was something that I, at the time, had overlooked myself. This observation, along with the existing research I was familiar with in terms of religiosity and old age, raised several questions for me and ultimately led me to the research presented in this thesis. The questions raised were: Why had I not considered non-believing and non-religious worldviews in the research I was conducting? Why was scholarly research with non-believing and non-religious older adults not common? Is there nothing that could be learned from this group? When this demographic was included in existing research, why was this always as a side-note to religious and believing older adults? Why could I not identify a substantial body of research that looked at non-believing and non-religious older adults in their own right?

What became apparent was a lack of space available for non-believing and non-religious older adults, not only in research regarding health and wellbeing studies but in research with religious and non-religious populations more widely. Something I then considered important was shedding light on this group and their experiences, listening to their stories, and trying to understand their lived reality as an overlooked group in scholarly research. The personal and preliminary observations and questions alluded to here helped pave the path for the current doctoral research and the more substantial and specific questions I hope to be able to begin to answer in this thesis.

Not only do I hope this thesis contributes to our understanding of non-belief in scholarly research, I also hope it makes space for listening to the important stories that older adults have to share, which can often be overlooked. Telling and sharing these life stories has intrinsic value in aiming to understand what it means to be human, what shapes our lives, and what gives us meaning – something to which I hope this thesis is able to do justice.

Chapter 1
Introduction

> There are people though who just make assumptions. You get that everywhere don't you? 'Oh you must be…', 'which church do you go to?', or something; 'well actually, I don't go', and then there is some shock and then [we] just carry on the conversation. Because you tend to, unconsciously or not, think that everybody must think the same as you, which isn't always the case. (Ellen, 67, Liverpool)[1]

Associations between religiosity and old age permeate not only academic work, but also older adults' experiences. Throughout this thesis, I draw on life-history interviews with 37 ordinary non-believing older adults in Canterbury and Liverpool (England). The growing field of non-religious studies over the last decade has been important for casting light on the varied lives, experiences, worldviews, and beliefs of non-religious populations around the world (Bullivant 2020). That said, and as will become clear throughout this thesis, older adults remain overlooked within these studies, or engagement is limited to certain topics, and their inclusion can add depth to what we already know as well as presenting unique contributions to the field.

Before progressing further, it is worth noting and defining the key terms I use throughout this thesis. In the chapters that follow, I use the term non-belief to capture my participants' 'state of not having (especially religious) faith or belief', following the definition from the *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism* (Lee and Bullivant 2016). The term non-religion is used to denote '[p]henomena primarily identified in contrast to religion, including but not limited to those rejecting religion' (Lee and Bullivant 2016). I use the word 'ordinary' to describe my participants as they were recruited from the community rather from non-religious organisations (e.g. an atheist organisation), as the latter represent a minority of non-believers in the UK, despite these groups being over-recruited within the field of non-religion (Lee *et al* 2017).

Like many terms used to describe the people we undertake research with, ordinary is a term used in different ways by different scholars, and by participants themselves. For instance, from

[1] All participant names are pseudonyms.

a cultural studies approach, Highmore (2010) explores 'ordinary lives' and sees 'ordinary' as denoting the habits, routines, and rhythms of daily life. He states '[t]he ordinary speaks of commonality without necessarily intoning the ideological set pieces of "the silent majority", or of universality' (2010: 18). Highmore highlights the risks of using the term ordinary too, and how in looking at 'ordinary' lives we stumble across the extra-ordinary too. Brownlie's (2019) work further highlights how the term ordinary can be contested. She specifically looks at emotions in research of the ordinary and everyday life and considers the 'ordinary' she is researching to be in contrast with the 'dramatic' (ibid: 258), while highlighting how the ordinary can also be a performance. In her research, Brownlie considers how people share their ordinary lives and 'insignificant' aspects of their days, and how, often, it is a difficult task.

Who is considered 'ordinary' depends on the context of what is being explored (Turner 2009). Within the context of exploring 'ordinary' people in the media, Turner explains how even within the context of media, there are 'so many different kinds of ordinary people we need to consider' (Turner 2009: 13). This is something to take into account with my own participants, although referring to them as 'ordinary' to reflect that they do not belong to non-religious organisations, the stories they share have both mundane and everyday elements as well as extra-ordinary elements, thus context is important.

From an anthropological approach, Lambek (2010) explores the 'ordinary', in relation to ethics in particular, and argues that ordinary in this context 'is relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself' (ibid: 2). Ordinary, in the context of this thesis then, has some similarities here in that I am looking at the lived realities of those outside of official modes of non-religiosity. This also has some similarities with Brownlee and Anderson's (2017) and Hall and Smith's (2015) use of ordinary, who explore ordinary acts of kindness through mundane acts rather than more official interactions by public employees for example.

Although not exhaustive, the above engagements with 'ordinary' highlight its widespread and varied usage in several fields. In this thesis, ordinary is used to reflect the non-official modes of religiosity that exist and are lived in people's everyday lives. Using the term ordinary does not suggest that participants' experiences are unimportant, but it is through their everyday nature, rather than drawing on the experiences of affiliated atheists for instance, that we are able to see non-believing realities in a more holistic manner. Through a series of life-history interviews I explore and identify the experiences and lived realities of these ordinary non-

believers and highlight the intersubjective nature of the non-believing worldviews and identities that are central in older adults' everyday lives.

Existing research has commented on age differences of 'religious nones'[2] in society, showing how older adults make up a smaller proportion of this category than other age groups (e.g. Crockett and Voas 2006). Linda Woodhead (2016: 248) states that, 'for younger people in Britain today being religious is very much the exception rather than the norm, whereas for older people it is the other way round'. Madge, Hemming, and Stenson's (2014) work with young people offers another example of the way in which the religiosity of older people is highlighted in relation to the greater non-religiosity of younger people:

> The view that young people do not value religious practice in the same way as older people, and that the intensity of their worship is often less, was also expressed [by the young people within our research]. They may be less likely to go to services that are more geared to older people and boring to younger people. Additionally, older people have more time and practicing religion is built into their lives. Young people have so much to do and may prioritise enjoying themselves and doing things with friends over religious practice. They are also more imbued with a sense of personal agency rather than an obligation to follow family tradition, and more likely to choose the parts of the religion they want to follow. But young people might still go along with religion as a kind of insurance policy (ibid: 47)

The British Social Attitudes Survey (2017) highlights the stark age differences of those claiming no religion, showing that young people make up the majority of the non-religious population, and older people the minority. Whilst this is true, and important research has been conducted to help understand these non-religious lives across these age categories (e.g. Day, Vincett, and Cotter 2013; Lee 2015; Manning 2015; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019), non-religious older adults have been overlooked and are typically considered to be less theoretically significant due to their minority status. As Woodhead (2016: 249) herself states, 'the more important story has to do with children' when trying to understand a shift from 'Christian to non-religious Britain' (ibid: 249).

Despite older adults being a minority when it comes to the non-religious, the fact is that in the UK they still make up a significant number the of non-religious population – with 40.9% of those aged 65 to 74, and 31.1% of those aged 75 and over, claiming 'no religion' (British Social Attitudes Survey 2018).[3] When it comes to non-believers more specifically, data from the

[2] A 'religious none' is '[a] person with no religious affiliation, most often used to refer to those who select 'none' or 'no religion' in surveys' (Lee and Bullivant 2016).
[3] Data from the 2018 British Social Attitudes Survey is available via: http://www.britsocat.com/Home

nationally representative British Social Attitudes Survey (2018) show that of respondents aged 65 and over, who were asked '[w]hich statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?', 17.56% said they do not believe in God, and 17.85% said they do not know if God exists and they do not know if there is any way to find out.[4] Although these are smaller populations than non-believers of other ages, in taking a broad definition of non-belief, inclusive of both of these stances, they amount to a large number of individuals whose voices and experiences stand to increase knowledge of the diversity and nature of non-belief in general as well as in relation to particular issues, such as understanding ideas around secularisation, the transmission of non-religious and non-believing cultures and worldviews, and end-of-life experiences. Through a lived non-religion approach,[5] which explores individual experiences and understandings of their non-belief and non-religion, rather than institutionalised and official modes of non-religiosity, this thesis emphasises that despite non-believing older adults being a minority, they are both empirically and theoretically significant.

Whilst there is a lack of research with non-believing older adults, there is a wealth of research on religious and believing older adults from several disciplinary approaches. This observation is a perpetuation of some of the assumptions around old age and religiosity. In these studies, religion and belief are often credited as positive, helpful, and meaningful for older adults in terms of their health, wellbeing, and social lives. These studies often focus on particular topics such as coping, loss and bereavement, decline, and death. The lack of representation of non-believing older adults in these studies brings into question not only some of the claims made around religiosity, belief, and old age, but they also tell us very little about everyday lived realities beyond the common topics discussed above. Much of the research that does include non-religious and non-believing older adults also tends to stick to these topics. What non-belief looks like for an older adult and what role it plays in daily life is largely unanswered by existing literature.

The State of the Non-Religious Field

The following, albeit brief, overview of the non-religious field sheds light on several unanswered questions and untold stories that exist when trying to understand non-religious and

[4] This has shown an increase from the data collected in 2008 in relation to the first statement. In 2008, of those 65 and over, 11.62% of respondents said that they do not believe in God. Yet the number of those saying they do not know if God exists and do not think there is any way to find out, seems to have plateaued, and even slightly decreased in 2018 from 2008, where 17.92% chose this statement.

[5] The 'lived non-religion' approach this thesis takes builds on McGuire's (2008) 'lived religion' approach to studying the role of religion in people's everyday lives rather than through official or organised religious forms. This will be further discussed below.

non-believing realities. I will show how the gaps identified could begin to be answered by taking into account older adults, gaps which this thesis aims to address.

In contrast to research with non-believing older adults, research with the non-religious from younger age groups and studies with people from a variety of ages, tells us a substantial amount about non-religious and non-believing realities, as well as some of the alternative worldviews, or 'existential cultures' (Lee 2015) that can be found amongst these populations. These studies provide a considerable breakthrough in showing the substantial nature of non-religion. They highlight the wide range of experiences and viewpoints that non-religious populations have. But to what extent these worldviews and cultures are also present with non-believing older adults is poorly understood, as is whether there are non-religious or non-believing cultures that are not yet accounted for within older adult populations. Considering whether there are expressions of non-religiosity or alternative beliefs that are uniquely important for older adults remains under-researched.

Within the field of non-religious studies then, there have been significant advances in understanding the substantial non-religious cultures, worldviews, and identities that people have. These findings are often displayed through typologies of non-religious people (e.g. Eccles 2012; Sheard 2014; Silver *et al* 2014; Lee 2015; Manning 2015). Yet, this typological way of thinking takes on a timeless quality and there is less known about how non-belief or non-religion may change over a person's lifetime. As I will discuss in more detail later, some argue that non-religious identity can be 'liminal' (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010) or 'fuzzy' (Voas 2009). But again, this fails to tell us the full story of the lived reality of non-belief: where identity might change, do belief and non-belief change in the same way? These top-level observations call for more qualitative depth in understanding what may bring about such changes, and older adults' experiences offer a key vantage point to consider this change over time.

One of the major strands of academic thinking that has dominated not only non-religious studies, but also religious studies and early sociology itself, is secularisation, or several theories of secularisation to be more precise. Such theories often depict religious attachments as being discarded and disappearing from non-believing lives, albeit at different rates, but always eventually vanishing as society becomes more 'secular' (e.g. Bruce 2002; McLeod 2007; Brown 2009). Further, such theories often identify the worldviews of non-believers as primarily and intrinsically liberal humanist, and as philosophical, moral, or intellectual, rather

than considering the social nature of non-religious and non-believing worldviews and identities (e.g. Bruce 2002; Zuckerman 2008; 2012; Campbell 2013; Zuckerman 2014; Manning 2015; Brown 2017). Such theories not only depict non-believing and non-religious people in the particular ways mentioned above, but see the shift from religion to non-religion as a linear process – from religious past to non-religious present – with little detail about how these processes happen on a micro-level and little known about whether and how cultural connections to religion may continue in people's lives.

Despite the presence of secularisation theories in the aforementioned fields, large parts of these secularisation stories remain untold. Whilst looking at non-religious populations provides empirical opportunities to understand so called 'secularised societies', we cannot fully understand secularisation by only looking at the non-religious young or the religious old. There are rich opportunities for understanding how key life events influence non-belief over someone's lifetime and whether people understand their non-belief in relation to wider historical, religious, social, and cultural changes – those which secularisation theorists claim to be significant. Who better than those who have lived through and likely experienced such changes to shed light on this? What secularisation theories and research also fail to show in sufficient depth is the lived experiences of these societal changes for non-believers and non-religious populations. This leaves many questions outstanding. For instance, does religion and belief disappear overnight or can religious cultures remain important for non-believers in different ways? Whilst these theories often focus on the decline and loss of religion, existing research has shown how non-religion is substantial (Lee 2015), it can encompass being *with* something, rather than simply being a lack or an absence of religion. Yet, there remain opportunities for further exploring the historical and contextual processes bound up in this.

Indeed, there are those who challenge the claims of secularisation theories and argue that religion instead has become private, but that people still believe. One example of this is Davie's (1994) notion of 'believing without belonging'. Davie argues that despite trends of decline in Britain, people tend to believe but there is minimal participation in institutional religion. She further argues that 'relatively few British people have opted out of religion altogether: out and out atheists are rare' (Davie 1994: 2). In looking at religious changes in Britain since 1945, Davie argues that '[p]ractice declines in all social groups (unevenly and from different starting points), while some sort of belief persists' (ibid: 107) – although, what Davie means by 'belief' is not defined. Drawing on data from the European Values Study, Davie states that this persistent belief goes hand-in-hand with the lack of a sense of need to attend or be involved in

religious institutions. As such, she argues 'it seems [...] more accurate to describe late-twentieth-century Britain – together with most of Western Europe – as unchurched rather than simply secular' (ibid: 12-13). In a similar vein to the argument put forward by Davie is the notion that people are 'implicitly religious' (Bailey 1997). Like Davie, Bailey argues that 'few people would describe themselves as religious, in [an] ideological or institutional sense' (Bailey 1997: 5) but that '[t]he majority, however, would see themselves as religious, in some sense, which they would consider equally important, and at least valuable' (ibid: 5). So, even for those populations who seem to be non-religious, or secular, religious meaning can still be found in the world for these groups, according to Bailey. For Bailey then, there are a range of activities and beliefs that people have which serve the same function as explicit religion, i.e. institutional religion. Bailey proposes three definitions of implicit religion, 1) commitment(s), which focuses on levels of consciousness; 2) integrating foci, which focuses on 'forms of sociality' (Bailey 2009: 802); and intensive concerns, with extensive effects (Bailey 1997: 9), which focuses on 'the study of religion, rather than of psychology or of social psychology or sociology' (2009: 802).

Although implicit religion does have some benefits, e.g. looking beyond institutional religion, much like everyday and lived religion as discussed elsewhere, Bailey's work is very much religion centred. Bailey sees religion as 'part of being human' (ibid; 42), whilst he sees the secular as insubstantial, stating that there is 'no substantive opposite to "religion"' (ibid: 5), thus limiting the possibility that there are alternative experiences that are not implicitly religious. One of the main aims of this thesis is to move away from the notion of non-religion as insubstantial, following the likes of Lee (2015). As such, the concept of implicit religion, like believing without belonging, is considered unhelpful in trying to understand this substantial nature of non-religion.

Davie (2007) also puts forward her argument of 'vicarious religion' which she defines as, '*the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly approve of what the minority is doing'* (ibid: 22, italics in original). The notion of vicarious religion grew out of Davie's earlier work around believing and belonging, in particular the notion of believing without belonging, in attempts to describe religious life in Britain, and Europe more widely. Vicarious religion moves beyond these debates of believing and belonging and 'concentrates instead on the subtle and complex relationships that continue to exist between these two variables' (ibid: 22). For Davie, religion can be 'vicarious' in several ways. Firstly, is the notion that '[c]hurches and

church leaders perform ritual on behalf of others', secondly that '[c]hurch leaders and churchgoers believe on behalf of others', thirdly that '[c]hurch leaders and churchgoers embody moral codes on behalf of others', and lastly, that '[c]hurch can offer space for the vicarious debate of unresolved issues in modern societies' (ibid: 23).

For Davie, with these different characteristics of vicarious religion come the expectations of the wider public in regards to the way the church, and church leaders, should be or behave and what they should represent. Davie argues that there remains a symbolical importance of religious institutions and physical church-buildings in European society, in several ways. Her notion of vicarious religion is something she describes as 'both more penetrating and more accurate than believing without belonging' (ibid: 26).

Studies such as these posit that, although people may look to be non-believing, non-religious, or 'secular' on the surface, they are actually 'religious' in new or implicit ways. Rather than being 'secretly' or vicariously religious, my work shows that, despite my non-believing participants having continued cultural connections to religion, these connections are transformed, taking on new non-religious meaning and often sitting comfortably with being a non-believer. This further highlights the importance of moving away from binary understandings of religion and non-religion and belief and non-belief, and towards a more inclusive understanding of people's lived experiences. Moreover, these theories are religion-centred and hold religious believing as their starting point, whereas I am taking non-belief as my starting point and recognise the lived reality of this.

Research which seeks to understand the mechanisms of secularisation on a more granular level often turns towards the family. These attempts to explain the decline of religion in society often argue that it is a failure on parents' behalf to transmit religion (Voas and Crockett 2005; Crockett and Voas 2006; Voas 2010; Lanman and Buhrmester 2017). More recently, research has explored the ways in which parents can transmit substantial non-believing and non-religious cultures to their children (Zuckerman 2012; Manning 2015; Bengtson *et al* 2018; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020). This strand of research remains in its infancy and more could still be known about these processes. In particular, key questions concern how the formation of non-belief 'happens': is this only due to the absence of religious belief, or are there non-believing cultures at play? If so, what do these look like? Might exploring lived realities show a mixture of processes underway? Working with older adults offers a unique viewpoint from which to explore these issues, they themselves being the parents

and grandparents to many of those who now make up the large numbers of the non-religious in society today. Older adults are in a useful position to shed light on changes in religious socialisation processes, from a time when, in the UK, Christianity was more dominant when participants were growing up, to a time when religion plays less of a role in social life today. Their stories can help us see ways in which (if at all) these wider societal and religious changes actually impacted on familial religiosity and parenting.

Lived Non-Belief as Intersubjective and Relational

In this thesis, I argue that the worldviews and identities of non-believing older adults in my sample are intersubjective and are deeply bound up in social relations and accompanying social contexts, both at present and historically. 'Intersubjective' is a term used widely throughout several disciplines and there are many theories and ideas relating to the intersubjective (Crossley 1996). Ultimately intersubjective refers to the 'mutual constitution of social relationships' (Scott and Marhsall 2009) and to conscious relations between people, things, and ideas. Intersubjectivity is how people understand the space between the subjective and the objective and the threads that run between these spaces. Crossley (1996: 173) explains intersubjectivity in the following way:

> Our actions and thoughts aren't reducible to us alone. They are moves in a game which has many players, responses to a call to action which is expressed in every gesture of the other. And their significance is precisely constituted through their place in that game.

As such, in this research, intersubjectivity means paying attention to the conscious and unconscious connections between participants and others, including myself, those they talk about, and with non-human entities as well. Whilst some authors shed light on the importance of relationships and sociality for non-religious populations, including non-believers (e.g. Day 2011; Lee 2015), others identify non-believers (and their associated worldviews) as philosophical, moral, or intellectual in nature (e.g. Zuckerman 2012; 2014; Manning 2015; Brown 2017), as discussed above. Through paying attention to the intersubjective realities of non-believing older adults, I argue that the worldviews and identities of non-believers can be developed and transformed in relation to social and cultural practices, values, and positions which can be religious and non-religious and which are enacted and negotiated with others in diverse ways. Further, through approaching non-believing worldviews and identities through an intersubjective lens, this thesis allows us to see the bigger picture in relation to secularisation arguments by showing how people do not exist in 'pure' religious or non-religious vacuums or

states. Rather, this approach allows us to see how non-believers actually live and how their positions are co-produced, developed, and constituted through a web of social relations.

I will show how the lived reality of non-belief for the older adults in this study is not primarily about the belief element, or lack thereof, for the most part. In participants' day-to-day lives, it is of no great consequence whether or not one believes in God, and the participants in this study do not have a fixed set of coherent non-beliefs by which they live their life. However, the reality of being a non-believer comes to the fore in certain situations and through certain relationships. What plays more of a role than their non-believing *per se*, and which impacts much more upon daily living, are the liberal ideals my participants associate with non-belief and explain as being important. Whilst authors have noted the presence of such liberal ideals in British society more generally (e.g. McLeod 2007; Brown 2009), for these older adult non-believers, it is something they feel sets them apart from others. Indeed Woodhead (2016) states that whilst the majority of the British population are liberal, religious nones are at the most liberal end of the scale. For these older adults, it is an element of their life which links uniquely to being non-believers.

I show that for the participants in this study, their lives are not structured around issues of non-belief. Rather, it is when non-belief, and associated non-believing worldviews and identities, are confronted in certain ways throughout their lives, be it subtle or extreme, that non-belief comes to the fore. The worldviews and identities of these non-believing older adults have an intersubjective quality that is most obvious in social relations and around key life events. Participants' lives are structured around these social relations and the contexts that come with them and the everyday experience of non-belief is articulated through these contexts, rather than coherent, epistemic belief or non-belief statements, or proscribed ways of thinking or acting. I will show how non-believing worldviews and identities become apparent through the narratives that participants employ and stories they tell about themselves and others at key moments in their lives. Rather than an absolute position, it is through narrating their lives, experiences, and relationships that we are able to see non-belief for the complex configuration it is. By understanding non-believing worldviews and identities in this way, this study moves beyond religious and non-religious binaries, and seeing people as 'purely religious' or 'purely non-religious' (or 'secular' or 'believers') and as shifting more or less wholly from one to the other through processes of secularisation.

What this thesis further helps illuminate is how the contexts in which participants were brought up, a time when religion was more prominent, have continued to influence them at various

moments in their lives, and still continue to influence them due to the associated expectations from those around them. These expectations come from peers, from other generations, and sometimes, though not often, from participants themselves, and such expectations play out over participants' lifetimes in several ways. For instance, non-believing older adults sometimes recount reactions of shock towards their non-belief by peers. Others explain their historic or ongoing involvement in religious practices because of unspoken and verbal pressure from those around them. These assumptions of religiosity were also present in some of the difficulties in recruiting participants for this study, especially in relation to gatekeepers to groups who assumed or decided that there would not be any non-believing older adults that they knew. But crucially, these expectations of religiosity are expectations that older adult non-believers can challenge, negotiate, or incorporate into their lives in different ways. Through taking a 'lived non-religion' approach, i.e. an approach which moves away from institutional or official modes of non-religiosity to instead examining how non-religion is actually lived in daily life, adapted from McGuire's (2008) 'lived religion' approach, this thesis illuminates the ways in which these ordinary non-believers live, experience, and understand their non-belief over time and in relation to others.

I argue that expectations of religiosity have played a role over participants' lifetimes and this is most obvious when it comes to life-cycle events (e.g. 'hatch, match, and dispatch' events, as one participant described them to me),[6] but can be evident in other ways too. This is bound up in the contexts in which participants grew up and these religious and social contexts have continued to impact upon participants' thoughts and behaviour – be this through continuity, adaption, negotiation, or challenge. Differentiating themselves from religious others leads many of the older adults in my sample to non-believing worldviews and identities which encompass ideas of liberalism, tolerance, choice, autonomy, and placing the individual as centrally important. These values can be expressed through an identity of 'indifference' to religion and sometimes non-religion, which participants use to distinguish themselves from religious others. These liberal values are also considered important to pass onto children. Despite the centrality of the individual, the thesis argues that social relations continue to be of central significance in the ways that non-believing older adults navigate their way through life

[6] The phrase 'hatch, match, and dispatch' was used by Liam, a participant in the research. It was a phrase he said his mother used in relation to life events traditionally linked to the church – i.e. christenings, marriages, and funerals.

in relation to religion, their non-belief, and their worldviews, especially when it comes to key life events which are traditionally related to religion.

Despite the importance of the individual and other liberal ideals which underpin a lot of participants' narratives, participants have a diverse set of experiences in how these ideals are understood, enacted, and described – from the development of their non-believing worldviews and identities, to how these worldviews and identities are performed and understood in certain situations across their lifetimes. Something to highlight are the different levels operating in relation to these liberal ideals. On one level there are similarities between participants which include their liberal ideals, such as the importance of the individual and the importance of choice. Yet, on another level, the ways in which the individuals in this study associate with, enact, or experience these ideals differs. There is not a blanket approach to how these common liberal threads play out in people's experiences, but they are a foundation stone for developing non-religious worldviews and identities and encompass positions on religion, non-religion, and non-belief. This thesis draws on qualitative life-history interviews to provide snapshots of participants' lives which allows us to see lived non-religion and associated worldviews in practice. This approach shows these lived realities to be complex, multifaceted, and a performed element of life which is bound up in relationships, continued connections with religion, and the development of new traditions and worldviews.

Lived Non-Religion

This thesis is a study in lived non-religion, adapting the phrase 'lived religion' which authors such as Orsi (1997; 2003) and McGuire (2008) adopt, an approach others such as Mumford (2015) have also taken. Scholars such as McGuire (2008) and Orsi (1997; 2003) are pioneers in the study of lived religion (for a more thorough discussion, see Knibbe and Kupari 2020). Through her work on lived religion, McGuire (2008) challenges sociologists of religion to 'rethink fundamental conceptualisations of what we study and how we study it' (2008: 4), describing 'standard notions of religion' and conceptions as 'wholly inadequate' (ibid: 4). In doing so, McGuire challenges the Western, and in particular Protestant, norms and assumptions on which much of the sociology of religion is built. She points out how the religion of official institutions often differs greatly from how religion is actually experienced and practiced by people. She states that lived religion 'examines individual religiosity and spirituality and suggests that they often do not resemble the tidy, consistent, and theologically correct packages official religions promote' (ibid: 3). For McGuire, lived religion allows us to differentiate between these different understandings and experiences of religiosity. Through a lived religion

approach, she advocates a move away from looking at the 'prescribed' aspects of religion (ibid: 12) which have dominated much of the sociology of religion's scholarly research, recognising instead that people's lives do not always fit into these official or grand religious narratives. A major and central aspect of McGuire's approach is recognising people's embodied religious experiences and connections to the world. While this thesis does not directly engage with the embodied nature of lived non-religion, it is recognised that work by scholars such as Lee (2015) does. Importantly, McGuire's work moves away from cognitive based arguments such as 'individual' religion and recognises the importance of the social (ibid: 13), something work by Orsi (1997; 2003) also does. In relation to this thesis, the lived religion approach is drawn on to try and capture the 'complexity, diversity, and fluidity' (McGuire 2008: 213) of non-believing and of non-religion and to move beyond institutional and organisational non-religion (although these are important), which does not accurately reflect all non-believing people. The objective of this approach is to shed light on the lived realities of ordinary non-believers. Studying non-religious and non-believing realities from a lived standpoint is still in its infancy, but is developing within the field of non-religion (see discussion below). This approach shows how non-believing older adults' lives are structured around relationships and contexts over time – not only or even primarily by abstract sets of beliefs or non-beliefs. Writing about the related concept 'everyday religion', Ammerman (2007: 5) states:

> Everyday religion may happen in both private and public life, among both privileged and nonprivileged people. It may have to do with mundane routines, but it may also have to do with the crises and special events that punctuate those routines. We are simply looking for the many ways religion may be interwoven with the lives of the people we have been observing.

Ammerman's approach to studying religion through the everyday was in response to, and a challenge to, macro theories prominent in the sociology of religion, such as secularisation. In doing so, her aim is also to expand how scholars define and study religion to the everyday and through looking at experiences of non-officials. For Ammerman, an important part of the everyday religion approach is to not assume we know what religion looks like. The aim of everyday religion is to recognise the wide range of experiences that can be considered 'religious' and that these social realities can be 'mental, physical, emotional, political, and social' (ibid: 6). Taking the starting point as the everyday, Ammerman argues, 'is to privilege the experience of nonexperts, the people who do not make a living being religious or thinking and writing about religious ideas' (ibid: 5). This does not ignore the importance and presence of 'official' narratives but moves away from considering this the only way to study religion.

Ultimately, through looking at the everyday, Ammerman challenges the over-emphasis on 'official' forms of religiosity that are often the subject of study within the sociology of religion. Everyday religion recognises the plural nature of people's lives and what they draw on, what they choose to encompass in their lives, and across multiple elements of people's lives (e.g. family, work, education etc.) and how this highlights the various and multiple ways religion can be 'produced and reshaped in places beyond institutions' (ibid: 223). This approach to understanding 'everyday' social reality, and not assuming we know what non-belief looks like for older adults, is an approach this thesis also takes in relation to the non-religious.

This thesis draws on this methodological approach and expands lived non-religion approaches by conducting research with older adults (see below more discussion on studies in lived non-religion). Scholars of lived religion shed light on the everyday reality of religion in people's lives, rather than looking only at organised and official religion, where studies are plentiful and informative. The following chapters in this thesis aim to show the role that non-belief and non-religion have in people's lives beyond organised non-religion and the 'New Atheist' caricatures often associated with not believing in God.

I show the important role that relationships play over time and it is through these relationships that we can see the role non-belief plays in everyday life for my participants. What existing work on lived religion has shown us is the presence and importance of intersubjective realities (McGuire 2008). For McGuire, intersubjectivity 'refers to the apprehension of another's subjective experience, for example emotion, that is not mediated by conscious thought – in which the other or the other's experience is the object of thought' (ibid: 113). This recognition of the intersubjective realities that people live in is also noted by Jackson's (2012) work in existential anthropology, where he adopts the phrase 'lifeworlds' from the work of Husserl (1991) to describe how the world we live in is formed of relationships which are intersubjective. For Jackson these 'lifeworlds' are not as fixed and proscribed as they may first appear but are in flux and can be suspended and disrupted in times when social life diverges from its 'normal' path, e.g. in times of crisis (Jackson 1989). Orsi's (2005) work extends the idea of intersubjectivity to include super-empirical beings through his exploration of lived Catholicism in twentieth century America. In his work, Orsi understands religion as 'a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together' (ibid: 2). A lived religion approach, for Orsi, helps us move beyond seeing religion as something ordered and coherent, to understanding religion as:

> [S]ituated amid the ordinary concerns of life, at the junctures of self and culture, family and social world, and on those occasions when the religious imagination (which itself is constituted both by culture and by personal experience and inheritance) takes hold of the world (as the world is said to be) in prayer, ritual, and theology, it is also itself taken hold of by the world (Orsi 2003: 172).

Understanding non-religion and non-belief as a lived phenomenon, then, is to pay attention to its intersubjective nature.

The thesis furthers understanding about the ways in which scholars in the field think about non-religion. I show how for my non-believing participants there can be flux, suspensions, and disruptions in social life and situations involving religion, non-religion, belief, and non-belief, leading to unexpected paths being taken by older adult non-believers in certain situations. This goes hand-in-hand with the observation that participants do not always have coherent statements about their non-belief and why they do not believe. Indeed, in the interviews, most participants struggled to explicitly articulate their non-belief and the role it has in their life and what it looks like. Rather, what we see are complex and messy realities; as McGuire (2008: 16) writes about lived religion, '[w]e must grapple with the complexities, apparent inconsistencies, heterogeneity, and untidiness of the range of religious practices that people in any given culture and period find meaningful and useful'. This thesis shows how these apparent inconsistences and this untidiness in religious and non-religious practices can also be identified in the lives of non-believing older adults as well.

A lived non-religion approach also aims to move away from some of the limits of typological approaches to understanding non-religious and non-believing people. Existing research has shed light on the diversity of non-belief and non-religion by differentiating them into types (e.g. Eccles 2012; Sheard 2014; Silver *et al* 2014; Lee 2015; Manning 2015), and whilst these findings are significant in the development of the non-religious field, the authors themselves often stipulate that people do not fit neatly into one box, and can instead fit into several of their proposed typologies in different ways. Whilst I can recognise features from these typologies which my participants may fit into (e.g. some participants for example fit in with Lee's [2015] 'humanist' type), the current thesis does not wish to replicate these typological approaches, but instead seeks to explore the intricacy of real life. Where other approaches point towards the ways in which people can fit into several boxes, this thesis provides examples of real-life situations which are able to show the heterogeneous nature of non-believing and non-religion in more detail. Through this approach, I also show experiences which are not always accounted for in such typologies, but which should not necessarily be considered as new 'types' because

the lived reality of these experiences are undefined, malleable, and changing. Although I argue that liberal worldviews play a significant role for participants (as do others, such as Quack 2014 and Manning 2015), I also show how the ways in which these liberal worldviews operate in daily life are not straightforward or uniform. Relationships, situations, and real-life contexts can challenge typological understandings of such worldviews. Some of the worldviews and identities that I point towards in this thesis (e.g. indifferentist identities bound up with liberalism, as mentioned above) can be a performance and an identity that is aspired to, but daily situations, as well as more unique life-cycle events, muddy these indifferent identities and the liberal values they encompass. Through a lived approach, it is this 'muddying' that this thesis aims to shed light on.

Whilst there have been a plethora of studies exploring lived religion, research which takes a lived non-religion approach remains in its early stages. Some of these studies look at lived non-religion in relation to specific topics, for example, looking at it in relation to environmental action (Beaman 2017), or eating habits and food choices (Salonen 2018), or in Bullock's (2017) case, through a non-religious organisation (the Sunday Assembly). Mumford (2015) likewise takes a lived non-religion approach through ethnographic research with three non-religious meet-up groups in London.[7] What these studies begin to show us is the complex lived realities of non-religious people. My research adds to this approach and, in particular, offers understanding of lived non-religious realities from a broad life-history approach, rather than exploring these realities in relation to a specific set of activities or organisational participation. This approach allows us to see how lived non-belief operates over a lifetime, and how the impact of historical contexts and the relationships bound up in the stories that people tell, provide us with insight into the complex and multifaceted presentations of non-belief.

One outcome of this lived non-religion approach is a challenge to 'secularisationist' (Bruce 2011) approaches that describe a clear and linear journey from believer to non-believer through processes of secularisation. Whilst recognising that there is no agreed definition or process of secularisation (Beckford 2003; Davie 2013), this thesis brings novel data to bear on theories of secularisation and considers numerous approaches to situate and understand non-believing older adults' place within these discussions. By drawing on work by the likes of Callum Brown (2009) and Hugh McLeod (2007) this thesis considers approaches to secularisation which emphasise the importance of certain decades in history – notably the 1960s. I focus on these

[7] See also Zuckerman (2008), Catto and Eccles (2013), Engelke (2015a), and Lee (2015) for lived non-religion approaches.

authors due to the fact that the decades they centre on are ones which my own participants lived through. McLeod's and Brown's research also sheds light on the religious cultures which dominated social, cultural, and political life (at least in the West) prior to the cultural shifts which helped to bring about mass diversions away from religion. These are the social contexts and eras through which my participants lived. For some it was their childhoods, for others their adolescence or early adulthood. A lived approach allows us to consider the ways in which these crucial decades (as argued by Brown and McLeod) were actually experienced.[8] My research finds that, although some participants mention these decades as important, many do not and this challenges the claims put forward by Brown in particular. Whilst McLeod recognises the impact of the 1960s, he also argues that previous historical developments were significant in the decline of 'Christendom' and he crucially argues that even the changes of the 1960s did not impact society in an all-inclusive or homogenous way, something backed up by my own findings. The rupturing contexts of the 1960s were not felt by all, this decade did not encompass a clean break from religion, as Brown suggests. Rather, within my sample it is often the case that participants continued religious practice and association within and beyond this decade.

This thesis shows various kinds of continued cultural and relational connections with religion that persisted after the key societal shifts of the 1960s. This is evident through participation in religious practices, continuing senses of connection to religion or, in some circumstances, the use of religion as a marker of identity. These continuing connections were also found to be bound up in relations with others, be it through feelings of expectation, obligation, or a sense of tradition. What the participants in this study experienced was not a sudden and dramatic break away from Christian Britain – as Brown (2009) would argue with his idea of 'dechristianisation'. Nor did older adult non-believers experience the break that Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) anticipates in her idea that religion is a 'chain of memory' and that such chains have been broken in modern society. What participants in this study have experienced are gradual changes, where the connections to religious traditions, and the relationships embedded in this, did not disappear overnight but rather are continued and/or transformed.

In this thesis, I consider how older adults' narratives can shed new light on the work of authors such as Hervieu-Léger and Brown and provide more understanding about the 'ruptures' and 'breaks' which they describe. The stories and memories shared by participants in this thesis provide substance for comprehending how these ideas might operate in daily life, through

[8] The authors refer to the 'long sixties' which also take into account parts of the 1950s and the 1970s which they consider to be significant.

social relations, families, and processes of non-religious transmission. Participants' narratives provide insight into how everyday non-believing older adults remember the past, interpret it, and apply meaning to it in the present day. I show the complex interplay between the contexts of religious pasts and present non-believing realities. Through looking at key life events relating to births, marriages, and deaths, I also demonstrate how religious and non-religious cultures can be shared, disrupted, and transformed across time and across generations.

Past research has shown the diversity of worldviews or existential cultures that non-religious people have (e.g. Day 2011; Sheard 2014; Lee 2015; Manning 2015; Brown 2017). My research sheds light on a number of threads which run through the narratives of older adult non-believers and contribute to their worldviews. These include liberal ideals, including notions of tolerance and importance of individual choice and of personal autonomy. Luckman (1990: 127) describes this as 'modern solipsism whose main themes ("self-realisation," personal autonomy, and self-expression) tend to bestow a sacred status upon the individual'. Despite the importance of the individual, what becomes clear in this research is that relations with others are often the cornerstone for the decisions older adults make. Further, despite these common threads, participants' understandings, performance, or expressions of these ideals are varied.

As well as continued connections to religion which have persisted in the lives of participants, rather than ruptures in society causing a clean break from religious pasts, this thesis also shows how substantial non-religious and non-believing worldviews and identities have also developed and changed over participants' lifetimes and that these can be transmitted between generations. Although there may be continuing connections to religious traditions, older adult non-believers are not bound or constrained by these, and non-believing worldviews offer unique ways of experiencing and understanding the world. As I will discuss in more detail below, I use the term 'worldviews' to try and capture both the non-religious and religious outlooks, connections, and values that can inform and impact upon non-believing older adults' everyday lives, their identities, as well as the stories they tell. Whilst I agree with Nynäs (2018) that it is important to recognise the ways in which religious, non-religious, believing, and non-believing outlooks can co-exist and inform a person's worldview, and that they should not be strictly separated, it remains important to think about how scholars define and use certain terminology. The next section discusses how we can understand substantial worldviews through socially embedded concepts such as 'belief' and 'non-belief'.

Identifying ‘Belief’, ‘Non-Belief’ and ‘Worldviews’

One of the key aims of this thesis is to show real-life complexity and to highlight how non-believing older adults do not exist in pure religious or non-religious states. As mentioned above, my findings challenge secularisation arguments which depict religion disappearing from people’s lives in linear and undisputed ways. Although recognising how connections to religion may continue in older adults’ lives, this thesis also challenges the idea that they are somehow ‘secretly’ or ‘implicitly’ (Bailey 1997) religious. Whilst shedding light on the complex and integrated relationship between religion and non-religion and belief and non-belief, there is not always appropriate terminology which reflect these interrelated realities. As such, to understand the ways in which participants’ lives and experiences can encompass both religious, non-religious, believing, and non-believing elements, I use the term ‘worldviews’ to reflect the substantial positions older adult non-believers have – rather than seeing non-belief as an insubstantial absence. The term worldviews helps connect with ‘belief’ and ‘non-belief’ (and religion and non-religion) by understanding these terms as discursive tropes relevant to the cultural context of my research.

In understanding what is meant by the term ‘worldviews’, I draw on the work of Ann Taves (2018) and Peter Nynäs (2018). Both Taves and Nynäs highlight the merits of using the term worldview to encompass both religious and non-religious outlooks. Nynäs stresses the importance of not making strict distinctions between religious and non-religious worldviews as this may overlook how ‘people can combine spiritual and religious positions with secular values into authentic and meaningful subjective positions’ (Nynäs 2018: 36). Further, for Taves the use of ‘worldviews’ allows us to consider how people answer the ‘big questions’ (2018: 2) in life as well as how people may find meaning and purpose in the world in everyday situations. Thus, in this thesis, the term worldview is used in an attempt to be inclusive and reflective of the complex configurations of non-belief in older adults’ lives.

Although drawing on Nynäs’ (2018) and Taves’ (2018) conceptualisations of worldview, Taves herself recognises how the term is problematic (Taves 2020) and whilst it has it uses, it should be approached critically. Terms such as worldview are never neutral, but carry with them ‘historical baggage’ (Taves 2020: 138). Indeed, Weir (2014; 2018) highlights how terms such as worldview are imbued with unequal power dynamics, discussing the term’s use in Nazi Germany.

The term worldview, then, is not perfect, and like many of the terms we use, is a problematic and contested one that scholars can use in both non-reflexive and critical ways. Benoit, Hutchings, and Shillitoe (2020) highlight some of these issues in their comprehensive multidisciplinary report on the concept of worldview. Taking a multidisciplinary approach, the authors highlight how the term worldview is used in varying ways, both within and between disciplines. Within anthropology, for example, they highlight how scholars such as Geertz (1957) primarily conceptualise worldview cognitively, ignoring lived and more embodied experiences that people may have, something Asad (1993) challenges (see Benoit, Hutchings, and Shillitoe 2020: 13). Within sociological work, Benoit, Hutchings, and Shillitoe discuss how the concept worldview has been used in broad ways, some of which do not encompass religion, with some scholars using the term in a more cognitive way, whilst others point to the socially constructed nature of worldviews. Within religious studies, use of the term worldview often complicates binary distinctions between religion and non-religion – something this thesis hopes to add to.

Whilst the term worldview helps to shed light on this intertwined reality of religious and non-religious cultures (Nynäs 2018 and Taves 2018), at the same time it does not reduce participants' experiences and thoughts to these alone and recognises wider cultural influences. This has similarities with Lee's (2015) idea of 'existential cultures' which recognises existential beliefs or philosophies that people may have intellectually, but how such existential cultures can also be influenced by and rooted in social relations and cultural traditions. The aim here, then, is to recognise the multifaceted ways in which worldviews can be developed and understood using terms such as 'non-belief'. That said, it is still important to recognise what is meant when using terms such as 'belief' and 'non-belief' in research.

The assumption that both researchers and participants are thinking or talking about the same thing when it comes to terms such as belief, and, by implication, non-belief, has been debated by a number of scholars (e.g. Needham 1972; Ruel 1982; Asad 1993; Stringer 1996; Day and Lynch 2013). Ruel (1982) highlights the centrality of the term 'belief' within Western, and predominantly Christian thought and points out the loaded nature of the term. By this merit, non-belief too is a loaded term, and it is a term to which different people attach different definitions and meanings. That said, in this research, most participants did not question the terms 'non-belief' or 'belief', though they were given the opportunity to question and challenge any terms I used. This reflects the cultural context of my research in which 'belief' is a term which is embedded and established.

Despite the lack of questioning around the term 'belief' by participants, it is important to draw attention to what is meant when talking about 'belief' and 'non-belief'. In my work, I use the *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism's* (Lee and Bullivant 2016) definition of non-belief, i.e. '[t]he state of not having (especially religious) faith or belief'. The understanding of the words 'belief' and 'faith' were not strictly defined before the project started, nor was it the aim of this thesis to scrutinise terminology, but rather to understand the lived realities of being a non-believer. Something I have come to recognise is the Christian-centric understanding of belief as being central not only to the questions I asked, but to the terms I used throughout the interviews that I conducted with participants, yet myself and participants were able to have productive conversations using terms such as belief and non-belief without any great issues. This reflects our shared cultural contexts and also reflects the societal norms present in participants' childhood and earlier life, where Christianity was a more dominant force in society. When using the terms belief and non-belief, this covers both propositional beliefs (belief that) and notions of trust in (belief in), as discussed by Ruel (1982: 103) (see also Needham 1972; Robbins 2007). These apply to both people's non-belief in God or gods but also encompasses alternative beliefs they may have.

However, as noted, and as will become clearer in the forthcoming chapters, having coherent or propositional belief statements (or non-belief statements) were not central or significant in participants' narratives, compared with other modes of believing. Like Abby Day's (2010; 2011) findings, for my own participants, beliefs and worldviews were expressed more often through social relationships and situations. Non-belief is not a separate 'thing' that existed in its own dimension for participants, but is bound up in relationships with others and comes to the fore in certain related contexts. What is evident throughout my research is that belief and non-belief mean different things to different people and in different contexts, and can have multiple expressions and meanings simultaneously. Non-belief can be an intellectual position but is most visible in everyday practice and relationships. When asked about their non-belief, participants often explained what they do and do not believe, but also differentiated themselves from believers by not participating in certain actions or practices. Ultimately, what we mean by the terms belief and non-belief is less important than what role this 'state of not having (especially religious) faith or belief' (Lee and Bullivant 2016) has on older adults' lived realities. Whilst recognising the importance of thinking critically about how academics and participants use or understand such terms, my aim is to appreciate that people use terms in

different ways and that this influences how we understand a narrative and the importance of what people are saying.[9]

As explained, this research is primarily framed around exploring non-belief, rather than the broader term 'non-religion' which is defined by Lois Lee as 'anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion' (Lee 2012: 131). Despite taking the narrower framing of 'non-belief', this study recognises the overlapping characteristics and still attends to 'non-religion' and 'non-religiosity' by exploring associated non-religious cultures. Likewise, the study is not framed around the terms atheist and agnostic due to negative connotations sometimes associated with these terms and because some participants explicitly expressed their dislike for these labels. Thus, to use this term to describe them would be not an accurate reflection of their lived realities, unless they expressed a wish to identify with one of these terms. As such, whilst recognising that all terms have drawbacks, non-belief was chosen as it not only describes participants in a broad way, including atheist and agnostic outlooks, but it is also a term which the majority participants agreed to me using throughout the interviews and a term which, due to its established cultural presence, had salience for most of the participants in this study.[10]

Thesis Structure

To show the ways in which older adults' non-believing worldviews and identities are relational, intersubjective and developed and transformed in relation to social and cultural practices, values, and positions, which can be religious and non-religious, this thesis proceeds as follows. In chapter 2, I review the relevant literature in the field in more detail, setting out key reasons that research needs to pay attention to non-believing older adults. I argue that the study of older adults has been marginalised in the field of non-religion, and where research has taken place, it has focused on a confined set of themes (e.g. end-of-life). This observation is, I argue, a reflection of the ways in which classical secularisation theory has shaped the field, i.e. the idea that Western society has come from a religious past to a 'secular' present. As such, young people are considered more important in understanding the increasingly 'secular' world than older people, who are treated as relics of the religious past. Subsequently, work with non-

[9] For a thorough discussion on terminology, see Lee's (2012) article 'Research Note: Talking About a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-Religion Studies'

[10] Non-belief, then, is used to capture more the narrow aspect of not 'having (especially religious) faith or belief' (Lee and Bullivant 2016), as a population identified in literature and surveys, rather than broader framing of non-religion. I then use worldviews to capture content and how individuals within these non-believing populations understand their lived realities and how these lived realities can encompass different aspects of religion and non-religion, belief and non-belief.

religious and non-believing older adults focuses on particular issues which they are deemed important for shedding light on – especially issues relating to end-of-life. This chapter shows how older adults' insights could contribute to several areas of research. For example, such research stands to contribute to work around socialisation and transmission: existing work shows the influence parents have on children; research with older adults provides a key standpoint from which to understand how the non-religious younger generations of today were brought up and what role older generations may have played in their formation as non-believers. Further, in an attempt to move away from a religious/non-religious binary, the study of older adults stands to increase knowledge about how non-belief may develop or change over time, and interrogate arguments about its liminality (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010) or stability. Whether or not non-belief is stable over one's life is not majorly addressed in qualitative work. Having lived longer than younger age groups, research with older adults allows for increased understanding of the permanence of non-belief over a lifetime. The ability to consider change over time also enables the investigation of the complexity of non-believing worldviews, including detailed understanding of how they relate to others, to ideas, and to changing social and cultural norms. These observations are then transformed into a set of research questions.

Chapter 3 focuses on the research design of this project. This chapter shows how a lived non-religion approach and the use of life-history interviews with older adults offer significant opportunities to better understand the worldviews of a significant population of non-believers and the nature of religious and worldview change over time. It also shows how recruiting from the community[11] rather than from non-religious organisations, whose members do not reflect the experiences of all non-religious and non-believing people, means we are given insight into the ordinary non-believer. Taking a lived approach to explore the experiences and narratives

[11] Above, I explain how my use of the term 'ordinary' reflects the recruitment of my participants from the community, rather than from official non-religious organisations. Community is not a term I engage with critically in this thesis, but it is recognised that 'community' is a term used by different people in different ways. In the context of this thesis, recruiting from the 'community' refers to recruiting outside of official non-religious organisations. Community, as noted, however, can be used in other ways. For instance, community can be understood as relating to shared and collaborative practices (Neal *et al* 2019). Blokland (2017: 29) further discusses community as 'culture' and as something performed through 'daily urban practices'. Further, others see community as embodied and performed (Wills 2016). Community, then, is often used in a way to explain some sort of communal belonging and practice. So community can be understood as imaginary or 'imagined' (Anderson 1991), aspirational or bounded, but also social and relational (Neal et al 2019). See also Studdert and Walkerdine (2016) for discussion on community. Day (2011; 2017) has also discussed how the term community can often be used as an identity marker, a way of differentiating and creating boundaries. Whilst there are these varied ways in which community is discussed, my thesis does not presume that the older adults in this study see themselves as a 'community' beyond a non-religious organisation due to their non-belief.

of ordinary non-believing older adults will generate new and important knowledge around their lived realities that existing research fails to adequately capture. Paired with life-history, this approach allows us to consider how historical contexts might impact upon understanding lived non-belief today. This chapter also draws on the concept of 'micro-climates' (Voas and McAndrew 2012) to show how local environments might impact upon expressions of non-religion and non-belief. Specifically, this chapter argues for the theoretical and empirical significance of conducting research in different 'micro-climates', in this case Canterbury and Liverpool.

The following four chapters show older adults' everyday experiences of non-believing and how the encounters and connections with religion and non-religion over time shape participants' experiences. They also show how, in the midst of this, non-believing worldviews and identities develop, embracing ideals of liberalism in distinctive ways, and come to be of central importance for ordinary non-believers. For older adults then, non-believing worldviews, as well as continued connections with religion, are shared, disrupted, and/or transformed in relation with other people over participants' lives. The chapters show us how participants remember and narrate these experiences as well as highlighting changes across their lifetimes – changes that can occur both between generations and over older adults' own personal life-trajectories as well.

In chapter 4, I argue that theories of religious change have been dominated by secularisation stories which emphasise the profound shift from religion to secularity that has occurred, especially in Europe and especially in the twentieth century. Though models vary, scholars attempt to describe the disruption of religious, predominantly Christian, cultures. Through exploring participants' childhoods, I argue that the historical, social, and cultural contexts that participants grew up with have continued to impact on their thoughts and behaviours, challenging the idea of a break and the total disappearance of religion from their lives. I show the strong influence of social relations (e.g. with parents) and specific contexts and ideas (e.g. a 'Christian' society or sectarianism) that have impacted upon non-believing identities and worldviews in enduring ways. Marriage and christening case studies show how social expectations around religious practice, involvement, and identity continue to exert an influence on participants and are approached and can be negotiated by participants in transformative ways. This shows that, contrary to many secularisation arguments, religion is not completely removed from people's lives to be replaced by a fully 'secular' way of life. Continued relations, and with it continued connections, play a role in everyday life. These examples also show us

new non-religious approaches to lifecycle events which can challenge traditional religious norms and how, although there might be continued connections to religion, the reasons and rationalisations behind this are grounded in participants' non-believing worldviews.

Where chapter 4 shows how some participants step away and differentiate themselves from the religious cultures that they experienced when they were younger, and how these transformed to fit with non-believing realities, chapter 5 shows the presence of non-believing and non-religious worldviews and identities that grow out of these transformed relationships with religion and which exist for participants today. I argue that a cornerstone of secularisation theory is that the cultural shifts of the twentieth century, most notably in the 1960s, brought with it new ideas regarding personal choice, autonomy, and the rights of the individual. This chapter shows the central role of liberal values in older adults' lives, embraced in different ways and expressed through non-believing worldviews and identities, such as religious 'indifference'. I argue that, for some, indifference can be real and is a reflection of the lack of importance non-belief has in participants' daily lives. However, this chapter also shows a tension between older adults' emphasis on liberal individualism in their narratives and their embeddedness in social contexts. I argue that an identity of 'indifference' is often a performance undertaken to portray these liberal values and to differentiate from religious others. At the same time, this indifference is not always a true reflection of real life, or participants' self-understandings of themselves, because of continued social connections and relations with religious others and cultures. Instead, these relationships are negotiated by participants in different ways which allow them to sit comfortably with their indifferent identity. This chapter shows how non-believing worldviews and identities are not fixed entities but are multi-layered and can occupy several places at once (e.g. significance, insignificance, implicitness, explicitness). This chapter advances our understanding of the relationship between liberal humanism and non-religion, or the state of 'being secular', showing how this relationship can be a façade, a narrative, and an idealist identity rooted in, but constrained by, social relationships and contexts. I show how understanding non-believers as primarily and intrinsically liberal humanist does not always map neatly onto lived realities.

In the third discussion chapter (chapter 6), I show how one way in which we are able to see the intersubjective nature of non-believing worldviews and identities is to look at relationships between parents and children and how these relationships are key in shaping and developing non-believing worldviews and identities through socialisation practices and transmission. This chapter shows ways in which the increase in numbers of non-religious people may not be due

to an absence of religion in social life, or the failure of parents to religiously socialise their children, but due to the presence and transmission of non-believing worldviews and identities between generations. By exploring participants' memories of their own upbringings, and how they then brought up their children, we see how there can be continuity between generations in regards to non-believing worldviews and identities. This chapter shows how, through parenting decisions, liberal individual worldviews can manifest in ways which are culturally contingent and reflect certain social structures. One way in which is this is shown is through exploring narratives around giving children choice and showing how this is approached in different ways by participants, including, for example, differences according to gender. 'Giving choice' is not therefore a monolithic or straightforward thing, but is diverse and something that can be limited through explicit and implicit transmission of non-believing worldviews, and shaped by social institutions.

In the final discussion chapter (chapter 7) we turn to end-of-life as a way of exploring the life course of participants. Existing literature posits death as important for exploring the worldviews and identities of older adults, yet less is known about approaches to end-of-life from the perspective of an ordinary non-believer compared to what is known about believers. In this chapter, I show how contexts around end-of-life cannot be detached from the rest of the life course and the social relations embedded within this. In this way, we can begin to understand participants' understandings and approaches to death more clearly. Looking at death exclusively with these older adults would give a false impression of what non-believing realities look like, perhaps leading to an assumption that death is the only thing that matters for older adults and that this age group are only useful in telling us something about this topic. Whilst important, this thesis shows that engagements with death should not be at the expense of engaging with other parts of the life course which help give a more holistic view of the messy lived realities of non-believers, nor should it be disconnected from these other aspects. This chapter also argues that death, like other life-cycle events, cannot be understood without paying attention to the importance of social relations and intersubjective realities. The social and cultural contexts which accompany end-of-life can impact on non-believing worldviews and identities in several ways. I show how non-believing worldviews and identities can develop out of social relations with both the living and deceased that are bound up in end-of-life contexts, which can sometimes be a time of questioning and uncertainty around one's beliefs. Despite occasional uncertainty, end-of-life contexts also shed light on the importance of the integrity of non-believing worldviews and identities for participants. Due to the observation

that death can be a time of significance, but also of questioning and uncertainty, as well as a social yet an incredibly personal event, this chapter shows the value of moving away from binary thinking to instead recognising the ways in which people's identities and worldviews are multi-layered. This extends to recognising that in approaching end-of-life, participants can have continued connections to religious cultures, as well as incorporating newer non-religious values, practices, and meanings. This further challenges the idea that people go from religious to non-religious in a linear manner.

The final and concluding chapter (chapter 8) discusses the ways in which this thesis has shown the intersubjective nature of older adults' non-believing worldviews and identities and how social relationships and contexts impact upon these worldviews and identities in complex and varied ways. The conclusion discusses the implication of these findings and calls for more research aimed at understanding the non-binary reality of non-believing and non-religious worldviews and identities. This is emphasised by highlighting the importance of moving on from thinking of secularisation as a linear process in which people and societies move from religious to non-religious realities in simple ways. The varied, continued, and transformed connections people have with religion should not be overlooked but embraced in order to have a more holistic understanding of the lived reality of non-belief. In arguing for recognition of substantial non-religious and non-believing outlooks which cannot be disconnected from social relationships, I propose some of the ways future research could take this into account (e.g. intergenerational research, further research on the stability of non-belief). Lastly, I argue that a non-binary understanding of lived non-believing realities has the potential to be related to religious and non-religious cultures in transformative ways, and could inform policy, wellbeing, and care initiatives, as well as provide suitable means of support for non-believing older adults in difficult times, such as death and loss. Through the chapters set out above, we see how approaching the worldviews and identities of non-believing older adults intersubjectively, and recognising their embeddedness in social relations and contexts, presents a meaningful shift in the bid to understand the complex lived reality of non-believing for older adults whose voices have been largely overlooked within academic scholarship.

Chapter 2
Locating Older Adults in the Non-Religious Field

Introduction

This chapter argues that the sociological study of non-religion needs to take better account of the presence and voices of non-believing older adults for a number of significant reasons. Primarily due to the fact that older adults are generally a more religious group (Voas 2010; Woodhead 2016), more research in the field of non-religion has centred on younger non-religious people (e.g. Catto and Eccles 2013; Day, Vincett, and Cotter 2013). Young people are considered more important in understanding the increasingly 'secular' world than the older people, who are treated as relics of the religious past. At the same time, there is a wealth of research exploring religion and older adults (e.g. Coleman *et al* 2002; Koenig 2006). These two observations reflect the state of each field of research and the position of older adults within them and this has implications for the study of non-religion where listening to the voices of non-believing older adults is long overdue. By drawing on key bodies of theory, including those which look at religious decline, theories of generations of religion, and the transmission of religion, I argue that working with older adults stands to add some much-needed empirical depth to our understanding of how non-believing worldviews and identities may have developed and been passed on. Work with this group can also contribute more understanding of what the everyday reality of non-believing looks like and some of the key issues people experience, e.g. approaches and understandings of death.

Building on some of the key questions raised by existing literature, this chapter argues the following points. The experiences of older adults stand to add insight into some of the theoretical claims surrounding the decline of Christianity, put forward by varying theories of secularisation. Further, exploring the experiences of older adults provides opportunities for more understanding about the role of socialisation and the transmission of non-religion and non-believing worldviews and identities and how may this be passed on between generations. Working with ordinary older adults can provide a more holistic approach to understanding decisions and thoughts around end-of-life. Further, exploring these issues with older adults specifically can add colour to current understandings of non-belief and non-religiosity by

looking at experiences over a lifetime. This life course approach provides a novel tactic to understanding the question of the stability of non-belief over time. One key point that runs through these themes is the complex nature of non-religious beliefs and identities. In line with insights from non-religious studies, I argue that working with non-believing older adults can enrich understanding of how non-believing worldviews and identities can be substantial and varied.

This chapter proceeds by introducing the absence of older adults in studies looking at non-belief and related work on non-religion and contrasts this with existing studies in the field of non-religion which look at younger populations, followed by exploring the handful of studies that look at older adults and recognising some of the strengths and limitations of these studies. It will then consider the amount of research conducted on *religion* and older adults and highlight the imbalance that is evident. One area which starkly highlights the place older adults inhabit in many studies in the field of religion and non-religion is end-of-life. The chapter will then turn to some of the competing theories of secularisation and discuss how the study of non-believing older adults can contribute to these arguments. Following that, the chapter will then consider theories and empirical evidence surrounding socialisation and the transmission of religious and non-religious cultures and argues that older adults are uniquely placed to contribute to understandings of these mechanisms. One of the major opportunities presented by working with older adults is to understand changes across a lifetime. Thus, I will discuss ideas around the stability of non-belief over a life course as well as pointing out complex presentations of non-religious and non-believing worldviews and identities. Throughout this discussion, I show that by taking a 'lived non-religion' approach to the study of non-belief we are able to more fully understand the ordinary non-believer. I then set out the research questions of this study as significant examples of the kind of themes and questions paying dedicated attention to older adults opens up.

Absence of Non-Believing Older Adults

Despite the growing study of non-religious phenomena, research with non-believing older adults has been scarce.[12] Of those studies that do include non-believing older adults, they are

[12] As noted in the introduction, by non-belief I mean '[t]he state of not having (especially religious) faith or belief' (Lee and Bullivant 2016). This term includes atheist and agnostic outlooks and can also incorporate indifference and allows for the recognition of belief in things other than religion and that these beliefs can be substantial and meaningful. Not all studies discuss non-belief specifically but they are still informative for the current study as issues such as non-religious identity are often correlated with non-belief, although not always.

often incorporated as a side note to and/or a comparison with religious and believing older adults, or part of a study with a range of ages and are rarely focused on specifically (e.g. Zuckerman 2008; Pasquale 2010; Wilkinson and Coleman 2010; Day 2011; Wilkinson and Coleman 2011; Eccles 2012; Lee 2015). Although this allows important comparison and breadth in research, non-believing older adults are lacking academic attention in their own right. The imbalance may be because older adults are generally found to be more religious and there are higher levels of younger people who are non-religious or non-believers (e.g. Voas and Crockett 2005; Crockett and Voas 2006; Voas 2010; Day 2011; Office for National Statistics 2012; Woodhead 2016). This has led to an uneven amount of research conducted with non-believing younger people rather than non-believing older people. As discussed in the introduction, Woodhead (2016: 249) states that when it comes to explaining religious decline 'the more important story has to do with children'. Discussing the results of the 2001 Census for England and Wales, Day (2011) states:

> Most people who ticked the Christian box were over 50 years old. In keeping with other data we have about young people and religion, the census figures confirmed that young people are less likely to claim a religious affiliation than older people (2011: 70).

This neatly encapsulates why younger people are often the focus in studies looking at non-religious phenomena. Although exploring why younger people are more likely than older people to have no religious affiliation does indeed warrant study, arguably there is an element of seeing non-religious older adults' experiences as less valid or worthy of discussion and with it, the assumption that older adults are less theoretically significant in the study of non-religion. Day goes on to ask: '[w]e might then wonder who those older people are. Why would they choose the category of Christian?' (ibid: 70). But this is also a key opportunity to find out who are the older people who *are not* ticking a Christian identity. Their understandings are equally important and could shed light on unseen elements of non-religious and non-believing realities.

The emphasis on younger populations is evident in further examples of youth-centred studies including Madge and Hemming's (2017) study exploring young British Nones, and an edited volume by Day, Vincett, and Cotter (2013) which presents three chapters specifically on non-religious and non-believing younger adults (i.e. Arweck 2013; Beaman and Beyer 2013; Sjöborg 2013) but none dedicated to the study of older adults. As well as this, there is research exploring 'unbelief' in children (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020) and on Generation Y or 'Millennial' (born between 1982-1999) non-believers (Herbert and Bullock)

as part of the 'Understanding Unbelief' programme.[13] Further examples of research exploring non-religion and younger people include studies by Savage, Collins-Mayo, and Mayo (2006); Day (2009; 2010); Collins-Mayo *et al* (2010); Tenenbaum and Ruck (2012); Catto and Eccles (2013); Wallis (2014); and Manning (2015; 2016). Although there are studies on non-believing older adults, discussed in more detail below, these handful of examples showcase the need for more research conducted among non-believing older adults, which remains in its infancy.

Religion and Older Adults

Where non-believing older adults are often overlooked in favour of more non-religious younger age groups, the amount of research which explores religion and older adults is vast, stemming from numerous disciplinary perspectives, including health and wellbeing, psychology, oral history, and sociology. In numerous existing studies, religion is said to be influential in older adults' lives, acting as a frame of reference and bringing about positive social, physical, and psychological benefits. Many of these studies focus on topics such as coping (e.g. Koenig 2006; Lee and Chan 2009; Heydari-Fard *et al* 2014), with an emphasis on how religion acts as a positive influence in helping people manage with hardship. Further common themes in studies of religion and older adults also reflect perceived negative notions of the experiences of old age, such as loneliness (e.g. Rote, Hill, and Ellison 2013). In a similar vein, as discussed in more detail below, several studies explore religion and older age in relation to death and dying (e.g. Johnson 1995; Coleman *et al* 2002; Koenig 2006; Coleman, Mills, and Spreadbury 2011; Spreadbury and Coleman 2011; Spreadbury 2013; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson 2015; Bengtson and Silverstein 2019). The social role of religion is also said to be of importance to older adults in providing social, emotional, and spiritual support (e.g. Arcury *et al* 2000; Eisenhandler 2005; Yoon and Lee 2006; Krause and Bastida 2011; Eccles 2012; Rushing *et al* 2013; Day 2017). However, existing authors have highlighted how numerous studies have failed to take non-believing older adults into account and this calls into question the supposed relationship between religiosity and wellbeing (Zuckerman 2009; Horning *et al* 2011; Wilkinson and Coleman 2011; Brewster *et al* 2014).

There are a number of limitations apparent in existing literature on religion and older adults. Not only does much research fail to take into account non-religious individuals, as mentioned

[13] Understanding Unbelief is a collaborative research programme based at the University of Kent 2017-2020 funded by the John Templeton Foundation which aims to advance understanding of different types of 'unbelief' around the world. The current doctoral research is also part of the Understanding Unbelief research programme.

above, many studies use quantitative measures, which cannot always adequately capture complex issues of belief, religiousness, or spirituality (e.g. Yoon and Lee 2006; Rushing *et al* 2013; Heydari-Fard *et al* 2014), exhibiting the need for a lived approach to understand everyday realities. Also, the terminology used in such quantitative measures may not always be relatable for older adults and thus are not always a true or accurate reflection of the depth of experiences older adults may feel (Glicksman 2009). Much of the research also focuses on Christianity (Coyle 2002) and is undertaken in the US (United States) (Johnson 1995; Koenig 2006). Further, the pessimistic portrayal of old age as a time of decline and loss, emphasising the need to cope in certain situations, is evident in many of the studies. Work with non-believing older adults might enable some of the overarching claims made about the role of religion to be challenged, or indeed validated, or both. As such, this opens up some key questions that could be considered, including: How does non-belief play a role in daily life for older adults – not just at times of illness or reduced wellbeing? Are there non-religious alternatives to the many supposed benefits of religion? And what can this tell us about non-believing more generally? These are questions which will not only benefit the study of non-religion but which will also bring about a more holistic and lived understanding of how belief and non-belief can play a role in older adults' lives in general.

The imbalance between the amount of research conducted both on religion with older adults and non-religious younger people is something which needs addressing. There are key reasons why older adults' experiences need to be recognised, including the following issues that I set out in the remainder of this chapter. Taking the approach that younger people have more to say risks the experiences of older adults being overlooked when in reality their experiences could have had a huge influence on younger non-believing and non-religious people today. Older adults could have been influential in the development and transmission of non-religious cultures, pointing to older adults' theoretical significance in the field of non-religion (further discussion below). As well as this, older adults' experiences are key in understanding the diversity of non-belief in society and should be taken into account alongside many other voices to feed into multiple narratives.

Work with Non-Religious and Non-Believing Older Adults

Despite the examples set out above which highlight the theoretical and empirical focus on younger non-religious and non-believing people and religion and older adults, this is not to say that no studies have been conducted on non-religious and non-believing older adults, but these

are far fewer in number and tend to focus on a limited set of themes or questions. Whilst these studies focus on real and important issues experienced by older adults, they paint a very limited picture of daily life, for instance by perpetuating negative notions of the experiences of old age. An example of this negative focus on old age can be seen with numerous studies that discuss later life as a time of decline, coping, and loss rather than a continuation of a meaningful life (Pentz 2005).

End-of-Life

As noted, research around end-of-life makes up a significant amount of research with older adults and with it comes assumptions around the role religion (or lack of) plays in these situations. In particular, a lot of research has focused on the idea that religion has a role in helping older adults prepare for and come to terms with their own death as well as the death of loved ones (e.g. Johnson 1995; Coleman *et al* 2002; Koenig 2006; Coleman, Mills and Spreadbury 2011; Spreadbury and Coleman 2011; Spreadbury 2013; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson 2015). In relation to studies which explore older adults and approaches to their own deaths, Cicirelli (2011) found that older adults with the highest levels of death acceptance had higher levels of religious spiritual beliefs (see also Ardelt 2003; Daaleman and Dobbs 2010). Existing research has argued that higher levels of religiosity can bring with it lower levels of fearing death (Wink and Scott 2005), more positive views towards death, and less anxiety (Hui and Coleman 2013). These studies seem to suggest that the nature of, and the level or strength of, belief can influence ideas and attitudes towards death and dying.

Others have looked specifically at bereavement. In exploring religious coping responses to spousal bereavement, Spreadbury and Coleman (2011) and Spreadbury (2013) find that undertaking ritual practices (e.g. prayer, lighting candles, taking communion/Eucharist, reciting the rosary, and reading religious scripture) can be helpful in bereavement processes. Similarly, work by Coleman *et al* (2007) explored the philosophical, spiritual, and religious responses to losing a spouse and found that people coped in different ways by drawing on resources such as devout religious beliefs to more secular understandings around the meaning of life. For many it was also a time of uncertain and conflicting beliefs. These studies highlight how beliefs are not static during later life, especially during bereavement, but are malleable and can be in response to certain life crises (Coleman *et al* 2002).

Religion, then, can play a positive role for older adults, and this is indeed the case for many, as the above studies suggest, and as I found to be the case in previous research I conducted (Malone and Dadswell 2018). That said, others have found that religion can sometimes have negative consequences. For example, Ng *et al* (2011) and Faigin and Pargarment (2010) found that some aspects of religion can cause stress and have negative implications for older adults, e.g. bringing about notions of punishment, guilt, and vengefulness. Williams and Sternthal (2007) also show how religious and spiritual social groups can have negative impacts on members, e.g. through prejudice, judgemental behaviours, exclusion, and criticism for lack of conformity.

In light of growing numbers of non-religious people, there is a need for more research with non-believing and non-religious older adults to better understand different approaches to end-of-life contexts. There have been a handful of studies which compare religious and non-religious coping mechanisms and these show how both religious and non-religious approaches can be drawn upon by older adults. Non-religious approaches that can be drawn upon include humour, exercise, self-distraction, listening to music, and being grateful and optimistic (Dunn and Horgas 2004; Wilkinson and Coleman 2010; Lowis *et al* 2011; Horning *et al* 2011; Wilkinson and Coleman 2011; McDougle *et al* 2016). Similarly, Wilkinson and Coleman (2010) compare coping mechanisms between religious older adults and atheist older adults in the UK, finding no clear-cut difference between the way the two groups coped with some of the challenges of ageing, including end-of-life.

More recent research has started to focus more specifically on non-believing and non-religious older adults to understand different approaches to death. Christel Manning (2019), for instance, explores meaning-making narratives of non-religious older adults at the end-of-life in the US and who were living in care homes. In Manning's research there were a mixture of religious and non-religious participants, but, crucially, her work shows how in end-of-life contexts, people can gain meaning, comfort, and explanations from non-religious sources too, such as drawing on family, the laws of nature, or the notion of the circle of life. Also writing specifically about the American context, Nicholas MacMurray and Lori Fazzino (2017) show how their non-religious participants, who were members of non-religious organisations, are often confronted with religion when it comes to end-of-life, something they have to fight against and challenge. Because of the strong cultural presence of theism in the environment where MacMurray and Fazzino conducted their research, their findings show how non-

religious people often feel overlooked and marginalised in their attempts to deal with death and dying in a meaningful way, contrasting with Manning's findings. Other research has explored death and funerals from the perspectives of non-religious celebrants, in particular Humanist celebrants (Engelke 2015b), highlighting how death can be dealt with institutionally. Whilst significant in showcasing non-religious and non-believing experiences of death, these studies still employ religious and non-religious comparisons, recruit from members of non-religious organisations, or take an institutional or organisational approach to understanding death (i.e. by looking at non-religious organisations in the case of Engelke's and MacMurray and Fazzino's work), and also looking at those facing end-of-life in a care facility, rather than providing insight into the lived reality of being an ordinary non-believing older adult. Whilst these more recent studies have started to move away from health and wellbeing disciplines, which often focus on how people 'cope', more is still to be known about how non-religious and non-believing older adults approach death, their ideas about death, what they believe death is, and what, if anything, might exist beyond death.

Although efforts to understand how older adults understand and face death from a non-believing and non-religious viewpoint have been undertaken, these studies are small in number and only show one aspect of later life. Additionally, many of these studies fail to see death as part of the life course but treat it instead as existing in its own vacuum or having its own special category, arguably leading to a partial understanding about how people think about or approach end-of-life. As will be made clearer in chapter 7, this thesis did not set out to look at the topic of death and it was not a part of the interview schedule, to avoid reducing participants' lives to this. Yet participants in the current study discussed death in a substantial way, highlighting how their perspectives as ordinary non-believers can add more holistic understanding to approaches to end-of-life amongst the non-religious. The next section looks at research which explores non-religious and non-believing older adults in a broader manner. This highlights the rich experiences older adults have to offer to the study of non-religion.

Daily Life

Research is not limited to psychological and health-based approaches, or to studies which focus on end-of-life. Work from sociology and oral history provide more empirical depth to the lived experiences of non-believing and non-religious older adults. The examples below begin to show that there are non-believing older adults with important things to say, with experiences to share, and these experiences and thoughts can tell us something about non-belief and non-

religion more widely. What becomes clear, however, is the need for a lived approach which explores the experiences of ordinary non-believing older adults.

In general, the handful of studies which look this group lay the groundwork for understanding the experiences, complexities, and variations of their lives. For instance, research by Eccles (2012) in Cumbria (North-West England) explores how older women relate to religion and non-religion in everyday life.[14] Eccles developed a typology of her participants, splitting them into 'affiliates' and 'disaffiliates'. However, those in the 'disaffiliate' group are not exclusively non-believers. Included in the disaffiliate group are 'implicit believers', 'holistic switchers', and 'secularists' which Eccles describes as those who have 'cast off all forms of religion and/or spirituality' (ibid: 480). She shows how for these women, their relationship with belief and non-belief, religion and non-religion is varied and highlights the messy nature of what it means to be a 'disaffiliate', noting how identity and beliefs do not always match up. Yet again, Eccles' research does not focus specifically on non-believing older adults, nor does she include men in her sample, as such her work is limited in what it can tell us about the lived reality of non-belief.

Taking an oral history approach, Coleman, Koleva, and Bornet's (2013) edited collection explores the lives of older people from the UK, Bulgaria, and Romania and draws comparison between the 'secular' West and the enforced atheism throughout Romania's and Bulgaria's socialist years. The chapters touch upon several themes such as: how their respondents make sense of and mark certain life events (Young 2013); the interplay between national, religious, and non-religious identities in socialist Romania and Bulgaria (Bădică 2013); contradictory ideas surrounding notions of orthodoxy and non-belief (Karamelska 2013); the importance of religious services for life transitions (Koleva 2013); and religious and non-religious change over a life course (Coleman, Grama, and Petrov 2013). Although the edited volume looks both at believing and non-believing older adults, the authors use oral history to show the complexity and depth of being a non-believer across these different environments. For instance, they show how beliefs do not always match up with identity and practice, i.e. someone may claim to be orthodox yet be a non-believer due to enforced atheism in the former socialist countries where they participated in religious practices covertly as a way of protesting against government impositions (Young 2013: 83). Similarly, in the UK there was sometimes a focus on the cultural

[14] Eccles defines these older women as aged 40 plus, although whether this is 'old' is questionable.

elements of religion, despite non-belief. Brown (2017) has also undertaken oral history work amongst 84 atheists, whom he defines as people who 'live their life as if there is no God' (2017: 1), aged between 40 and 90 years old. His work provides a breadth of examples as well as in-depth narrative from people's lives, exploring the numerous ways in which people from the US, Canada, the UK, India, France, and Estonia 'became atheists', suggesting a linear progression from 'religious' to 'non-religious' through processes of secularisation. Through his work, Brown presents examples of common experiences his participants shared. These include: the development of atheism, such as experiences of those becoming atheist in childhood; how atheists may present themselves in everyday life, such as 'silent' and 'indifferent' atheists; and gender differences in people's narratives of becoming atheist. He also sheds light on the overlooked examples of non-white atheists, and how ethnicity and religious background can play a significant role on peoples' narratives. However, it is important to note that Brown recruited the majority of his participants from non-religious organisations, after humanist lectures he had conducted, or via a specific website which set out clearly the aims of his research. So although his work is hugely significant in filling some of the gaps mentioned above (and to follow), the ordinary non-believer (i.e. those recruited from the community), who does not belong to such non-religious organisations, remains in the side-lines.

Despite the informative research undertaken with non-believing older adults, there are a number of limitations with the existing studies. For instance, as noted, non-believing older adults are often explored as a side note to and/or comparison with religious older adults. Likewise, many studies are overly interested in end-of-life at the expense of other aspects of the life course and daily life for older adults in general. Therefore, more understanding is needed about non-believing older adults as a group in and of themselves, not as a group to be compared with the religious, nor as a group to only tell us something about death. Also, existing studies with this demographic present some issues in regards to where participants are recruited from – past examples being from the British Humanist Association (e.g. Wilkinson and Coleman 2010; 2011), the Richard Dawkins Website (e.g. Horning *et al* 2011), humanist and other non-religious groups, and humanist lectures (e.g. Brown 2017). This raises questions about whether these participants reflect the reality of all non-believing people (Bullivant 2008; Cotter 2011). Therefore, as is already stressed within the field, there is a need to understand the experiences of non-believing older adults from various backgrounds, not just those affiliated with a non-religious organisation (Lee *et al* 2017), to highlight the complexity and

heterogeneous nature of non-believers. Whilst the 37 non-believing older adults in the current research do not represent a complete or generalisable picture of all non-believing people, their stories add another voice and perspective to what is known from the findings of existing studies. Additionally, although Brown (2017) provides in-depth information about atheist older adults, his book reflects similar narratives to his previous work (discussed below) which have a heavy focus on the 1960s as significant in why people turned away from religion in much of Western society. Although this undoubtedly played a significant role for some people, as Brown (2009; 2017) himself highlights, the extent to which alternative narratives are overlooked is something to be questioned. Also, Brown does not focus in detail on how or what role non-belief plays for his participants in everyday situations; rather his work focuses much more on the loss of religion, although he does see atheism and humanism as something of substance which is 'gained' by people. In particular, he points towards what he terms the 'humanist condition' which he presents his informants as having (more discussion on this can be found in chapter 5).

Several Secularisations

Despite apparent inattention to non-believing older adults, there are important theoretical reasons for researchers to engage with this group. A key body of work that older adults could contribute to are secularisation theories, which aim to explicate religious decline and are often used to explain the growing numbers of non-religious people in Western society. A number of scholars have put forward different secularisation arguments which showcase a variety of social, cultural, political, and economic influences which they argue contribute to secularisation (for instance, see Berger 1967; Luckman 1967; Wilson 1969). However, Beckford (2003) and Davie (2013) point out how there is little consensus on the definition of secularisation. Consequently, the term is used in multiple and varying ways despite different arguments not always being compatible with one another. These secularisation theories have been prominent in the sociological study of religion since its inception and this has continued into the study of non-religion too.

One approach to explaining religious decline in society is a so-called 'classic' version of secularisation theory put forward by Steve Bruce (2002; 2011), which sees modernity and secularisation as intrinsically related. For Bruce, modernity has brought about the declining social significance of religion, as well as the decline of the influence religion has in relation to other spheres in society, such as the state or economy. This has, in turn, brought about

decreasing numbers of religious people and subsequently a decline in the social standing of religious institutions, according to this secularisation approach. It is argued that this therefore influences the degree to which people are religious and the extent to which they engage with religious practices and live their lives informed by religious beliefs or norms. These key dimensions of secularising forces cannot be untangled from each other. Highly influenced by the work of Max Weber, Bruce argues that as society changes, the plausibility of religion declines due to secular alternatives, and so religion becomes less desirable. This change in plausibility has developed over centuries in numerous and complex ways. Some of the influencing factors include the ability to question religious authority using scientific and rational knowledge, which in turn brought about increased relativism and tolerance for other worldviews. Furthermore, Bruce argues that with increased choice, traditional religious boundaries are harder to maintain, leading to religious indifference.

A key element of secularisation for Bruce is the loss of religion's social significance, as noted above, and this happened, in British society in particular, in several ways. For instance, Bruce argues that Protestantism, specifically, brings about a much more privatised religion which focuses on the individual, leading to the declining role of the church in public life (Bruce 2002: 8-10). In an increasingly egalitarian and diverse society, the church became less central in public life and less relevant for the public, argues Bruce, and these changes occurred over centuries and in multiple and complex ways. Bruce further highlights how the role of science contributed to the decline of religion's social significance. But crucially, for Bruce, the 'crucial connections [between science and the decline of religion] are far more subtle and complex than those implied in some zero-sum knowledge competition' (ibid: 26). Bruce suggests rather than thinking of religion and science as in direct conflict with each other, the relationship is far more subtle, it was more of a 'bypass' of religion to science in certain situations, and in doing so, handing over the reins of power once held by the church and showing the social significance of religion decline.

For Bruce, the changes in public and private life, such as those discussed briefly above, lead to what Bruce envisages the 'secular' to be, which is insubstantial. He argues:

> In so far as I can imagine an end point [to secularisation], it would not be self-conscious irreligion; you have to care too much about religion to be irreligious. It would be widespread indifference […] no socially significant shared religion; and religious ideas

> being no more common than would be the case if all minds were wiped blank and people began from scratch to think about the world and their place in it. This is an important point, because the critics often assume that the secularisation paradigm supposes the human default position to be instrumental, materialist atheism (ibid: 42).

For Bruce then, indifference and neutrality towards religion is the 'ideal' destination of the declining social significance of religion. He considers religious belief to decline in line with the decline of other elements of religion, leading to an ideal state of being secular, i.e. to indifference to religion. This is central to Bruce's argument – in response to other suggestions, such as increased rationalism and scientific knowledge, for instance, he argues:

> Most people did not give up being committed Christians because they became convinced that religion was false. It simply ceased to be of any great importance to them; they became indifferent (ibid: 235).

For Bruce, it is primarily a decline and lack of religious socialisation which leads to such indifference, as well as 'the lack of constant background affirmation of beliefs' (ibid: 241). This is further enhanced by increased egalitarianism and diversity in society which has brought an end to a shared faith which was reaffirmed by social life – i.e. the declining social significance of religion and belief and increasing indifference go hand-in-hand through complex cultural changes and shifts.

Whilst some authors (e.g. Berger 1967; Wilson 1969; Bruce 2002; 2011) are emblematic of classical secularisation theorists, i.e. those who emphasise a strong link between modernisation and secularisation, there are other authors who follow a related, but slightly different, approach. For instance, Chaves (1994) argues that rather than religion declining *per se*, it is rather the scope of religious authority which is declining. Norris and Inglehart (2011) also offer an alternative explanation that in modern societies, as 'existential security' increases (e.g. increased wealth or welfare), there is a decline in the need for traditional religions. Indeed, there are also other approaches to explaining religious change and supposed deterioration in society. Alternative explanations include Stark and Bainbridge's (1996) notion of 'rational choice' theory, based on models of supply and demand, which suggests that mainstream religious denominations have declined due to their inability to keep up with a modern and changing society. As such, they have lost their appeal in the religious market meaning people look elsewhere for their religious needs, they argue. There are also authors such as Brown

(2009) and McLeod (2007) who posit particular moments in history, and most notably the twentieth century, as key in understanding sharp religious decline in Western society.

This section considers three approaches to secularisation and argues that work with non-believing older adults may contribute and add depth to such arguments. The secularisation arguments this thesis engages with most substantially are classical secularisation theory models, typified by Steve Bruce (2002; 2011), as well as models offered by Callum Brown (2009) and Hugh McLeod (2007). These authors are focused on due to the temporal models in their work; they focus on change over time and work with older adults is an important resource for assessing the relative validity of these models. Whilst classical secularisation arguments set out a time line of religious deterioration spanning over more than a century, the model put forward by Brown points towards the 1960s as a watershed era, whilst McLeod's model is somewhat of a combination. The historical contexts these authors highlight as significant for looking at changes over time, i.e. from more gradual changes over hundreds of years to the changes of twentieth century and the 1960s in particular, are considered in this thesis. The authors provide valuable data for looking at temporal changes and I show how work with older adults can add more depth and real-life intricacy to their arguments.

For Callum Brown (2009), Christianity was an all-encompassing force in Britain for hundreds of years up until around the 1960s.[15] Brown states: 'really quite suddenly in 1963, something very profound ruptured the character of the nation and its people, sending organised Christianity on a downward spiral to the margins of social significance' (ibid: 1). The 1960s were a threat, in this view, because this period revolutionised the way people constructed their lives, families, sex lives, identities, and morals; and the emergence of a counterculture proved a significant challenge to 'discursive Christianity' as it existed. 'Discursive Christianity' is a phrase Brown uses to describe a certain 'form' that religion manifested itself as in society from the 1800s to the 1950s (Brown 2009: 12). The phrase links to ideas of protocols around Christianity linked to a Christian identity (e.g. rituals, customs and behaviour, dress, economic activity) which have a discursive nature in people's lives, which can be perpetuated by the media, the clergy, or the family, for example (Brown 2009: 12-13). These discourses, and related protocols, impacted on people's behaviour, their identity, and how they narrated their autobiographical accounts of themselves, argues Brown. The 1960s challenged this through

[15] Brown emphasises the importance and influence of the 'long sixties', which for him spanned from 1956-1973.

some key changes in society, including legislation on abortion, homosexuality, divorce, women's liberations movements, youth culture, and student rebellions. For Brown, women had been the key guardians of religion up until the 1960s when they 'broke their relationship to Christian piety in the 1960s and thereby caused secularisation' (ibid: 10). Brown's (2009) work was seminal in looking at non-elites using archival material from a social historical approach and his worked challenged classical secularisation theories.

Hugh McLeod (2007) offers a related but alternative approach to Brown's (2009) work. McLeod also emphasises the role the 1960s played in regards to the decline of Christianity in the Western world, but unlike Brown, McLeod recognises the gradual changes that had been taking place since the seventeenth century, including changes in religious tolerance and pluralism, but argues that the majority of people had been nominally Christian and the churches still had power, authority, and influence. For McLeod, the 'long sixties'[16] challenged this status quo. During this time, church-attendance dropped, as well as church marriages and baptisms, the number of clergy being ordained decreased, and the numbers of those claiming no religion, or following different religions, increased. For McLeod, the 1960s was a time that provided opportunity for the challenges to 'Christendom' to be discussed out in the open. Unlike Berger (1967), who argued that religions lose legitimacy and plausibility and then become open to debate, McLeod suggests that it is the other way around and that the opportunity to challenge cultural norms openly brings about critical stances toward religion.

McLeod's work also raises the important observation that the changes happening in society did not affect everyone in the same way. Like Brown (2009), McLeod (2007) argues that the counterculture of the 1960s produced a lasting legacy, but this is despite only a small proportion of people being actively involved in it. Moreover, he challenges some preconceptions surrounding the counterculture. For instance, despite many advocating the contexts surrounding the countercultural movements of the 1960s as a positive and liberating experience, McLeod notes that this was not always the reality and large numbers of people were not involved in the first place. This supports Mannheim's (1997) notion of a 'Generation Unit', to reflect different sub-groups that exist in a generation and how, despite people living through a certain time together, individuals' experiences are not always the same.

[16] For McLeod, the period termed the 'long sixties' spans from 1958-1974.

Research with non-believing older adults could stand to inform these differing secularisation theories in ways that have not yet been taken advantage of. For instance, working with older adults provides an opportunity to observe whether and how different types of knowledge, experience, exposure to other worldviews, increased diversity, ideas of tolerance, and choice have been influential on their non-belief. These sorts of experiences are useful for understanding religious decline in Western society, but have yet to be explored empirically in any great depth from the perspectives of ordinary non-believers. As mentioned earlier, whilst it may be true that older adults are more religious than their younger counterparts, this perhaps ignores the fact that the people involved in the events of the 1960s are now in fact old or entering old age. As such, their stories are useful in understanding the reality of eras such as the 1960s and whether some of the claims made above were actually the case for the average person, or whether there are alternative narratives, such as the influence of other eras. Looking at these issues is important because it reinforces the theoretical significance of research with older adults, as empirical work with this group stands to provide new insights into the plausibility of these differing theories of secularisation, including, but not limited to, those discussed in detail here. Wider post-war changes that could have been influential on religious decline should also be considered, including the development of youth culture, the sexual revolution, feminist movements, political radicalisation, gay movements, and changes in related areas of law, such as those relating to divorce, abortion, contraception, and sexuality, as argued by Davie (1994), McLeod (2007), and Brown (2009).

The claims made by authors such as Bruce, Brown, and McLeod raise a number of questions which could be further explored by working with non-believing older adults. This demographic could provide empirical grounding to their arguments about change over time, such as how key life events influence non-belief over a life course. Some of the questions their work brings about, and which work with non-believing older adults could help answer, are as follows. Firstly, did people experience a sudden change in their lives (e.g. with social and political movements in the 1960s) which contributed towards their non-belief? Or was it more of a gradual development? Secondly, in line with Bruce's argument, did knowledge or experience of different worldviews and increased cultural diversity influence or impact upon, or even reaffirm non-belief? If key moments in history (such as the 1960s) were so important in explaining religious decline, then understanding the perspectives of those who experienced it first-hand would help contextualise such theories. Not only could this approach highlight the unique experiences of older adults, it could also give context and depth to understanding

generational changes when it comes to non-believers. It is, however, important to consider that people may not necessarily associate their personal experiences with wider social factors at all, such as the countercultural movements of the 1960s which Brown (2009) and McLeod (2007) suggest are important. Therefore undertaking empirical work with ordinary non-believing older adults from a lived non-religion approach can help add ‘real-life’ contextualisation to these arguments and bring to the light and allow other narratives to come to the fore.

The debates which focus on secularisation and a specific era could be deepened by paying closer attention to theories on life course and generation, both of which the study of older adults would contribute to. The term ‘generation’ is used in various and often conflating ways, including to describe kinship descent, a birth cohort (e.g. baby boomers), a life-stage (e.g. student generation), or an historical period (e.g. cultural generation) (Edmunds and Turner 2002). The notion of a ‘canonical generation’ is important in relation to the study of older adults because it might shed light on how historical events can be personalised and shape the narratives people tell. A canonical generation is: ‘those whose experiences come to epitomise an event of historical and symbolic importance’ (Nettleingham 2017: 850). In his work on canonical generations, Nettleingham questions what happens ‘when generations are remembered by subsequent actors who are, in turn, attempting to make their own mark’? (ibid: 852). Working with older adults could tell us something interesting here i.e. how they make sense of their understanding of what generation they consider themselves being part of and other generations from which they distance themselves, which may in turn have influenced their non-belief. In relation to secularisation theorists in particular, we might even consider whether research from figures such as Brown and McLeod is itself shaped by their relationship with the ‘canonical generations’ of the 1960s. With Brown born in 1953 and McLeod born in 1944, they may have been involved in many of the events of the 1960s and therefore are writing about them in a particular way.

Not only can empirical work with older adults provide new insights into some of these contested theories of secularisation, Roof (2009) also argues that the notion of generations fits well with theoretical arguments around religious transmission. This is therefore relevant in research with older adults because intergenerational relationships between parents, children, and grandparents can come to light (Pilcher 1995).

Socialisation and Transmission

Societal and Familial Decline

Another body of theory which research with non-believing older adults stands to contribute to relates to the transmission of religion: the study of non-believing older adults would help to better understand how non-religion might be transmitted in ways comparable to religion. In line with the emphasis on religious decline, some authors have tried to explain why younger people are less religiously committed than previous family generations, and some authors turn to the family and approaches to religious socialisation to explain such decline. Voas (2010: 29) suggests that one factor is what he describes as, 'value changes among parents', in which they reduce 'the priority they give to transmission of religion'. Voas argues that a potential reason for this decline is that being religiously affiliated is less practically useful than it used to be and therefore socialising children religiously is less important. In this model, parents are influential on the growing numbers of non-religious people due to their failure to religiously socialise their children (Voas and Crockett 2005; Crockett and Voas 2006). From a cognitive anthropology perspective, Lanman and Buhrmester's (2017) work engages with the idea of 'CREDs' (credibility enhancing displays), a theory of social learning which suggests that there is a bias to believe certain things (e.g. the existence of God) when verbal expressions provided by a caregiver are backed up by action. The authors argue that religious decline is linked to the lack of religious actions being displayed by a caregiver (most often a parent), since this leads to younger generations failing to adopt that religious model. Additionally, Crockett and Voas (2006) argue that religious decline is a cohort or generational effect with each generation becoming less religious than the one before. Crockett and Voas also argue that having religious parents means it is more likely that children will have higher levels of affiliation, attendance, and belief. Similarly, Woodhead (2016), draws on data from the British Social Attitudes Survey to argue that there is a 95% chance that those brought up with no religion will retain that identification.

Due to observations that successive generations are becoming less religious, much research has looked at younger adults brought up in a less religious manner, yet the accounts of those who may have socialised their children in this manner are neglected. This may be due to an emphasis on 'subtraction' models of secularisation (Taylor 2007; Lee 2015), i.e. a focus on the decline of religion and the failure to transmit religion (e.g. Voas 2010; Lanman and Buhrmester 2017) rather than the growth of other substantial worldviews or non-religious cultures. However, more recent work has begun to study the growth of non-religious worldviews and cultures

including research by Lee (2015), Manning (2015), Bengtson *et al* (2018), and Strhan and Shillitoe (2019). Therefore, more could be known from listening to the accounts of the older generations who helped influence the way the world is today, and this may also shed light on some of the familial generational differences in religiosity.

The emphasis on the decline of socialisation and transmission of religion within the family is reflected in a wide range of research. For Brown (2009), this focus on the failed transmission of religion is seen in his emphasis on women as once the key provider of religious education, including passing on certain beliefs, practices, and rituals; his argument about the significance of the 1960s focuses on the decline of this provision. McLeod (2007) also highlights the role women played in the decline of 'Christendom', especially in relation to the socialisation of children:

> Right up to the 1960s it had mainly been mothers who had taught their children prayers or made sure they went to Sunday School, and who had hung up crucifixes and pictures of saints or of biblical scenes on the walls of the home. The distancing from religion and the church of many women of the 1960s generation was a key factor in the weakening of the religious socialisation of the next generation (2007: 186).

According to McLeod, by the 1960s and 1970s, the number of children who received very little or no religious upbringing was increasing. Parenthood changed as society did and phenomena such as increased affluence and leisure time changed the ways parents wanted to spend their Sundays; increasingly this meant taking part in activities *away* from church (ibid). McLeod (2007) argues that the environment surrounding children was also changing with increased emphasis on them making their own choices rather than parental enforcement.

Exploring the narratives of older adults would contribute significantly to this literature by enhancing empirical knowledge of how parents socialised their children, and how this differs from how they were themselves brought up. Research with non-believing older adults may allow for the possibility of showing how processes of non-religious transmission may echo processes of religious transmission too, thus larger numbers of younger non-believers may be an outcome of this non-religious transmission from older generations. Such research would address significant questions such as: Is the decline of religious socialisation the only story to tell, or do other non-religious practices take the place of religion through intergenerational exchange? Are there examples of transmission of non-religious values outside the dominant

framework that older adults could shed light on, such as younger generations (e.g. children and grandchildren) influencing older generations? These are questions which could significantly enhance understanding of socialisation and transmission when it comes to non-belief and belief and religion and non-religion. Whilst not all these questions will be answered in this thesis, exploration of the current literature highlights several gaps which could be filled through taking older adults' perspectives into account. By looking at the life course and change over time with older adults, their memories and experiences might help develop understanding of non-belief and understanding why non-believing parents are more likely to have non-believing children and the processes which might bring this about.

Towards Substantial Models

Research exploring the ways in which people raise their children in a religious manner, or not, has begun to gain traction within the sociology of religion and non-religion and its findings raise some important and conflicting issues regarding whether non-religious transmission processes are akin to religious transmission processes. Where past research looks at the decline of parents socialising their children into religion, this does not always take into account the possibility of parents socialising their children into something else, i.e. non-religious cultures and beliefs. Yet Koleva (2013: 120) argues that 'secular attitudes and practices' can also be passed down through family generations and that instances of people questioning the models handed down by their forebears were extremely rare. Further, research conducted by Bengtson *et al* (2018) in the US highlights the ways in which non-religious worldviews can be actively transmitted between generations, explicitly and deliberately, as well as implicitly. Additionally, Strhan and Shillitoe's (2019) research based in the UK shows not only how non-religion can be transmitted within the family, be it deliberately, or implicitly through 'banal expressions of non-religion' (2019: 3), but that such transmission can also take place in the school and between peers. These findings suggest that non-believing and non-religious cultures or worldviews can indeed be passed on in much the same way as religious belief, culture, and worldviews.

In the US, the emphasis on religion in children's lives is deemed extremely important for the moral and social wellbeing of a child (Zuckerman 2012; 2014; Manning 2015). This is reflected in the vast volume of parenting literature written from a religious standpoint, as discussed by Nall (2010). Nall examines parenting literature from Christian and atheist perspectives, comparing two books: *Parenting Beyond Belief: On Raising Ethical, Caring Kids Without Religion* by McGowan (2009) and *Revolutionary Parenting: What the Research Shows Really*

Works by Barna (2007). Nall states that, '[u]nsuprisingly, I find that Christians aim to develop their children into faithful followers of God, while atheists aim to develop their children into rational free-thinkers who disdain dogmatism' (2010: 179). Although these books may represent the most overt form of non-religious and religious socialisation, other studies have shown similar processes of socialisation at play, whilst also demonstrating how these processes can be far more complex than suggested by the likes of Nall. Examples of such complexity are showcased by Christel Manning (2015), who explores how unaffiliated or 'None' parents raise their children in regards to religion or non-religion in the US and how they transmit their worldviews. The heterogeneous nature of her participants' beliefs is reflected in Manning's findings. Despite all of Manning's participants being 'religious nones' (i.e. not affiliating with a religion) not all of the participants are non-believers; many still held religious beliefs, whilst others did not, and all but three were raised in a religious home. Those who are she refers to as 'philosophical secularists' can often associate with labels such as 'humanist' but do not have religious belief, for instance. There are also those participants which Manning describes as 'indifferent' who both lack religious belief and do not identity with any label. What was common amongst these parents, argues Manning, is how their worldview choices were just that – *choices*. For the participants in Manning's study, the importance of choice is extended to children's ability to choose. All the parents in Manning's study expressed that ultimately they wanted their children to have agency when forming their own worldview. But Manning also shows how in practice this was not straightforward. This narrative of increased choice could be something stressed by older generations and influencing younger generations, and vice versa, and as such, work with older adults could inform findings such as Manning's.

By looking at the transmission of non-religious cultures, research could grasp whether these can be passed down in the same way religion is. Manning highlights five strategies for transmitting parental worldviews to children: conventional, alternative, self-provider, outsourcing, and non-provider (2015: 107). Some parents wanted their children to have the same experiences as they did in traditional religions and followed the conventional strategy (conventional). Whereas others wanted to find alternative communities (e.g. American Humanist Association) or merged multiple religious traditions (alternative). Some parents undertook a self-providing strategy in transmitting worldviews without any institutional involvement (self-provider), whereas others relied solely on outsourced external institutions (outsourcing), and other parents simply chose to do nothing in relation to religion or non-religion (non-provider). These examples suggest that there are ways in which non-religious

cultures can indeed be passed down. Building on this work, research with older adults provides a unique opportunity for the reality of raising children to be recognised, with the possibility of older adults being able to reflect on intergenerational relationships, and reveal any non-religious traditions which may impact socialisation.

Also based in the US, Phil Zuckerman (2014) presents some key issues around raising children. His discussion revolves around 'secular'[17] people, individuals he identified as non-religious as well – having rejected religion for a variety of reasons and are now living what he describes as a 'secular life'. Zuckerman discusses how many of these non-religious people hold the idea of not wanting to raise a child with 'nothing' (i.e. no religion), which could suggest that many non-believers perceive themselves as having no worldview or alternative beliefs. But, as Koleva's (2013), Bengtson *et al's* (2018), and Strhan and Shillitoe's (2019) findings suggest, this is not always the case. The picture is mixed. Like Manning, Zuckerman states that, for many, the question of religion (or non-religion) is only important when children entered the picture. Ultimately for Zuckerman:

> The beauty of being secular on this front is that you and your children are not bound to rituals. You are not enslaved by traditions. You do not have to engage in such activities because it is expected of you, or because your family urges you to, or because you feel obligated or guilty or forced to. Secular families perform rituals, celebrate holidays, and partake of traditions only if they want to. If they decide to. Thus being nonreligious means that you have much more freedom to pick and choose what you want to do or not, participate in or avoid, join up with or walk away (2014: 104).

There are good reasons to question this claim. For example, there may be secular and non-religious rituals which people feel just as obliged to take part in as religious ones (both adults and children), e.g. 'Darwin Day' (Zuckerman 2014: 103). Non-believers might also attend religious rituals because they feel obligated by family members for example (Eccles 2012), but this does not mean they are less 'non-religious' or 'secular' because such rituals may be based more on tradition or the cultural elements of religion, rather than a religious conviction (Voas 2009). Rather, the reality of life is more complex than simply being able to pick and choose what one does or does not want to be involved in, something a lived non-religion approach could help to highlight.

[17] Zuckerman uses the term secular to describe people who do not believe in God.

Ultimately, this work does support the view that there are processes at work other than just the failure to transmit religion. Manning (2015) argues that None parents see themselves as constructing their own worldviews rather than just inheriting them and Zuckerman (2014) argues that secular people are not bound by traditions and that they too can construct their own. What does this mean for the study of non-belief? Manning's and Zuckerman's research offers some key empirical data about None and secular parents and how they raise their children. But would these findings be replicated in societies other than the US? It is likely that contrary findings might arise when it comes to the role of religion and non-religion in the socialisation of children due to the starkly different religious environments in the UK and the US, for instance, where the cultural and social connotations of non-religion are different (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Cragun *et al* 2012). Indeed, as was noted in Strhan and Shillitoe's (2019) study, non-religion could be transmitted through banal forms, perhaps reflecting the different cultural backgrounds.

Discussions surrounding the socialisation and transmission of religion and non-religion point towards how non-believers may grapple with the issues of socialising children in a religious manner or not, but whether non-religious cultures have an existing heritage remains unclear. Therefore, non-believing older adults are theoretically and empirically significant here and can provide knowledge about those generations who went before them, as well as after them, to try and understand more clearly this notion of heritage. Thus, the field of non-religion could benefit greatly from working with older adults and documenting their experiences in this area. As touched upon by Manning (2015), Zuckerman (2014) also argues that, because there are no set structures for 'secular' people (like in religious traditions), when it comes to the transmission of certain values or practices, that secular people are more involved, active, conscious, and aware of these issues when bringing up children. However, the evidence for this claim is limited and open to question. For example, it is equally plausible to imagine that many people may be simply indifferent to religious or non-religious considerations when it comes to raising children and it could be that the issue never crosses their mind. Zuckerman draws on the theoretical work of Hervieu-Léger (2000) who argues that religion is a 'chain of memory'; this in turn pulls on notions of collective belonging and lineage, which connects present day members of a community to their forebears and descendants. Hervieu-Léger argues that religion is a 'particular form of belief and one that specifically implies reference to the authority of a tradition' (2000: 4). She explains:

> What matters here is not the actual substance of belief but the ingenuity, the imaginative perception of the link which across time establishes the religious adhesion of members to the group they form and the convictions that bind them. Seen thus, one would describe any form of believing as religious which sees its commitment to a chain of belief it adopts as all-absorbing (ibid: 81).

For Zuckerman, this notion of lineage and an all-absorbing chain of belief is limited or sometimes totally absent from secular traditions and rituals. An example of a secular ritual and tradition can range from secular activities (e.g. sports game), to 'secularised' religious holidays, for example a 'Jesusless Christmas morning' (Zuckerman 2014: 103), to non-religious organisation celebrations (e.g. Darwin Day), to parents creating their own rituals and traditions, for example (see Zuckerman 2014: 102-103). Secular culture lacks heritage, argues Zuckerman. This is something also argued by Brown (2017: 20) who states that 'there is little atheist heritage – discourse or collective memory – to draw upon'. But Hervieu-Léger points out that traditions do not have to be exclusively religious and explains that 'what comes from the past is only constituted as tradition insofar as anteriority constitutes a title of authority in the present. Whether the past in question is relatively short or very long is only of secondary significance' (2000: 7). In other words, something coming from the past, a ritual for instance, is only considered a tradition if it holds some sort of authoritative position in present circumstances. If a certain ritual, for example, does not hold authority in the present, then it is not considered a tradition. Research by Koleva (2013), Bengtson *et al* (2018), and Strhan and Shillitoe (2019) finds that non-religious cultures may have a relatively short history but nevertheless are authoritative and could be seen as traditions to be passed on. These findings suggest that Hervieu-Léger's model could also apply to non-believing and non-religious people. In fact, Brown (2017: 85) does suggest that younger generations build upon the non-religious characteristics of those who have gone before them, a claim that contradicts competing claims about non-believers lacking heritage as per his previous statement above, i.e. that 'there is little atheist heritage – discourse or collective memory – to draw upon' (2017: 20). Research with older adults provides key opportunities to investigate competing claims about non-belief lacking heritage. It may well be that it does have heritage, but this heritage may be hidden and unobvious (Lee 2015) (an idea acknowledged by Zuckerman) yet shared between people and passed down across familial generations. The above studies provide empirical depth about the reality of non-religious and religious socialisation and transmission and ideas of heritage but ultimately paint a mixed picture, calling for more understanding around these issues.

Further, the majority of this research is set in the US (bar Strhan and Shillitoe's 2019 work),[18] and work in different parts of the world may paint a very different picture. For example, the language of individual choice that Manning and Zuckerman employ and observe may be reflective, to some degree, of this US environment, in which individualism and personal choice are prized (Norris and Inglehart 2011). Since this is not the case everywhere, further research in different environments will allow for the some of these findings to be expanded and claims regarding different parenting strategies or non-religious heritage to be scrutinised. For example, work in Europe may be able to shed light on how the ideas of a 'nominal' (Day 2011) and a cultural Christian identity links with notions of nationality and belonging (Zuckerman 2008; Day 2011), which could be influential on non-belief. Thus, there is room for more research which explores socialisation and transmission from more diverse environments.

Understanding the Stability of Non-Belief

In relation to when a person 'became', realised, or actively thought about being a non-believer, it may also be the case that the boundary between belief and non-belief might have changed in various ways over time. A key question that still dominates research in the field concerns the stability of non-belief over a life course. Existing research on this topic seems unable to reach a consensus, therefore there is scope for deeper investigation.

In analysing large-scale data regarding people with 'no religious preference' in the US, several of which are non-believers too, Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam (2010) find that being a 'religious none' is not a stable characteristic. Affiliation can change regularly and significantly over a lifetime, they argue, suggesting some element of instability and that perhaps the lines between religion and non-religion are blurred. Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam (2010) introduce the notion of 'liminality' as a framework for understanding this, arguing that 'many religious nones are actually liminal somethings, who still hold a weak sense of attachment to a religious tradition and thus may identify with the tradition sometimes, if not always' (2010: 597) (see also LeDrew's [2013] Canadian study which stresses the fluidity of beliefs and identities). However, Pasquale's (2010) work explored a number of secularist groups and their affiliates and suggested a different picture. One of his key findings was that very few of his participants reported any sort of 'religious relapse' (2010: 54), with his participants stating that rather than

[18] Koleva's (2013) work, though not set in the US and drawing on data from Romania, Bulgaria, and the UK, only deals with socialisation and transmission in passing. Likewise, Brown's (2017) research spans several countries but does not focus specifically on issues of socialisation and transmission.

their non-religious beliefs changing and developing over time, it was mostly a stable and one-way process. Crucially though, Pasquale's participants were members of non-religious organisations and their experiences may not reflect the reality for all non-religious and non-believing people when it comes to stability or change. Manning's work with none-affiliated parents also raises some questions about liminality, stability, and the transient nature of 'none worldviews', as she states that 'becoming a parent is itself a liminal stage' (2015: 35). Furthermore, although not directly comparable, as Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam's, Pasquale's, and Manning's work have different aims and methods (i.e. the former are looking at affiliation on surveys, the middle at metaphysical and existential worldviews using mixed methods, and the latter qualitatively exploring how none-affiliated parents transmit worldviews to children), their work shows how there is a lack of consensus when it comes to the stability of non-religious identity which needs further empirical research.

Indeed, studies undertaken outside of North America confirm the inconsistent evidence around the stability of non-religiosity. Work by Coleman, Grama, and Petrov (2013) in the UK, Bulgaria, and Romania stresses that childhoods are greatly influential on belief and non-belief today and that adult conversion (or de-conversion) is rare. This view is supported by Woodhead (2016) and Brown (2017) who suggest that few people express doubts in their non-belief or non-religiosity. Additionally, research based on UK data (Voas 2010) argues that religious decline is down to a 'cohort effect' i.e. that religious people are replaced by cohorts of less religious people and society therefore becomes less religious over time. David Voas argues against an 'age effect' i.e. the notion that people become more religious as they age (suggesting change), rather he argues that levels of religiosity remain steady throughout adulthood, which again brings about questions regarding stability of non-religiosity too.

These uneven findings around the stability of non-belief and non-religion over time, as well as the observable differences between the US data and findings from elsewhere, might suggest culturally specific influences. The studies by Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam (2010), Pasquale (2010), LeDrew (2013), and Manning (2015) are mainly working in a US context, and all in a North American one. Given the focus on individualised spirituality in the US and the idea of 'spiritual markets' and that people 'shop around' for spiritual or religious needs (Roof 2001; Brown 2017), it may be that liminality in regards to identity is more common than in other parts of the world. Observations on what the stability of identity and belief over time looks like in other geographical locations (i.e. the work by Voas 2010, Coleman, Grama, and Petrov 2013,

Woodhead 2016, and Brown 2017) might be due to different cultural narratives where less emphasis may be put on individual spirituality. These observations highlight the cultural contingencies of these findings and instability may be culturally specific to a North American context, rather than a feature of non-religion.

Working with older adults provides ample opportunities to understand more about stability. For example, if older adults have relinquished a religious affiliation, when in their life did this take place? It may have been when they were younger, or it may have been later in life. This would further enhance the empirical knowledge of how non-belief may develop and change over time and could address some of the questions around old age and religiosity or non-religiosity, for example, whether change is a cohort effect as Voas suggests. Working with older adults is particularly helpful in addressing questions of stability of belief over the life course because, put crudely, they have lived longer and could tell us more about these issues than younger generations can or may not have yet experienced on the same scale.

Ideas of 'nominal' Christianity could shed some light on the question of stability. Day (2011: 174) argues that people who are 'nominally religious' might identify with religious culture for ethnic, natal, and aspirational reasons without necessarily believing or practicing that religion.[19] Many nominal Christians, Day argues, undertake a performative Christian identity for different reasons, including to display a national or cultural identity (ethnic), a sense of familial connection (natal), or for social reasons such as seeing a Christian identity as a marker of respectability (aspirational). Building on Day's notion of 'nominal Christianity', Voas (2009) argues that many Europeans have a nominal Christian identity, but that this does not play a particularly important role in everyday life. For Voas, practice, like identity and belief, can be 'fuzzy' and for a large majority of fuzzy Christians there is not an overarching attitude of hostility or rejection of religion, rather religion is not very important. These 'fuzzies' may be open to the idea of believing in something, they may even perform rites of passage in the church, but if religion does play a role in their lives, it plays a minor role. In looking at change over time, Voas argues that people stop being religious more quickly than they become 'wholly secular',[20] leading to widespread indifference and therefore suggesting that this in-between category is 'transient' (ibid: 166). Yet what these in-between and transient categories look like

[19] See also Voas and Day (2007) for discussion on nominalism.
[20] Although what Voas explicitly means by 'wholly secular' is not clear-cut. He ranges from describing the 'secular' as 'non-religious' (2009: 163) to indifferent (ibid: 162).

in real life is not well known. Drawing on work by Day (2006) and Voas (2009), Storm (2009) explores the idea of 'fuzzy fidelity', highlighting how individual religiosity is often closely tied to other types of social identities, including ethnic, national, class, and gender identities (see also Day 2011). Therefore, with older adults having the benefit of a long life, the idea of 'fuzzies' may be influential in understanding the stability of a non-religious identity and whether people dip in and out of this identity rather than making clear-cut decisions and further understanding how and why religious and non-religious identity may change.

Although identities may change, whether or not beliefs change in the same way, or how they may change is not well known. Although looking at identity is informative for the study of non-belief,[21] many large-scale surveys ask questions about affiliation rather than belief and the two are not always necessarily related, i.e. you can affiliate with a religion without believing, as the above studies show. Indeed, beliefs are much harder to capture (Glicksman 2009). Thus, additional methods for achieving an understanding of belief and non-belief across a life time are valuable and lead to a more nuanced understanding of how belief and non-belief operate in social life, how they may change, and what might exist in-between these positions.

Complex Non-Religion and Non-Belief

Through the lived non-religion approach adopted by this thesis, understanding the complexity around how non-believers actually live and what impacts or influences their day-to-day lives is central. As such, older adult non-believers can contribute to a greater understanding of how belief in things other than religion can be meaningful and substantial, due to the fact that older adults may have had more time to make sense of and experience alternative beliefs or worldviews. Lee (2015), for instance, argues that non-religion can be substantial rather than insubstantial and emphasises that what constitutes 'non-religion' is not clear-cut, but reflects social life in its ambiguous, multifaceted, and contradictory nature. Through her work, Lee shows everyday and banal forms of non-religion existing in public and private spheres and how it can play out in people's daily lives in material, embodied, physical, and emotional ways.

[21] In terms of how this relates to non-belief, there is evidence to suggest that non-religious identity can be used a proxy for non-belief. For instance, data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (2018) shows how 46.2% of those all who identify as non-religious have positive atheist beliefs, and a further 25.6% of those who identify as non-religious have strong agnostic beliefs. This data therefore suggests that 71.8% (combined) of non-religious people are non-believers, although this is a crude measure, as beliefs asnd identities are much more complex in real life, it is nevertheless suggestive.

Typological Approaches

In trying to show the complex and multifaceted realities of non-religious people, various authors provide typologies of non-religious and non-believing individuals which highlight substantial alternative existential beliefs and worldviews. For instance, Lee's (2015) work in the UK sets out five classifications of existential cultures she found with her non-religious participants, which are as follows. The first existential culture Lee identifies is 'humanism' which is associated with a materialistic view of the world and the centrality of humanity in regards to knowledge about the world and meaning, often gained through scientific methods. The second is 'agnosticism', this is also associated with a materialistic view of the world but there is an emphasis on the limitations on human knowledge about the world. The third and fourth existential cultures are 'theism' and 'subjectivism'. Whilst people may not identify with these labels, these types are more associated with religion or alternative spirituality in terms of knowledge. Theism locates the source of knowledge as coming from an autonomous being, whilst those aligning more with subjectivism see knowledge about the world as arising from the individual's subjective experience. The last existential culture Lee identifies is 'anti-existentialism' which is associated with a lack of interest in or rejection of existential cultures and philosophies with a focus instead on practical, everyday life and immediate concerns. Manning's (2015: 38-46) work in the US sets out four common non-religious worldviews: 'unchurched believer', those who held conventional religious beliefs but were unaffiliated as organised religion could not fulfil or meet their needs; 'seeker spirituality', those who combine different religious or spiritual traditions in a pluralistic manner to meet their personal needs; 'philosophical secularist', non-believers who follow a non-religious 'philosophical worldview' (ibid: 43); and 'indifferent', those who showed no interest in either religious or non-religious worldviews.[22]

Some authors point towards categorisations of non-believing and non-religious people in relation to how and/or why they may have lost or moved away from religion and what beliefs they now hold. For instance, Sheard (2014) suggests three classifications: the 'anti-religious', associated with religious trauma, anti-religious attitudes, and personal trauma; the 'pro-atheist', associated with radical politics, rationalism, contact with atheism; and the 'non-religious', associated with irrelevance, or having been brought up atheist. Similarly, Brown (2017)

[22] See also Eccle's (2012) typology of affiliates an disaffiliates in her study exploring religion and non-religion in the daily lives of older women in Cumbria, discussed in more detail on page 41.

highlights numerous ways in which people may have arrived at their atheism but argues there is a common thread which runs throughout the narratives of many of the people he interviewed, which he calls the 'humanist condition'. The humanist condition, for Brown, encompasses a 'new moral compass' (2017: 161) which many of his participants shared and experienced before knowledge of what humanism was. He states that the humanist condition is a 'web of moral change amongst Western people, dominated by those who have lost religion' (ibid: 169). For Brown, the humanist condition is rooted in doubt about God and religion and the idea that morality is not separate from humanity. Whilst not strictly a typology, he identifies six core values of the humanist condition: the 'golden rule'; the right to have freedom of and freedom from religion; women's rights; sexual freedom; equality; and the right to assisted suicide. However, it is equally plausible that religious people hold these values and that many non-believers do not hold these values, suggesting that in reality, the values non-religious and non-believing people hold may be more diverse than this.

Whilst such typological approaches provide evidence of the diverse nature of non-religion in society, arguably, they do not reflect real life. Many of these authors stipulate the fact that people do not always fit into one typology but there can be cross-over between different types. Thus, in order to fully realise the complex and multifaceted nature of non-believing lives in a more holistic manner, life-history research with non-believing older adults could go beyond these approaches and provide an avenue through which to understand expressions or presentations of non-belief over time. This might highlight the ways in which non-belief and non-religious realities are not timeless 'types' which people slot into but may be lived and experienced to varying degrees over a person's life.

Cultural Connections to Religion

Working with older adults provides a distinctive starting point for exploring the role of cultural ties to religion, since older adults have lived through social contexts in which religion was arguably more significant. What is apparent in some of the literature discussed is the sometimes 'contradictory' nature of non-belief and non-religion. This is evident in Zuckerman's (2008) work in Scandinavia where many of his non-religious and non-believing respondents participated in religious events (e.g. baptism or getting married in a church), but these were done out of tradition or as a cultural marker. Further examples can also be seen in work by Day (2011), Zuckerman (2012), Young (2013), Bădică (2013), Karamelska (2013), Koleva (2013), Lee (2015), and Manning (2015), which show how cultural performances do not always reflect

religious beliefs or views. Work on religious indifference (e.g. Lee 2015; Quack and Schuh 2017) also shows the complex, often seemingly contradictory ways in which religious indifference can operate. Work in this field higlights not only how it can be difficult to capture such approaches, but also how being 'indifferent' can have several different presentations and cannot be easily defined. Findings such as these reinforce the importance of not taking certain practices or beliefs at face value and to try and understand some of their wider ramifications in social life. Further, as the multiple examples discussed above show, many people participate in religious practices or rituals out of tradition, this suggests that cultural connections to religion can be a powerful force in some people's lives and should not be dismissed. Cultural connections to religion may impact upon non-believers in numerous ways and may be even more pronounced with older adults who may have grown up experiencing the authority of Christianity, for example.

Working with older adults, as well as offering unique opportunities to find out about things such as socialisation, inter-generational transmission, and the role culturally religious factors may play, also offers generic opportunities to contribute to knowledge of non-belief and non-religion, such as understanding in more depth substantial worldviews and cultures. What the above studies have shown is that there is no single way of being non-religious or non-believing. The non-religious can have different 'existential cultures' (Lee 2015), different approaches to bringing up children (e.g. Manning 2015; Zuckerman 2014), and different connections to religious cultures. Keeping the complex and multifaceted nature of non-religion and non-belief in mind, future research is essential to understand in more detail the multitude of ways non-believing may play a role in the lives of older adults. For example, some may attend a place of worship, despite not believing in God, due to the social and cultural connotations attached to it, which may have continued impacts on older generations. Others may consider transmitting non-believing cultures to their children to be important. Therefore, an approach which allows this depth and complexity to be tapped into is essential.

Looking Forward

The existing literature set out above highlights a number of gaps in the field and I have shown how research which focuses on non-believing older adults can help address some of these gaps. The key arguments will now be summarised. Firstly, research with non-believing older adults is scarce compared to research with their younger counterparts and studies with religious older adults. Further, much of the work with this age group focuses on loss, decline, and end-of-life

without much consideration for understanding the lived realities of non-believing older adults. Thus, more in-depth work is needed to widen empirical knowledge to this understudied group. Secondly, working with older adults may challenge or support some of the claims put forward by secularisation theorists by offering new vantage points on how key points in history may have been influential for non-belief, as well as being open to alternative narratives. Thirdly, research with older adults may achieve more sensitive understandings of how non-believing and non-religious cultures may be transmitted between generations through socialisation. Lastly, some of the inconsistencies and ideas surrounding the stability of non-religion can start to be addressed. Taking into account a lifetime will allow deeper understanding of how non-religious beliefs may or may not change over time.

The proposed research addresses some of these issues via the following questions:

1. What does non-belief look like for an older adult and what role does it play in daily life? Are there alternative beliefs that participants articulate as being important?

2. How do the key life events of participants influence their non-belief over a life course? And how (if at all) do participants understand their non-belief in relation to wider historical, religious, social, and cultural changes that they have lived through?

3. Is the formation of non-belief about the absence of religious belief, the presence of non-believing cultures, or a combination of both?

4. To what extent is participants' non-belief bound up with other forms of religious identification, practice, or sentiment?

5. Does non-religious belief change over participants' life courses or is it stable over time?

Indeed, these research questions are only some of those that the study of older adults could and perhaps should address, nor are these the only topics which could be worth consideration. Other studies could focus on key issues such as class and gender which could also be influential on the nature and reality of non-belief for older adults and which are known to be influential on non-religion. The literature which looks at religious and non-religious coping techniques for older adults during old age could also benefit from wider exploration with the non-believing and could stand to contribute to issues related to old age, health, and wellbeing in wider research across disciplines. Research from a health and wellbeing perspective could also take into account other ways in which non-religion and non-belief could possibly benefit older adults in the same way religion is purported to.

The contribution of this study comes from its exploratory methodology, which takes a broad approach in trying to understand the lived realities of non-believing older adults. The following chapter sets out this methodology in detail. It draws further on the literature discussed in the present chapter to highlight the ways in which existing findings have helped shape the current thesis in important ways.

Chapter 3
Methodological Approaches to Research with Non-Believing Older Adults

Introduction

The previous chapter set out the theoretical and empirical significance of conducting research with non-believing older adults. The current chapter will discuss the key methodological considerations of conducting research with this group. I show how a lived non-religion approach, and the use of life-history interviews with older adults, offers significant opportunities to better understand the worldviews of a significant population of non-believers and the nature of religious and worldview change over time. I also illustrate how recruiting from the community – rather than from non-religious organisations, whose members do not reflect the experiences of all non-religious and non-believing people – also means we are given insight into the ordinary non-believer. Taking a lived approach to explore the experiences and narratives of ordinary non-believing older adults will generate new and important knowledge around their lived realities that existing research fails to sufficiently explore. Paired with life-history, this approach allows us to consider how historical contexts might impact upon understanding lived non-belief today.

A central challenge of the research was considering how to capture the rich and multifaceted experiences of participants in a manageable way. Another challenge was ensuring that the research design was sensitive and conducive to working with older adults, who might have particular requirements as research informants. As such, the following chapter will also discuss the methods, analysis, and key considerations that were undertaken to address these issues and the research questions set out at the end of the previous chapter.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss the theoretical approaches taken to data collection, geographical locations, and studying non-belief, before turning to the practical aspects of the fieldwork, including designing the sample, recruitment, eligibility, the interview, ethical issues, reflexivity, and data analysis.

Research Approach

Data Collection

In order to capture the lived experiences of non-believing older adults, the research undertaken employed an inductive qualitative approach, using face-to-face semi-structured interviews which touched upon life-history (see Appendix 1 for interview schedule). This approach was adopted for several reasons. One aim of the research was to try and understand the ways in which non-belief develops over a lifetime, the experiences related to this, how it is remembered and narrated, as well as to understand the lived reality of non-belief – complexity a quantitative approach would not allow for. Conducting interviews face-to-face meant that body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and other emphases were taken into account, allowing for recognition of how these impact upon narrative, something not visible with quantitative methods (Byrne 2004; Abrams 2010; Bryman 2016). Further, the current research employed an interpretive approach which is the view that 'meaning does not exist independent of the human interpretive process' (Hesse-Biber 2017: 230). Plus, as Bryant (2000: 495) states, an interpretive approach means 'treating each interpretive account as an equally valid "take" on a non-recoverable past'. Experiences and perspectives are important sources of knowledge and thus exploring these through qualitative research presents a way of capturing important aspects of the subjective reality of lived non-belief.

The previous chapter showed how older adults, on the whole, are a group which are overlooked due to their higher levels of religiosity in comparison with other age groups. Janesick (2010) argues that oral history can be a helpful method in trying to capture the voices of those often ignored in society, describing it as a 'vehicle for the outsiders and the forgotten to tell their stories' (2010: 1). Janesick's statement reflects oral history's suitability for capturing these older adults' stories, which largely remain unheard and untold in the field of non-religion. I undertook a combination of semi-structured and life-history interviews, sometimes referred to as 'episodic interviews' (Flick 2014) or 'single-issue testimony' (Slim *et al* 2006) in which background narrative (in relation to life-history) is captured, but participants are still asked key questions, in this case relating to their non-belief across their lifetime. Flick (2014: 279) explains the key benefits of this type of interview:

> As the interviewer you have more options to intervene and direct [the interview] through a series of key questions concerning a subject recounting and defining situations. Thus the extremely one-sided and artificial situation given in the narrative interview here is replaced by a more open dialogue in which narratives are used as only

> one form of data. By linking narratives and question-answer sequences, this method realises the triangulation of different approaches as the basis of data collection.

This approach was chosen because 'episodic interviews' still allow for in-depth narratives about someone's life, whilst allowing me to ask more focused questions when needed.

As reflected in the research questions, research with older adults presents a key opportunity for recognising if and how they understand their non-believing worldviews and identities in relation to the wider historical, religious, social, and cultural changes that they have lived through, as well as the opportunity to look at change over time and significant transitions in participants' lives (e.g. changes in outlook, stability of non-belief). Oral history was identified as a suitable way of exploring such changes and transitions. As Abrams (2010: 33) neatly sums up: 'life stories are complex and revealing narrative performances which can offer an insight into both identity formation and the relationship between that and larger historical forces'. This approach was chosen as it spoke directly to my research questions which aimed to explore the lived reality, development, and experiences related to non-belief over my participants' lifetimes.

Not only does oral history allow for participants to consider and talk about change over their own personal histories, this research approach also speaks to secularisation theories, including those put forward by Brown (2009; 2017), McLeod (2007), and Bruce (2002; 2011) that this thesis focuses on (see chapter 2). By conducting oral history interviews with older adults, the lived reality of the societal, cultural, and religious changes discussed by these authors might be realised through exploring the personal stories of those who will have likely experienced a whole array of such changes. Whether the development of participants' non-believing worldviews and identities was gradual, sudden, influenced by certain events, and/or associated with changes in societal norms was addressed in various ways in the interviews, with the intention of creating a dialogue with the aforementioned theories of secularisation. This way, the importance of certain historical moments might be illuminated (or not) and might also show how influences on non-believing worldviews and identities may have come from varied sources.

Additionally, a life-history approach allows greater depth and understanding of how the historical, cultural, and religious contexts in which people grew up are encompassed in people's narratives and what role they may have played in the development and lived experience of being a non-believer. Moreover, by taking a regional perspective (discussed below), the

methodology also explored how location may have influenced peoples' experiences of belief and non-belief in relation to wider historical and cultural contexts. Assessing the ways in which external factors may have been influential for participants was approached by asking participants about their backgrounds, growing up, and key influences on their non-belief. Instead of asking 'were there any political influences on your non-belief?' for example, I instead asked participants if they ever felt part of any wider movements or ways of thinking and whether they felt their non-belief distinguished them from others in society. This way, participants were given the space to discuss what they deemed influential external factors (if any), rather than me imposing ideas of what might be important. This approach also attempted to uncover multi-dimensional ways in which so-called secularising forces might – or might not – have been actually experienced by ordinary people.[23]

Portelli (1991) and Abrams (2010) highlight how, in oral history narratives, the way people draw upon wider historical processes is not always factual. Rather, wider historical processes or events may be drawn upon to help give people's stories coherence and help to make sense of and give meaning to somebody's life. Abrams (2010: 40) states:

> Life-story research is interested in the ways people achieve coherence – both in the sense of telling a coherent story, one that hangs together, from an array of unrelated and often contradictory experiences, and in the sense of telling a story that conforms to a shape that meets the listener's expectations.

This is an important consideration in the analysis phase of oral history research. For example, a selection of participants mentioned the influence of the 1960s, but it is possible that this was because they are remembering their experiences in a way which is very much influenced by the position they are in today, rather than giving a 'factual' representation of the past as it was experienced at the time. As one participant alluded to in the current study, stating '[s]o it was a very gradual process and I can't account that everything I've said is categorically true; that's my memory of the time' (Ellen, 67, Liverpool).

By asking participants at the beginning of the interview to describe when they first started to question religious belief (if they had one), or when they first realised or thought of themselves as a non-believer, this allowed participants to speak for themselves and provide examples relevant to their lives. It allowed them to 'set the scene', after which I could ask for more detail,

[23] To be clear, this is not to suggest that secularisation is a 'thing' which 'happens' in a defined or indisputable way, but here I am referring to those theories discussed in chapter 2 which helped inform the current thesis.

ask about a part of their life they did not mention, or ask them about the significance of what they were telling me. Because of this, each interview was unique due to the personal nature of a life-history approach. What is deemed important varied from person to person, and depending on how participants began their narrative, my own questions were not always asked in a specific order; I was responsive to the unique nature of each individual interview.

One way of understanding how non-belief is actually lived is to see what it might look like in practice. Issues around the socialisation and transmission of non-religious cultures are purported by existing literature to be influential on non-religiosity, but these remain understudied phenomena. By non-believing and non-religious cultures, I mean where non-belief and non-religion may impact upon how somebody lives their life, shaping people's actions, thoughts, and beliefs. As such, my research design aimed to explore this in more detail. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked about their own upbringing and the ways in which they socialised their own children (if applicable) in relation to religion or not. The rationale behind this was to allow for patterns of socialisation to be observed. I used key life rituals, such as christenings, as prompts if a participant was not sure of what to say – asking about these things was not a structured part of the interview, but was context dependent. I also asked more general questions as an attempt to tap into how non-belief is actually lived, for instance I asked participants about potential scenarios in relation to bringing up children, e.g. how they might have answered questions their children might have asked regarding religion or belief whilst growing up. The aim was to see how issues around religion, non-religion, belief, and non-belief may have been managed and negotiated when bringing up children. I also asked participants if they knew their children's beliefs at present, in order to try and get an idea of the role non-belief plays in everyday life, its potential importance, and the role it might play in close relationships. Child-rearing is also a key site for understanding how non-religion and non-believing manifest in everyday life.

Christel Manning (2015) highlights how for non-believing and non-religious people, family relationships can generate tensions in relation to raising children. Manning shows that such contexts can bring a person's belief or non-belief to the fore. By prompting participants on particular situations or life events, I hoped to encourage examples of non-belief in everyday life to come to the fore and see how alternative beliefs, worldviews, and/or identities might operate.

Another way of capturing the everyday reality of participants' non-believing worldviews and identities is to explore how these may play out in relationships more generally. Lee (2015) stresses that relationships can be influential on non-religion and that religious or non-religious identification can vary according to the social situation, i.e. an individual might identify as atheist in one situation but not in another. For Janesick (2010: 104) '[o]ral history, by virtue of telling a story, looks at relationships'. Therefore, I asked participants explicitly not only about bringing up children and any relationships involved in this (e.g. partners, extended family), but also about participants' wider social circles – past and present – whether most people had similar views to them or not, who did and did not know about their non-belief, and whether their non-belief had ever been a focal point in a relationship, whether positively or negatively. This approach further allowed me to delve into the complex reality of non-belief as something which is lived and experienced in various ways, rather than as a stable position or outlook that people inhabit or possess.

As discussed, oral history allows participants to think back over certain times of their lives and, in particular, key life events where their non-believing worldviews and identities may have been important. For non-believers, marking certain life events may be a time when traditional religious rituals and practices come head-to-head with non-belief (Zuckerman 2008; Manning 2015). Discussions around these situations hoped to provide an opportunity for non-religious alternatives to religious life-cycle events to be recognised (Koleva 2013; Lee 2015), in an attempt to understand the substantial nature of non-belief and non-religion and investigate 'subtraction' models of secularisation (Taylor 2007; Lee 2015). These models, such as those employed by Voas (2010) and Lanman and Buhrmester (2017) suggest that non-belief or non-religion signifies the simple absence of religion. An oral history approach also allowed me to see where continued connections to religion might be present. In all of these different ways, oral history interviews were considered appropriate to examine the research questions of this thesis, allowing for depth, complexity, and lived reality to come to the fore.

Geographical Locations

The methodology also considered how location may have influenced participants' experiences of belief and non-belief. This is in line with existing research which shows how local geographical variation, or 'micro-climates' as Voas and McAndrew (2012) describe it, can be influential on religious affiliation and belief, and how the religious heritage of a place (Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2018) may also be influential. The current research

considered two cities in England, Canterbury (Kent) and Liverpool (Merseyside), to explore in more detail these arguments about how location and religious heritage may impact upon participants' experiences of non-believing. The findings of these studies informed the locations chosen for data collection in several ways, discussed in more detail below. Importantly, the aim of collecting data in these two geographical locations was not to test questions about the impact of region or even religious background and context, but sampling in this way allowed me to take into account a realistic expectation that these things *might* matter, as suggested in the existing literature (Voas and McAndrew 2012; Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman 2018), and help offer some explanations for differences that may be found.

David Voas and Siobhan McAndrew (2012) argue that 'micro-climates' differ in prosperity and deprivation and that this impacts upon religious and non-religious commitments. Canterbury and Liverpool differ in regards to the proportion of the population who are religiously affiliated or not. Canterbury has high levels of religious 'nones' (Canterbury City Council 2017). Contrastingly, Liverpool has much lower levels of religious 'nones' (Voas and McAndrew 2012). Voas and McAndrew argue that people's inclination to be religious or non-religious is largely influenced by socio-economic factors and the authors highlight an apparent North/South divide when it comes to these socio-economic differences and its impacts.[24] As such, Canterbury, in the South East of England, and Liverpool, in the North West of England, were chosen as proxies for socio-economic variety and to try and reflect these socio-economic differences. For instance, some parts of Canterbury fall within the 10% least deprived areas in the country (e.g. Blean Forest, Harbledown, Barton, Tankerton, and parts of St Stephens) (Canterbury City Council 2017). By contrast, a report by the Department for Communities and Local Government (2015) uses data from *The English Indices of Deprivation* to show that Liverpool is one the most deprived areas in England. This is not to say that there are not more deprived areas in Canterbury and more affluent areas in Liverpool. For instance, one area in Canterbury, Northgate, has 40.6% of children living in poverty, the highest percentage in the district (Canterbury City Council 2017). Other areas in Canterbury which see higher levels of deprivation include parts of Wincheap, Barton, and Seasalter (Canterbury City Council 2017). Similarly, not all of Liverpool is deprived; rather it is neighbourhoods around the City Centre which are the most deprived whereas areas such as Mossley Hill, Woolton, Cressington,

[24] The authors define socio-economic factors as levels of education, age structure, employment rates, proportion of full-time students, and religious or ethnic diversity.

Childwall, and Allterton are less so (Liverpool City Council 2015). Despite these exceptions, on the whole, these two cities represent very different socio-economic environments.

However, socio-economic factors only account for about three quarters of the influences on religion and non-religion: the rest is likely to be explained by something else, argue Voas and McAndrew (2012). For instance, they show that in terms of religion or non-religion, neighbourhoods tend to be similar to surrounding neighbourhoods and speculate that this could be due to similar kinds of people living there, or unique features of the local environment which could influence residents. As such, it was hoped that working in Canterbury and Liverpool would add to the discussion around micro-climates and the different ways in which these areas are made unique. Liverpool and Canterbury were also chosen as potential avenues to explore neighbourhood values and/or cultures that may be present and influential on non-religiosity – which, along with socio-economic factors, are influential on micro-climates, according to Voas and McAndrew (2012).

Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman (2018) argue that the ways in which non-religion plays out are varied according to the religious heritage of a country. The authors state that environments with a stronger Catholic heritage are often more community focused, and expected religious norms extend beyond the religious sphere and into other parts of community life. The authors argue, therefore, that '[b]ecoming non-religious in such a [Catholic] context entails a marked act of deviance that places one outside the community' (ibid: 213). Additionally, in countries with a Catholic heritage they find high levels of polarisation between believers and non-believers due to the non-religious having higher anti-religious sentiments. As such, they found that for Catholics in secular[25] countries, there are strong elements of cultural Catholicism and nominal religious commitment, with these elements of religiosity expressing identity or cultural affiliations, but not necessarily linked to active religious commitment or belief. This appears not to be the case in places with a stronger Protestant heritage, where there is more focus on the individual, religion is much more privatised, and religion does not encroach upon other aspects of cultural life quite as much (ibid).

Liverpool, which has a strong Catholic heritage, and Canterbury, which has a strong Protestant heritage, were therefore chosen to increase diversity in the sample in terms of religious heritage. Canterbury has a strong Protestant heritage, evident in Canterbury Cathedral being

[25] The authors measure secularity 'by aggregating the individual scores for non-attendance for each country per wave.' (Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2018: 215)

the seat of the head of the Church of England, and Liverpool has a strong Catholic background which goes back to the time of the Reformation when Lancashire remained strongly Catholic[26] (Fallon 2015). This Catholic heritage is also due to high levels of Irish immigration (Voas and McAndrew 2012) which Fallon (2015: 6) suggests has created ‘a distinct Liverpool-Irish style of Catholic identity which remains a powerful influence’. Voas and McAndrew suggest that influences such as these help ‘reinforce norms of religious practice’ (2012: 45) which may be why there are higher levels of religion in Liverpool.

An aim of my research is to try to understand the complex environments in which participants grew up and the varied influences location might have had on their experiences. Therefore, informed by Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman’s (2018) work, I considered several potential contexts that might lead to differences in lived non-belief in relation to a city with a strong Catholic heritage (Liverpool) and a city with a strong Protestant heritage (Canterbury). For instance, due to their suggestion that the strong community and cultural focus of Catholicism may impact on non-believing, might non-believing participants in Liverpool express continuing cultural connections to religion despite their non-belief? If so, might this have led to experiences of deviancy and breaking away from a community, as the authors suggest. Due to higher levels of Catholicism and religiosity in Liverpool, stronger anti-religious sentiments among non-believers might also be common. In Canterbury, on the other hand, a city with a strong Protestant heritage, experiences of non-belief might be more individual and private in manner due to the potential lower levels of imposition of religion onto other aspects of daily life. Anti-religious sentiments may also be less prominent amongst participants due to Canterbury having higher levels of non-belief than Liverpool. Whilst not suggesting these contexts may be explicitly found, they are considered significant possibilities which might help us understand the complex environments in which participants grew up and the varied influences their location might have had on their experiences.[27]

Studying Non-Belief

There is some discussion of how to accurately study non-belief, with some participants themselves questioning how I hoped to study something that was, for them, an absence, a lack and a non-entity. As one participant asked:

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[26] Liverpool used to be in the county of Lancashire before Merseyside was created in 1974.

[27] See chapter 4 for discussion around these questions related to findings from my data.

> Well are there different types of unbelief? Surely if you don't believe, you don't believe? How can there be different varieties of unbelief – well I suppose there could be militant unbelievers like Dawkins and indifferent unbelievers like me but other than that, what else is there? (Peter, 71, Liverpool)

Stephen Bullivant (2008) explains how methods for studying religion are not always useful for researching a 'lack' of religion, which often relates to the idea of non-religion as 'nothingness'. Lee (2015) also explains how non-religion is often seen as insubstantial, leading to questions of how to actually capture non-religious phenomena. But Lee's work shows how, in reality, non-religion can be substantial, and this informed the methodology of this research. However, there is little precedent when it comes to researching non-believing or non-religious populations. This is reflected in the wide approaches to data collection, from studies which ask overtly about non-belief (LeDrew 2013) to approaches taken by authors such as Day (2011) whose aim is to capture people's beliefs without asking religious questions. As such, in order to capture the substantial nature of non-religious phenomena I adopted a number of approaches, including Lee's (2015) suggestion of recognising situational examples of non-religion, something also advocated by Beckford (2003: 16) in relation to religion:

> From a social scientific point of view, it would be better to abandon the search for, and the assumption that there are, generic qualities of religious meaning, and, instead, to analyse the various situations in which religious meaning and or significance is constructed, attributed or challenged.

Therefore, in the current research, I aimed to pose multi-dimensional questions to participants, looking at situations, relationships, as well as asking about believing and non-believing explicitly in an attempt to cover a wide range of topics and potential ways non-belief may be important.

Another issue considered was that, within the field of non-religion, the terminology lacks consensus, with a plethora of terms used in different ways by different people (Lee 2015), and which can often be complex (Jewell 1999). Simmons (2005), Schlehofer, Omoto, and Adelman (2008), and Coleman (2011) stress the importance of taking into account lay definitions when conducting research around the topic of religion and older adults. This was something I adopted by starting the interviews by asking participants if there was a term they would label themselves as and would prefer me to use throughout the interview. The majority opted for 'non-belief', some preferred the term 'atheist' or 'agnostic' and, if participants were unsure, I offered the term non-belief or non-believer but made it clear that if they thought of a more suitable term,

they should inform me. This allowed participants to use the terms they wanted to use rather than imposing etic categories without any choice and the variety of terms put forward highlighted some of the issues surrounding terminology that are present in the field of non-religion.

Conducting the Research

Participants

In the current study, I undertook 37 interviews with non-believing older adults aged 65 and over (20 in Canterbury and 17 in Liverpool). How we define an 'older adult' is, of course, debatable, but following the American Psychological Association guidelines: '*[o]lder adults* typically refers to persons 65 years of age and older and is widely used by gerontological researchers and policymakers' (APA 2014: 34, italics in original). The interviews took place over a period of six months (October 2018 to April 2019). The table presented in Appendix 2 gives an overview of each participant; all names are pseudonyms. As mentioned above, I chose Canterbury and Liverpool as my locations for fieldwork to try and get a range of participants from different locations to allow the possibility of some interesting contrasts or commonalities to be recognised. I started fieldwork aiming for a sample size of around 40 people (with a minimum of 30), following advice from Warren (2002), Adler and Adler (2012), and Brown (2017). For participants to be eligible, they had to be aged 65 or over and answer a number of eligibility questions (see below). I did not recruit from non-religious organisations (e.g. Humanists UK) because members may not necessarily reflect the experience of the majority of non-believers (Bullivant 2008) – what I describe as 'ordinary' or 'everyday' non-believers – and within the field there is over-recruitment from these groups (Lee, Bullivant, Farias and Lanman 2017). Out of the 37 participants, two (Julie and Fred) had been involved in a non-religious organisation. Julie (68, Liverpool) was once a member of Humanists UK but left, and Fred (86, Liverpool) was a member of Humanists UK with the extent of his engagement being reading the leaflets he received in the post.

The ages of participants ranged from 65 to 86 years old: 15 participants were in their 60s; 15 were in their 70s; and seven participants were in their 80s. The oldest participant was born in 1933 and the youngest in 1953, and taking these age differences into account in analysis is important for highlighting how over 65s are not a monolithic group (Hazelrigg 1997) and will have had varied upbringings and experiences in different social environments. In Canterbury, the split between genders was even, 10 women and 10 men, while in Liverpool, seven

participants were male and 10 were female, leading to an overall number of 20 women and 17 men in the sample.

Recruitment

I employed multiple approaches to recruit participants across the two locations. I began by reaching out to local groups with a focus on older adults. In the Canterbury area these included charities and education organisations and I also placed an advert in a local magazine for three months. A local educational organisation was quick to reply to my request and, with help from their research officer, I put out a call for participants amongst their members, which resulted in over 20 people quickly expressing their interest. There was also interest from people who had seen the advert in the local magazine. To avoid the sample being too narrow, I recruited 11 people via the educational organisation, five via the magazine advert, and four via snowballing, a method proven to be useful when working with older adults (Montague 2005). Recruitment in Liverpool was comparatively slower. I contacted 16 groups which had a focus on older adults, including charities, education organisations, social groups, residents' groups, and pensioners' groups, nine of whom got back to me and five agreeing to advertise my research. As well as contacting local groups, I also placed adverts in two local magazines, a community library, a supermarket, and post-offices, but uptake remained comparatively slow. This was unexpected considering Liverpool's larger population.[28] A number of issues may have contributed to this, for example, possibly the magazines in which I advertised simply did not have a wide readership, and it may be that free magazines, such as those I advertised in, might not be read by people in great detail.

Another unexpected issue in regards to recruitment in Liverpool was the lack of willingness of groups to collaborate or reply to my enquiry. This highlights some of the potential ways that gatekeepers may be a barrier to research; sometimes gatekeepers make decisions on behalf of people as to whether research is valuable or interesting (Holland 2005). When I collaborated with the educational organisation in Canterbury, although I was faced with some initial resistance from the gatekeeper, this route provided me with a number of people interested in the project. However, the corresponding Liverpool branch replied only to my fourth email, stating that they were a non-denominational group and that the committee did not think my research was a suitable topic for their members. As mentioned above, I also contacted other

[28] According to Office for National Statistics (2020) population estimates for mid-2019, the population of the Metropolitan district of Liverpool was 498,042, and the population of the non-metropolitan district Canterbury was 165,364.

societies, social and community clubs, and retirement clubs. I did not receive a reply from most of the clubs, but with others I sent them advertising material and extra information to share with their members. Gatekeepers of some other organisations said they would discuss the research with members and get back to me – although many did not ask for any further information to pass onto their members.

A further observation about some of the (very few) older people's clubs I could find in Liverpool is that several were associated with a church. Perhaps this created another barrier to recruitment, evident with one gatekeeper who advised me that I probably would not have much luck recruiting from their club because they met in a church. This association of meeting in a religious place being synonymous with believing may be a reflection of the social contexts and people's understandings and experiences of what religion and believing are or should be. Following these experiences, I came to reflect whether the gatekeepers I had contacted may have been religious believers themselves and therefore might have shown some resistance in helping find participants for my research. This is something one participant explicitly expressed to me when we were chatting after the interview, suggesting a lot of people are religious so might not want to help. Another participant discussed something in the same vein, but in specific relation to Catholicism: he wondered if I was having difficulty finding people because of strong Catholic links in Liverpool. These experiences provided useful data for the research and for understanding participants' social contexts. However, more progress was made after contacting a pensioners' organisation in March 2019 who agreed to share information about my research with members, which helped boost my number of participants. Although I was not aware at the time, it transpired that this was an active left-wing political group, adding some unavoidable narrowness to my sample.

Whilst recruiting outside of non-religious organisations was an attempt to capture the ordinary older adult, 17 of my participants were recruited from groups of other kinds. These groups included an educational organisation for older adults, from which 11 participants were recruited, a pensioners' organisation, from which five participants were recruited, and one participant was recruited from a local retirement group. So although participants may not have belonged to non-religious organisations, they 'belong' in other ways. As such, my participants may be people who more readily sign up to be involved in things, and volunteer, as some participants themselves indicated. Consequently, the extent to which my participants represent the 'ordinary' older adult may be questioned – although ordinary in this context, as discussed elsewhere, relates to their lack of affiliation with non-religious organisations specifically. The

type of groups people belonged to may have influenced the data in several ways. For instance, as I note above, the pensioners' organisation I recruited from turned out to be an active left-wing group, which may impact upon findings that run through this thesis, but particularly chapter 5, which discusses the liberal ideals that permeated through participants' narratives. The strong sense of relationality and the importance of social relationships for participants, both in their everyday lives and in relation to the development and lived reality of their non-belief, may also be a reflection of their belonging to certain groups. Although not all participants were recruited from organisations such as those discussed above, others were recruited through some sort of social connection, e.g. a community library – with one participant explaining how she saw the advert in the library when she was at a knitting group. This again might be reflective of the importance of sociality in the findings presented. If I had interviewed people who were socially isolated, the sense of relationality and sociality may not have come across as strongly and may give a wholly different picture of the lived reality of non-believing.

Eligibility

On first contact, potential participants were sent a list of questions to determine whether or not they were eligible to take part in the interview (see Appendix 3). When sampling in the two areas, I was inclusive in terms of race, class, ethnicity, gender, accepting of anyone who wanted to be involved who was aged 65 and over, and met the criteria set out below. I adapted question 2 on the sampling criteria from the 2008 International Social Survey Programme Survey (ISSP 2012), which presented participants with a number of statements; the responses to which determined their eligibility for the study.[29] The statements were as follows:

A. I don't believe in God
B. I don't know whether there is a God, and I don't believe there is any way to find out
C. I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind
D. I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others
E. While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God
F. While I have doubts, I feel that I don't believe in God
G. I know God really exists and I have no doubt about it
H. Don't know

[29] See Appendix 3 for full eligibility criteria.

Item ‘F’ was an addition I included to help answer one of my research questions exploring the stability of non-belief over the life course; so if participants had doubts but ultimately self-reported that they do not believe in God, this could raise some interesting ideas in regards to stability. As such, people who answered either ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘D’ or ‘F’ were eligible. If participants answered ‘A’ then they are considered to be a non-believer for the purpose of this study. If they answered ‘B’ they were also eligible and it was hoped this would allow for a broad spectrum of non-belief to be explored, because, as highlighted by Brown (2017), people who believe there is no way to prove God’s existence do not necessarily lean towards belief, but can be just as likely to lean towards non-belief. Finally, if participants answered ‘D’ or ‘F’ then it was hoped that this would allow a potential avenue for exploring the stability of non-belief over time. Out of the 37 participants, 28 chose statement A, eight chose statement B, one person chose a combination of statements (B and F), and nobody chose statement D. I also asked participants if they were members of non-religious organisations to try and capture the ordinary non-believer, for reasons discussed in more detail above.

After answering these questions, I would provide participants with more information about the research and explain what taking part involved. I also shared a participant information sheet (Appendix 4), and explained to participants that they would be asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 5) relating to the information sheet on the day of the interview. I also made it clear to participants that they could ask me any questions. All interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in a place convenient for participants; 15 interviews were conducted in participants’ homes, and 20 were conducted in public places (e.g. cafés, or a group meeting place). At the interview, all participants were given a consent form to sign and were encouraged to ask any additional questions they had. I also explained to each participant that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to, could have a break if needed, could ask me to clarify if they did not understand a question, and could stop the interview at any time.

The Interview

Most interviews started with me asking participants to think back to when they first realised they were, or thought of themselves as a non-believer (or their chosen term), which allowed participants to set the scene of their narrative. The order of the rest of the interview schedule was roughly followed but, depending on the interview, there were some times when we jumped back and forward to different aspects of questions, if for example the participants’ narrative took the conversation in a particular direction. On the whole, the questions asked sparked

interesting discussion and narrative from participants and they seemed to enjoy the discussions we had.

The first three interviews had a slightly different structure to the rest. One focus of this thesis is examining alternative beliefs or worldviews and the potential existence of non-believing and non-religious cultures. This involves exploring what guides participants' lives, and what they draw on to give them meaning, to answer questions, or to explain things. The reason behind this is to move away from the idea that being a non-believer equals a nihilistic outlook on life or that non-belief is the mere absence of religious belief. I wanted to further explore the content of people's non-believing identities and worldviews, since an emerging body of research shows these to exist in some form (see Day 2011; Lee 2015; Manning 2015). In my first three pilot interviews, I started with an open question about what participants believed in (see 'descriptive exercise' on the interview schedule, Appendix 1). I would ask participants to think about things they drew on to help them answer 'big questions' (Taves 2018) or what might be meaningful to them. I took this question style from Day's (2011) work, where she simply asked her participants 'what do you believe?'. However, since Day reports that her participants often did not know how to answer her question, I gave my own participants extra prompts. Nevertheless, the responses I received were like those of some of Day's participants, i.e. they did not know how to answer, did not think they could answer, or did not know what to say. I asked this question at the beginning of the interview, which I learned was not as insightful as it could have been, as it could be difficult to start off with.

Therefore, I decided to take a different approach in the remaining 34 interviews. Firstly, I decided to move any question which aimed to address non-religious or non-believing worldviews to the latter part of the interview in the hope that people would find it easier to answer, due to the things we had been discussing. Secondly, I decided to incorporate the following question from the Understanding Unbelief's 'Across Disciplines Across Cultures' research (ADAC)[30]: 'if you were looking back on your life, can you tell me what sorts of things might make you personally feel that you had lived a meaningful life?' The reason for choosing this question came out of discussions with my supervisory team about how people cannot always clearly articulate what they believe in, whilst asking people to think about what is

30 ADAC is the core research project of Understanding Unbelief research programme which I was a team member of, where I helped in data collection by conducting interviews.

personally meaningful may help bring some of these issues to the fore. Therefore, in the following interviews I used either a combination of the original opening question and the second question, one or the other, or both – depending on what each individual interview was like. Although it was still a question that often stalled participants, and they often contemplated about their answer for quite some time, I found that the added structure of the second question was easier for people to answer.

Ethical Considerations

There are a number of ethical issues to consider when conducting qualitative research, both in relation to research with older adults and more generally to conduct ethically responsible research. In terms of working with older adults, there were a couple of instances when I got the impression that some of my participants were lonely and enjoyed having someone to speak to. At a couple of points, ending the interview was not always straightforward, something Greenwood (2009) highlights as a key issue in working with older adults. On the handful of occasions this happened, I let participants know that I had finished my questions and thanked them for taking the time to speak to me; I asked if they wanted to receive a summary of the results, before thanking them again and saying goodbye. Greenwood explains how many older people feel they have nothing to offer in terms of useful contributions; this too was something I experienced with some participants who would, for example, ask if their answers were satisfactory, ask if their stories were what I had been looking for, or apologised for perceiving to have wasted my time. In these instances, I reiterated that there were no right or wrong answers and that their narratives were legitimate and useful. Other practical matters that came up at a handful of times were issues such as hearing for participants. When these issues did arise, I made sure to speak as clearly and as loudly as possible and informed participants that I could repeat any questions. At the beginning, I also made it clear to participants that they could take a break if they needed to at any time in the interview – although this offer was never taken up.

As with any interview research, following the British Sociological Association *Statement of Ethical Practice* (2017), participants were fully informed about the research and it was reiterated that their involvement was completely voluntary and that they were able to withdraw at any time, including the withdrawal of data up until any had been published. Informed consent was gained from participants before any interview took place. Participants were given the chance to read over the participant information sheet in their own time, before deciding whether

or not to take part. They were also informed that they could contact me before the interview to ask any questions, as well as during the interview itself. Participants were also informed that they could contact me after the interview if they remembered anything they thought would be useful and two participants took me up on this offer.

Given the sensitive nature of some of the issues relating to non-belief for older adults, it was the case that issues such as illness, loss, and death came up as topics of conversation, sometimes causing upset for participants. Participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to and could take a break at any time. In these instances no participant took me up on this offer and indicated that they wanted to continue the interview. In many ways, the interview seemed quite therapeutic for some participants, with many thanking me after the interview had finished for allowing them the time to speak, to tell their stories and in helping them revisit things they had forgotten.

Ethical considerations continued during the transcription process. Measures were taken to protect participants' identities as much as possible. Pseudonyms are used for the names of participants, and any names they mentioned are anonymised, and any other identifiable information changed. Participants were informed of this via the participant information sheet as well as during an interview if it came up. Any data relating to participants and audio-files, and transcripts from the interviews, are stored securely on a password-protected computer, and are password-protected files, only accessible to myself, the researcher. Physical copies of consent forms and participant information are kept in a locked storage cabinet, only accessible to myself. At all times, all management and use of the data conforms to GDPR guidelines.

Not only are there ethical considerations to take into account concerning participants, but issues around researcher safety are also paramount (Parker and O'Reilly 2013; British Sociological Association 2017). Because I undertook interviews on my own, there were a number of practical steps and actions I undertook to ensure my safety as a lone researcher. Following advice from the Social Research Association (2001) and Paterson, Gregory, and Thorne (1999) I always spoke to potential participants before interviews, preferably by phone. When an interview took place in a participant's home, I made sure I was dropped off and picked up by someone I knew and made sure they saw me go into the participant's house; I also provided them with a rough time frame as to when I thought the research would be finished. Other practical issues I employed included always taking a mobile phone, keeping this switched on

and in easy access, and taking a personal alarm with me, as advised by Paterson, Gregory, and Thorne (1999).

Full ethical approval was granted by the University of Kent from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Advisory Group for Human Participants on 25th September 2018 (Reference Number 0041819).

Reflexivity

Throughout fieldwork I kept a 'reflexive diary' which I wrote in following each interview, as well as at any time throughout the duration of the fieldwork. This diary allowed me to note initial thoughts on the interview, any themes I saw emerging, as well as how I was finding the research, as well as contextual details about participants and anything else I considered as being potentially important in the interview.

On the whole, I did not find that my age was a barrier to the rapport built between myself and participants in the interview. In fact, participants were quite often interested in how I came to my PhD topic and often asked about my past experiences, and by giving them details about myself, including past educational and career achievements, I felt I was often legitimising my own position as the researcher. I found that in general, most participants found it easy to open up to me, giving me lots of details about their lives, even details that were not relevant to the research topic.

During the interviews, I also found that for some participants, this openness and sharing was expected to go both ways, with a number of participants asking me personal details about my own life, e.g. what I believe, whether I was religious, how I was brought up, or whether my family was religious – bringing about a power shift between the interviewee and interviewer. I would always answer honestly to these questions, telling participants that I was brought up Catholic, was not particularly religious, and that I would define myself as agnostic.

Although some participants asked me outright about my religious beliefs, I also found there was an element of assumption by some about what I believed and whether or not I had some sort of religious agenda. One example was after the interview I conducted with Jane (68, Canterbury) who asked me whether or not I was a believer, to which I answered 'not really' and she replied 'but you're wearing a cross'; it was in fact a necklace with a bee on it. This raises questions regarding whether Jane may have answered my questions in a certain way if she assumed I was a Christian. That said, her answers did not seem suggest this – for example

she openly criticised Christians – but this provided an interesting reflection to think something so trivial as misrecognising a necklace may have influenced the way the interview went. Assumptions by participants regarding the aim of research and my own opinions were apparent. For instance one participant, Peter (71, Liverpool), was quite defensive when trying to figure out my reasons for the research, wondering if I was 'trying to prove a point'. Other participants also expressed to me that they had been slightly on edge at the thought I was going to attempt to convert them. The following excerpt is from my reflexive diary after my interview with Pam (68, Liverpool):

> *She mentioned at the end she thought I was going to convert her, so I got the impression she was ready to fight her corner if need be, but seemed relieved that this hadn't happened.*

This assumption was not just held by my participants. In talking to a couple of people about my research at social occasions, I had two people ask me similar questions, I noted one example in my reflexive diary:

> *I had an afternoon tea today with various female members of my family and [family member] was asking what I was doing (she is quite religious apparently). So I told her, and then she said to me 'and then are you going to try to make them religious?' I was quite shocked at this and answered 'No, I just listen to them'. I think actually, a lot of people might think this is my aim [...] a couple of participants have thought I have an agenda, but she really highlighted that issue.*

When situations such as these arose, I was quite surprised but explained to participants, and anyone else who asked, that this was not the intention of the research, but rather it was an exploratory study into the lives of non-believing older adults with no religious agenda in mind.

On the whole, I found the interviews enjoyable and felt privileged that participants also enjoyed sharing their stories with me. I generally followed the tone set by participants in each interview. For instance, if someone was jovial and laughing throughout, then I would follow suit, and if someone had a more serious demeanour I would also reflect this in my approach. Most participants were the former and seemed to genuinely enjoy the interview and reminiscing about their lives, and I think this approach put people at ease and I felt it made building rapport easier. Additionally, I found my position and performance (Wilkins 2008) as a young, white, well-educated, British woman impacted upon how participants perceived me during the interview and I recognise this might not have always been the case for a researcher of a different ethnicity, age, or nationality. This is reflected in what some participants told me, for example expressing negative views about certain religions, such as Islam, that I do not imagine they

would have expressed if I was a hijabi-wearing Muslim woman, for instance. The fact of my whiteness was also evident when conducting interviews with two of my participants from ethnic minority backgrounds. In these interviews, there were certain things as a white woman I could not relate to, for instance experiences of racism. Further, my Catholic background and relatively limited knowledge of what it means to be brought up in another religious tradition also created a barrier to fully understanding the references given by some participants. This was something I was conscious of during the interviews and therefore asked the participants to expand or explain in more detail things that I did not want to misinterpret. This need for clarification is similar to what Best (2003) describes as 'doing race' within research and could be applied to religious differences as well, as it exemplifies difference between me, the researcher, and my participants in various ways. Through data collection, I uncovered some of the assumptions present in my work, for instance, my use of predominantly Christian examples in my interviewing technique, e.g. in asking about marriage in church or christening children – an approach I adapted when needed. On reflection, being more inclusive in my approach and not simply assuming that Christianity was a religion everyone could relate to would have been beneficial.

My sample was fairly homogenous in terms of ethnicity, with all but two of my participants being white, and many were well-educated, although I had originally intended to have a more diverse sample. Unfortunately, this was not the case and was a consequence of recruitment methods and who responded to the call for participants, something that I did not anticipate at the outset. As I did not ask what participants' ethnic identity was prior to the interview (nor education level or class identity), there was no way to control for this. Alternative recruitment methods could address this issue through more active engagement in recruiting which could widen the findings of my research to better understand the experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) (as well as those of varied educational attainment and class identity) who are non-believers. However, this is not to ignore the many ways in which one can be, or do, 'whiteness' (Hughey 2010) and recognising the 'whiteness' of my participants as something performed, produced, and changeable (Ferber 2007; Knowles 2008; Wilkins 2008) is essential for recognising unseen assumptions and biases which can play a significant role in people's experiences and narration.

It is also the case that my sample has slightly more female participants than male, this is largely down to the gender imbalance in Liverpool (7 male, 10 female). The gender imbalance could also just be due to gender imbalances within the populations I sampled from (e.g. local groups):

there were a number of men in Liverpool I had to turn down due to lack of eligibility when answering the statements about belief in God. It could also be down to the gender balance related to the types of places I recruited from, e.g. local magazines, community clubs, supermarket noticeboards: it may be the case that more women frequented these places or read these publications more than men did.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and I transcribed interviews as fully as possible, including the use of 'crutch' terms (Good 2006) such as 'erm', 'you know', and 'like' in people's narratives. As in any conversation, people do not talk in neatly constructed sentences, and participants often started sentences but changed topics half-way through. To reflect this in the transcripts I use the symbol '–'. I also used '…' to indicate when a participant trailed off at the end of their sentence or paused. In an attempt to get the real feel of the interview across in the transcripts, I included non-verbal elements of the interview too. For instance, if someone laughed, I include [laughs], similarly with [whispers], [sighs] etc., and when people emphasised a certain word, I italicised this in the transcripts. I also tried to transcribe accurately in relation to the way people spoke and used colloquialisms or local variations, for instance ' 'cause' instead of 'because', or in Liverpool some would say 'me dad' instead of 'my dad'.

An interpretivist view is employed in this thesis which recognises that people's life-history narratives are not necessarily 'factual' but are constructions which will be unique to each participant and the specific interview. Analysis has been an iterative and multifaceted process which I began undertaking at the start of data collection and continued throughout the writing-up stage. I did this by making annotations and notes when transcribing, using the reflexive diary to write down key themes arising out of interviews, and using NVivo software to help organise the data into themes using their 'nodes' function. As well as using NVivo, I annotated hard copies of transcripts in several stages; for instance, one stage involved highlighting and annotating transcripts in relation to my research questions, another stage was looking explicitly for examples of where location was mentioned. These different stages of analysis also included re-listening to interviews on their own and next to the transcripts to further drill down into *how* participants said things and provide opportunities to make note of anything that was missed during transcription.

I undertook a multi-level analysis in which I employed thematic analysis but also looked beyond themes and cross-referenced the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which non-believing worldviews and identities developed and played a role over participants' lifetimes. Some parts of analysis where quite straightforward, for instance participants' discussion of death tended to be explicit, facilitating analytical work around that theme. By contrast, examples of indifference, for instance, could be subtler and implicit in the narratives of participants, and as such, needed a deeper level of analysis. For example, when looking at indifference, there were examples of people explicitly stating their indifference, but there were also subtler expressions, such as participants not knowing what to say, sometimes resulting in short interviews, or instances of difficulty in articulating their beliefs (see chapter 5 for further discussion). As such, indifference was not always a word that could just be searched for in the transcripts (unlike death and related terms).

Elements of thematic analysis were employed on the transcribed interviews, following the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) which allows for rich qualitative data to be coded into themes. Braun and Clarke state that a theme 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (ibid: 82). They highlight their six steps for conducting thematic analysis which are as follows: 1) familiarising yourself with your data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing the report (ibid: 87) – a process which is not linear but involves back and forth movement through the stages. This approach was chosen as it allows for large amounts of data to be analysed without losing any rich description. I have used thematic analysis both inductively, by letting themes arise which are directed by the data alone, and deductively, by looking for themes which link to existing ideas and concepts which are influenced by my research questions, which in turn were influenced by the existing literature.

Since practice and analysis cannot be separated for one another (Abrams 2010), several issues are considered which may have influenced the stories people tell and the overall data collected. The act of interviewing involves two people – the interviewer and the interviewee – and each will influence the other and the subsequent information given in the interview. The way in which I presented myself, and also the ways in which respondents perceived me, will have influenced how and what they told me during an interview situation, and vice versa. Therefore, this was considered during the analysis phase and my reflexive diary was revisited simultaneously to analysing the interview transcripts. An interview is never a neutral

environment and it is recognised that people's narratives are not static but change depending on various factors and are likely to be expressed in a different way with a different interviewer or in a different environment (Portelli 1991; Abrams 2010). I tried to take this into account and made note of relevant features of interviews in the reflexive diary; for instance, in my interview with Maryam (70, Liverpool), which took place in a café, there were a couple of instances where she would lower her voice when talking about certain things. For instance, she whispered when talking about buying her son a child's Bible and when talking about her in-laws who were Irish Catholics. This whispering might suggest embarrassment or something Maryam would rather keep 'secret' and not be too open about, as distancing herself from 'religious others' was something she did at various times throughout our interview. Considering instances such as these are crucial for understanding the dynamic of the interview and understanding how this may influence people's narratives in significant ways. Also considering the context in which participants said certain things is also important when analysing data, considering when and how certain examples come up is important for giving a more accurate representation of the data.

It is not just the manner in which participants shared information with me or how much information they were willing to share that may have influenced the data. It is also acknowledged that the content or discourses presented by participants may be partly shaped by external factors such as popular norms. The concept of social desirability in research is a recognised phenomenon (e.g. Portelli 1991; Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993; Presser and Stinson 1998; Grimm 2010). Additionally, there may be hidden influences that impact upon people's narratives, such as societal norms, upbringing, or past experiences. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, oral history narratives are not always historically 'factual', but rather people draw on certain things to make their stories coherent. Abrams (2010) explains how the memories people draw upon are as much about the situation in the present as they are about the past. For instance, when I asked participants whether there were any wider influences on their non-belief, their answers may not reflect what actually happened at the time, but it allows us to see how people interpret wider social, cultural, and political situations to make sense of their own lives and build a narrative around certain themes to give legitimacy and grounding to their stories.

Limitations

Before presenting my findings in the following discussion chapters, there are a number of limitations to the current study that are important to recognise, relating to the types of data

collected, recruitment, and participants. For instance, whilst life-history interviews help capture the lived experiences of non-belief over a lifetime, this brings with it issues around what topics arise or not, because of the personalised nature of each life-history and, subsequently, each interview. More structured approaches could allow for data to be captured that otherwise slipped through the net.

Moreover, as with all empirical data, and especially life-history, participants' accounts are memories of what happened in their pasts, not factual accounts of what happened, and these memories are recounted through the lens of today. Participants' stories are their interpretations of what happened, and it might well be the case that I could interview them again tomorrow and they would provide altered versions of the stories they told, or different stories altogether. Whilst this is a limitation in some senses, it is also the nature of social life and this study does not claim to provide an objective account of the lives of non-believing older adults.

A further limitation of the study is the lack of diversity in the sample, in terms of ethnicity and religious background. Like a lot of work with non-religious people which focuses primarily on what have been described as 'WEIRD' (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) populations (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010), future research could explore what non-belief for older adults looks like in other parts of the world and in countries with different religious backgrounds. Likewise, there was an imbalance in gender, with more female participants than male. Whilst I did not ask demographical information in the interview, in the course of the interviews it became apparent that there were a number of well-educated participants: 19 went to university and several more had professional jobs such as nursing, teaching, or social care. Whilst not all of the participants had professional jobs or had a university education, many of them did, particularly from the Canterbury group.

Lastly, it should be recognised that due to the nature of the data collected, there is only so much the current research project can say and tell us about non-belief. Firstly, the study does not aim to be representative or generalisable, therefore it cannot say whether findings would be true for all non-believing older adults, or non-believers in general. Similarly, the regional comparison does not claim to be undertaking in-depth comparative regional work, rather it aims to shed light on potential differences that have the possibility of being important in participants' expressions of non-belief. The study aims to understand what being a non-believer means to individuals specifically and, although the interviews drew on wider social, cultural, and public events, times, or eras, the focus is more on how the participants perceived this to be important

and how it makes sense in relation to their non-believing worldviews and identities. The data presented represents a snapshot of participants' lives and the analysis considers where non-belief may have played a role, developed, or been important alongside other contexts in their lives.

The next chapter is the first of four substantive chapters which discuss findings from the 37 interviews conducted with non-believing older adults.

Chapter 4
Legacies of the Past: Continuities and Change

Introduction

Numerous scholars have sought to understand the decline and changing nature of religion in Western society, and we see this through the number of dominating theories of secularisation which try to address this issue by exploring societal changes. Although there are varied secularisation models, ideas and images of broken continuity have been central in describing profound shifts from religion to 'secularity' in the twentieth century. Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) proposes that the 'chain of memory' that religious traditions manifest is 'broken' in secularisation. Callum Brown's (2009) vision of 'dechristianisation' similarly emphasises how secularisation processes involve cutting ties with once-dominant 'discursive Christianity'. This I something I challenge in this chapter, instead arguing that, for my participants, connections with religion continue in transformed ways.

Scholarship exploring the specific mechanisms involved in secularisation processes particularly focuses on attempts to understand this decline by turning to the family and by exploring how religion is transmitted; here the focus is also on discontinuity: the failure of parents to transmit religion to their children (Voas and Crockett 2005; Crockett and Voas 2006; Lanman and Buhrmester 2017). But as the following discussion will show, failure to transmit and the absence of religion is not the only thing that is happening. This builds on more recent studies which show how this idea of the failure of parents to transmit religion may not reflect the full picture in regards to increasing numbers of non-religious people (e.g. Bengtson *et al* 2018; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020). See also chapter 6 in this thesis. What we begin to see in the present chapter is that for participants, whilst religion and belief were not always overtly discussed or verbalised in the home when they were growing up, there were still expectations of certain types of religious practice and identification. Religion was not absent but played a specific and sometimes performative role in social life, by which I mean religion was practiced or identified with to conform to social norms, traditions, or aspirations. This shows that there can be continued cultural connections to religion despite non-belief.

In-depth empirical work with non-believing older adults conforms with the ideas set out by Hervieu-Léger and Brown in several ways, but challenges them too. What is observed is not always a clean break in the chain of memory but one of transformation, adaptation, and complexity in how that chain is negotiated. I argue that, to some extent, the religious traditions with which participants were brought up still have a lasting influence on their thinking and behaviour. This is reflected in the narratives of participants in various ways with the reference to a notion of 'that's how things were done'. At the same time, these traditions are transformed by new non-believing and non-religious cultures and can themselves be passed on across generations. Thus, this chapter will consider religious continuity and discontinuity between generations and explore how religious cultures have been subsumed, shared, and transformed.

In thinking about how religious cultures can be shared, as well as disrupted or transformed, Hervieu-Léger (2000) approaches these issues by theorising religion as a 'chain of memory' and draws on notions of collective belonging and lineage which connect people to predecessors and descendants. She argues that the chain of religious memory has been broken through lack of transmission and society is no longer based on collective memory. For Hervieu-Léger, processes of modernisation and rationalisation have delegitimised traditional religious authorities and go hand-in-hand with 'modern themes of free expression, self-realisation and mobility which correspond with the advent of individualism' (2000: 34). Religious traditions were once so authoritative not because of their content, she argues, but because of the idea of a binding link between generations in relation to religious traditions:

> [T]he imaginative perception of the link which across time establishes the religious adhesion of members to the group they form and the convictions that bind them. Seen thus, one would describe any form of believing as religious which sees its commitment to a chain of belief it adopts as all-absorbing (ibid: 81).

Religious traditions were, Hervieu-Léger proposes, previously powerful not just because of an imagined link to the past, but because, by referencing an authoritative tradition, religious traditions become legitimised – '*as our fathers believed, and because they believed, we too believe…'* (ibid: 81, italics in original). In the words of Hervieu-Léger (ibid: 84), 'religion is the code of meaning that establishes and expresses social continuity'.

Non-religious and non-believing outlooks and cultures have an ambiguous role in Hervieu-Léger's 'chain of memory' theory. Hervieu-Léger proposes that 'what comes from the past is

only constituted as tradition insofar as anteriority constitutes a title of authority in the present. Whether the past in question is relatively short or very long is only of secondary significance' (ibid: 7). Although the traditional chain of memory may be broken, it can be subjected to 'de-structuring and re-structuring, dis-organisation but also re-development and re-employment of elements deriving from the earlier order in the fluid system of modern society' (ibid: 85), she argues. This suggests that there is room for understanding how non-religious and non-believing people might understand traditions and have continuities with the past. As we will see, for some participants a religious chain of memory remained authoritative, to some extent, rather than disappearing. However, Hervieu-Léger's work fails to take into account other traditions as important and places religious belief as centrally significant, telling us very little about non-religious and non-believing realities.

Something to consider is the timeline of Hervieu-Léger's work, which was originally published in France in 1993 and translated into English in 2000. Scholars such as Bullivant (2020) and Lee (2016) map the development of the field of non-religion and Hervieu-Léger's work pre-dates the growth of such studies. Her work also pre-dates the rise of the 'New Atheist' literature that become popular in the mid-2000s, which was one of several catalysts in the rise of studies in non-religion (Bullivant 2020), as well as pre-dating critical secular studies (e.g. Asad 2003; Mahmood 2015). Both non-religious studies and critical secular studies see non-religiosity as having some sort of shared culture, not just an absence of religion. This chapter presents a novel approach in connecting Hervieu-Léger's theory to a lived non-religion methodology which posits non-religion and non-belief as being substantial. My analysis draws on the idea of a 'chain of memory' to understand non-belief and non-religion and considers how ideas of traditions and continuities can provide people with a sense of meaning and understanding about the world.

This chapter begins by looking at the historical contexts in which participants were brought up, together with the religious and cultural contexts that were pervasive at the time, and I show how these contexts remained influential on participants in numerous ways. In exploring the wider historical and religious contexts that have pervaded participants' lives, I then consider the influence of place on participants' narratives. Through considering Liverpool's sectarian past, I argue that religious and historical particularities can continue to impact upon participants' non-belief today. This chapter also reflects on why this might not be as strongly

felt by those participants in Canterbury, the majority of whom migrated there in their adult lives.

What becomes clear through participants' narratives is the centrality of social relationships in shaping their experiences and which continues to shape them in a complex manner. I show how these influences continue beyond childhood for many, seen most notably in key life events such as weddings and christenings. By looking at these events, I show how cultural elements of religion can remain strong and how there are expectations of religiosity placed on participants, but show how these events can also be a time when participants' non-believing worldviews and identities become deliberated and when shared religious cultures might be continued, disrupted, or adapted. This shows how despite secularisation arguments, religion is not completely removed from people's lives to be replaced by a fully 'secular' way of life. At the same time, traditions do not always unthinkingly continue in the same way as before, but what we see is negotiation, challenge, and transformation. Importantly, whilst there are continuing connections with religion, these do not detract from participants' non-belief but make up part of a complex web of experiences and influences which impact upon their worldviews and identities today.

Participants' Upbringings

This section discusses how participants were brought up in relation to religion, and aims to give a general sense of what everyday religious and/or non-religious lives were like for participants. For most, religious upbringings were a common and often unremarkable feature of their daily lives. On the whole, the older adults I interviewed did not describe dramatic and difficult experiences when breaking away from their religious upbringings, in contrast to what is suggested by some work on apostasy, especially in the US (e.g. Zuckerman 2012). What comes through in many of the descriptions given by my participants is a largely unquestioned tradition or 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000) which both they and their parents went along with to various extents.

The ways in which participants were brought up in relation to religion varied, and included non-believing households to fervently religious ones, but most participants' upbringings were somewhere in the middle. Every participant had contact with religion, most often Christianity, in some way. This contact with religion mostly came from external factors such as school and Sunday school, but religion in the home was sometimes practically absent, something also

found in Brown's (2017) study of how those of the sixties generation 'became' atheist. Some participants may have still undertaken certain religious rites of passage, such as confirmation, but deeper levels of religious engagement were not described by most. What the majority of participants described were 'nominal' (Day 2011) or cultural religious upbringings. Thus, the idea of the past being a fervently religious place where 'discursive Christianity' (Brown 2009) reigned supreme is not what most participants remember experiencing in their everyday lives. Indeed, the fact that participants are now non-believers may play a role in how they are remembering their pasts, i.e. through the non-religious lens of today, rather than an accurate representation of what happened; it indicates, however, how participants have processed and understood their childhoods. This extends to how many also remembered their parents as being 'nominally religious' (Day 2011), with some sense of a usually 'Christian' identity, broadly speaking. This type of upbringing is one which is exemplified by Gillian (65, Liverpool):

> I didn't have any *strict* religious faith, I was sent to a Methodist Sunday-school – family was broadly Church of England but not church attending but there would always be [pause] erm a sense of a connection to that because I grew up in the fifties and the Dingle, and it was very much a community, and it was a very – it wasn't a particularly affluent area and Methodist Church was almost like a community centre. So, just happened to be the nearest one and so a lot of time was spent there socialising, Sunday school – but I wouldn't say it was an active belief, it was just like going to school and absorbing, there was no sense of a deep faith.

Harry (70, Canterbury), who grew up near Birmingham, described something similar:

> I was brought up in a wishy-washy Christian family but rarely went to church but kind of did when there was some occasion to go to church – marriages, the usual thing. I went to a school which was basically – both schools, primary and secondary, were Protestant, I would say. They had their daily assemblies where we sang hymns and recited the Lord's Prayer and other prayers, we said grace before lunch, before meal times and my parents sent me to Sunday school 'til I was, you know, about 11 and then gave up. I was in the Boy Scouts which, at that time again, was a very – not very religious but it had – it was based on religious principles on its founding principles were religious. And so I did all the kind of what I would call traditional Protestant Christian things.

These examples highlight the type of nominal upbringing many participants remember experiencing and provide a sense of the type of role religion played in daily life.

Even for those brought up outside of Christianity, this sense of 'nominal' or cultural religious upbringing was apparent in their narratives too. For instance, Rishan (80, Canterbury) was

brought up in India in what he describes as a 'traditional Hindu home' and his family participated in traditional Hindu rituals and practices. Rishan remembered how there was never any great faith or belief, but rather a sense of tradition, practice, and ritual which was integrated into everyday life without much 'religiosity' attached to it.[31] In a similar vein, Ruth (72, Canterbury) was brought up in a non-Orthodox Jewish home in the Northwest of England. She attended a Yeshiva where she studied Hebrew and the Torah and participated in Jewish practices and rituals, including fasting, following dietary laws, and sometimes attending synagogue. For her, believing in God when she was younger was expected and unquestioned. Her parents did not have strict religious beliefs and did not keep the Sabbath, because of work commitments, but would participate in major festivals – much like those who described their Christian upbringings. Lastly, Maryam (70, Liverpool), was brought up with exposure to three different religious cultures: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Her exposure to Christianity and Judaism were through schooling and her exposure to Islam was through her father who was Muslim, though his religion was something he kept largely private, with Maryam and her siblings having limited experience of it. Maryam expressed that although she had experiences of three religions, her involvement when younger was never substantial and she never really felt she belonged. Although these different traditions were present, the way in which participants narrated their childhoods did not differ that much from those brought up Christian. Of course, there were specific differences (e.g. going to a synagogue instead of a church) but on the whole, these religious upbringings were very similar to the Christian upbringings described by other participants – in that although religion was present, the role it had in daily life was rather unassuming, unspoken, and had an unquestioned presence.[32]

I will show how this nominal or cultural religiosity that was common in many participants' childhoods had deeper levels of complexity and involvement, including the significance of practice and identity. By exploring how participants narrated their own backgrounds, we see how there are all sorts of social expectations which existed for participants in relation to how religion was expected to play a role in their lives.

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[31] It is important to consider that, for many Hindus, ritualistic practices are a part of life and not necessarily to be positioned as religious. It was during colonisation that Hinduism was decreed a religion by the West (see Flood 1996).

[32] Whilst recognising the presence of these different traditions, the main examples I will talk about are related to Christianity, to reflect the majority of participants' upbringings, but I will differentiate when talking about different religious upbringings when appropriate.

Expectations of Religiosity in Childhood

This section explores how the manner in which participants narrate the role of religion in their childhoods reflects the social and historical contexts in which they grew up. McLeod (2007: 258, my emphasis) states that: '[t]he great majority of those coming to maturity in the 1960s had received a Christian upbringing, and in all sorts of ways, both positively and negatively, *this continued to be a significant influence on their thinking and behaviour'* . Understanding this context is crucial for understanding participants' stories, how they understand their non-believing worldviews and identities, and for shedding light on how they brought up their own children subsequently.

In this section, I draw on Lanman and Buhrmester's (2017) work on 'CREDs' (credibility enhancing displays) theory to explore the role participants' parents had in regards to religious or non-religious upbringing. Lanman and Buhrmester use CREDs theory to try and explain why some individuals might have religious beliefs and not others. Essentially, the idea of CREDs explores whether what people *say* matches up with what they *do*. In the authors' words, parents have to 'walk the walk' not just 'talk the talk' (ibid: 5). In looking at relations between parents and children, they argue that a 'CREDs bias' would occur if parents did the same as what they were telling their children to do. So, for example, if parents told their children about the importance of going to church, and then actually went to church themselves, then a religious model would be more likely to be passed on to children. But if parents do not back up verbal statements with practice, then there is not a CREDs bias and it is therefore less likely for these models to be passed on. For Lanman and Buhrmester, words alone do not count for much when it comes to transmitting religious worldviews, as such an absence of CREDs, in this case religious practice, is more likely to result in a person not having religious beliefs. Whilst the authors stress the impact of not backing up verbalised statements with practice (in relation to religious transmission), my research shows more of a mixed picture, with some examples conforming to Lanman and Buhrmester's argument, and others challenging it. What my findings show is that on the whole, religion and belief were not overtly discussed or verbalised in participants' childhood homes, and this was even sometimes discouraged (i.e. the verbal part of 'CREDs' did not play a significant role), whilst practice was more prominent and expected. As such, the relationship between 'talking the talk' and 'walking the walk' is not the same as that suggested by Lanman and Buhrmester, allowing us to consider alternative pathways to that set out in CREDs theory.

As noted, cultural, social, and religious changes in the second half of the twentieth century have been identified as significant to religion's place in society (Brown 2009; 2012; McLeod 2007). Although focusing on the 1950s and 1960s does not reflect the childhoods of all my participants, as some were already young adults, all participants lived through these decades at different stages of their lives, thus experiencing them differently. With 15 participants in their 60s, 15 in their 70s and seven in their 80s – 30 of my participants would have experienced varying degrees of their childhood in the 1950s, which was a noteworthy context in terms of religious environment. Brown (2009: 175) sums up 1950s religion in his publication *The Death of Christian Britain*, and makes particular reference to the influence this had on children's upbringings:

> The fifties' Sunday was only marginally more liberal than its Edwardian predecessor: going (or being sent) to Sunday school whether or not your parents went to church, Sunday-best clothes, restricted Sunday games, and with the parkies tying up the swings in the public park. The church, Sunday school and family were memorials to their parents' history which the young endured in that decade. Both change and continuity seemed retrospective. There was the world of the past, still present in Victorian values, in adults' memories of depression, in a war memorialised in bomb-sites, war movies and a father's silence on his war. The past also seemed present in what was new: the welfare state, prefabs and council-housing estates mending the past in its own image [...] The 1950s were about perfecting Victorian values and finally distributing their fruits.

The experiences of many of my participants' childhoods can be contextualised in these wider societal and religious environments. For instance, Rebecca (70, Canterbury), born in 1948 recalled the parks being locked on a Sunday where she grew up in Wales.

Reflecting this, the authority of adults was common in the narratives of participants' upbringings, especially in relation to being told to do certain things by their parents or others in society. For instance, Amanda (69, Canterbury) remembered how, when she was younger, she was involved with 'churchy' things, but this was not of her own volition but rather because her mother 'made' her. She said, 'I didn't really believe, I just went along with it because she said "do it" really'. We see this pattern repeated with several more participants who were involved with certain religious activities due to adult instruction. For instance, Fred (86, Liverpool) remembered:

> I was what my parents had told me to be, what the vicar had told me to be, I had a faith which had been told to me rather than discovered by me. But in the late teens I started to question that.

Societal expectation of religious involvement was something Fiona (66, Liverpool), who grew up in the 1950s and 60s, remembered. She described the importance of conformity, not only with religion but in other aspects of social life more generally. Similarly, Liam (69, Canterbury) shared his memory of how, in his 1950s childhood, it was expected that he went along with certain practices his parents told him to, and one such practice was church-going and Sunday school.

> Liam: I had to get dressed up in my finest and walk to the church and I just thought 'why am I doing this?' and that was the start of it. The first time I remember ... was it a rebellion? It was sort of rebelling against my parents' upbringing and I was born in 1949 so I would have been – it would have been early to mid-fifties and lots of people still attended church. My parents weren't *particularly* religious but the norm at the time was that you did go to church, particularly for the three hatch, match, and dispatch bit.
> […]
> *Joanna: Okay, so what was it like in terms of – you said your parents weren't very religious but as you were growing up, during your childhood what sort of role did religion play?*
> Liam: It was something, for me, it was something to be endured. It was expected and I went along with the game.

Contrary to what Lanman and Buhrmester argue, it would seem that, despite Liam's parents practising religion at 'hatch, match, and dispatch'[33] events, Liam explains how they 'weren't *particularly* religious' and religion was not particularly talked about at home. Here, the norm of practising or being seen to practise did not match up with verbal communications in the way that Lanman and Buhrmester suggest.

The religious activities that participants talked about in the 1950s and 1960s can be understood within the context of a post-war national identity. The norms and expectations of going to church were considered patriotic, and linked with a sense of religious revival and Christian identity after the war (Davie 1994; McLeod 2007). This is also something highlighted by Brown (2009) who argues that strong 'discursive Christianity' dominated much of society after the Second World War and throughout the 1950s. My data suggest, however, that this was not

[33] As noted earlier, the phrase 'hatch, match, and dispatch' was one that Liam's mother used, and that Liam himself now employed. The phrase refers to life-cycle events traditionally associated with the church – i.e. christenings, weddings, and funerals.

strong in the home but could have some sort of public presence. This is apparent with some participants describing their own parents' Christian identities. For instance, Nick (67, Liverpool) stated:

> I think religion for my parents was bound up with them being working class Tories, they saw it as a ... how can I put this? They sort-of – as a badge of respectability, they stood out from the lumpen masses almost.

For Nick's parents, and in accordance with Day's (2011: 174) notion of 'aspirational nominalists', religiosity was something they were committed to and saw as an important identity, subsequently sending Nick and his brothers to Sunday school. But beyond that, religion did not play a demonstrative role in family life and Nick's parents themselves did not go to church regularly.

We also see these expectations and social norms for those who were born earlier too. For instance Carmel (78, Canterbury), born in 1940, talked about her mother in relation to the wider societal norms that were pervasive at the time:

> I was brought up all those years ago you went to Sunday school and you had religious instruction in school every day and you said your prayers and all that. Then I was confirmed into the Church of England, you know I just went along with it all, you know, as you do in a religious setting. Not that my parents were religious but, and my mother thought it was the 'thing to do'; it was all part of being ... your upbringing, so you went to Sunday school and you went to church on a Sunday and you said your prayers and that was it, you just got on with it, no explanation, it's what you just *did.* So I mean as a youngster you just do it, you go along with it don't you?

What is key here is not making the assumption that Carmel's church-going is a reflection of religion in the family home or of parental involvement. Rather, Carmel was sent to Sunday school not only because it was expected at the time she was growing up, but because, as Carmel explained, her mother sent her to get some time to herself. This example seems to be consistent with Lanman and Buhrmester's argument – what Carmel's mother said did not reflect what she herself did – but Carmel herself was still made to attend. This was also found with others, such as Carl (80, Liverpool), born in 1939, who remembered how his mother also sent him to the Salvation Army on a Sunday to get him out of the house. Experiences such as these are also discussed by Brown (2009; 2017) who states that during eras such as the 1940s '[t]he family subscribed to the discourses of Christian behaviour less by going to church and more by passive

and surrogate association: the family rituals of marriage and baptism, and the attendance of children at Sunday School' (2009: 187). The widespread attendance of Sunday school is also pointed out by Pickering (1972) and Guest, Olson, and Wolffe (2012), who explain that during the nineteenth century and up until the Second World War and shortly after, Sunday school played a prominent role in society. My own findings tend to fit with the arguments regarding the salience of Sunday school attendance, with 25 participants remembering their involvement. Brown and Lynch (2012: 332) further state how in the 1950s '[e]ven if their parents were backsliding church-goers, Christianity was hard for children to shake off. It represented the spirit of the age'. This supports Lanman and Buhrmester's (2017) argument, showing how a parent's identity or verbal confirmations of religion did not always reflect practice. However, this did not mean lack of practice on children's behalf, as CREDs theory would predict.

The societal expectations of religion were not only present in family units. The following example shows how these norms were present among peers too, something Strhan and Shillitoe (2019) show can be influential. Anna (80, Canterbury), born in 1938 in Southampton, described how it was actually other children her age who influenced her participation in religion, whereas her mother did not enforce it. The influence of her peers continued throughout Anna's teenage years and young-adulthood and she recalled how she undertook confirmation to fit in with friends, and whilst at university she felt the odd-one-out because most of the people around her were Christians, and she felt she should be too. The desire to conform and fit in with those around her remained strong for Anna and it was not until receiving some unhelpful advice from a chaplain whilst at university that she decided to stop attempting to fit in with the religious norm.

As will be discussed in chapter 6, the way participants talked about their own upbringings contrasts significantly from how participants discussed the upbringing of their children. The idea of freedom of choice was central when talking about their children, whilst narratives about participants' childhoods were imbued with social expectations, forced religious involvement, and a perceived lack of choice. Although some participants recognised how they may have been expected to participate in religious-related practices, despite not wanting to, their involvement could reflect family loyalties. This quote from John (66, Canterbury) shows how norms and expectations are, in everyday life, bound up in intersubjective relations based upon love and care:

> I'm not *quite* sure whether [participating in religion] was really because I *believed* what I was doing or rather that everyone was – I love my mum and dad and I didn't want to be disrespectful to *their* – the central focus of their life.

Thus, to present participants as completely passive in these situations would not be a fair reflection. Indeed, Strhan and Shillitoe (2019) highlight the importance of recognising children's agency when it comes to understanding and negotiating religious identities, and the agency of children has been discussed at length elsewhere (e.g. Oswell 2013). Although participants might not have enjoyed it and were often keen to break away from these 'enforced' participations, several participants did see their involvement as a 'performance', to use Goffman's (1959: 15) definition of performance as 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants'. In the examples above, involvement in religious activities was something family members wanted participants to do and could have important social functions.

It is important to note that whilst many participants expressed memories of religion being 'forced' onto them, without participants having much say in the matter, there were some exceptions. A handful of participants explained how their parents gave them a fair amount of choice and options when they were younger. Indeed, Day (2017) does suggest that 'Generation A' women (those born in the 1920s and early 1930s and whom may have been the same generation as my own participants' mothers) actually instilled a great deal of choice and independent thinking when bringing up their children, so this idea of being 'forced' might not actually reflect reality.

A common theme in participants' stories about their upbringings was how religion and belief generally were not discussed at home. They may have been sent to Sunday school, joined church-related clubs, or participated in religious rites of passage, but for most, there was not substantial dialogue related to this. They were expected to do it and that was that, in participants' minds. Whereas Lanman and Buhrmester stress the contrast between what people say and what they do – with the authors putting more emphasis on the superficial nature of 'saying' and a lack of 'doing' which leads to religious models not being adopted – my findings show how for a number of non-believing older adults, the verbal element of CREDs did not play that much of a role. Issues of belief and/or religiosity were not discussed in the home and only a few participants gave examples of undertaking religious activities in the home (such as prayer). Various participants expressed the lack of importance religion had in their everyday

childhood and home life whilst growing up. Participants' memories suggest that for many parents, religion was just the norm, 'the done thing', with no apparent deeper levels of engagement or consideration. Perhaps this is a reflection of how 'nominal' religion takes on unique cultural and social forms with ideas about what public versus private religion should be like. Thus, the disconnect between saying and doing did not present itself as too much of an issue in regards to participants and their parents. Perhaps this lack of dialogue is itself a reflection of the time, as Carmel helpfully articulated: 'I can remember being told over the dinner table you *do not* speak about politics, religion, or sex – they're out. And that was always instilled in me'. If historical and cultural context matters in this way, it may be significant that Lanman and Buhrmester's research was undertaken in the US and thus findings may be US-specific. Therefore, in relation to my own findings, differences in religious culture must be considered, with religious beliefs and identities being a much more private affair in the UK.

As we will see in chapter 5, presentations of indifference to religion, and sometimes non-religion, as a non-believing worldview are expressed by participants in several ways. Situating these narratives in the context of participants' upbringings could show how such indifference stemmed from the home and the lack of significance parents placed on various elements of religion when participants were growing up. For example, Fred, one of the oldest of my participants, grew up in Liverpool during the 1930s and 1940s and his narrative reflected a time where societal questioning of religion and other institutions was not as widespread, unlike those participants born later and growing up in the late 1950s and 1960s. Fred explained how within his family, religion was something both he and his parents just went along with; whether or not there was any great faith was largely unimportant. In talking about his parents, we see how the idea of CREDs could be applicable here:

> [W]e weren't church goers, we weren't church goers at all, no, no. No, so it was, as I say, it was just a passive thing really. I think if they had been asked they would have said 'yes we are Christian' but they were non-participating Christians.

What we begin to see here are the underlying complexities and realities of participants' everyday lives. Although there is an overarching narrative of imposed religious involvement, this is not always a one-dimensional reflection of participants' childhoods, though this narrative may indeed help participants make sense of their pasts through the non-believing lens of today. What happened privately in the home did not always reflect what public religious involvements might look like, and vice versa, questioning the extent to which people 'absorbed Christianity

into their lives' before the 1960s, as Brown (2009: 1-2) suggests. As we also saw earlier, what participants were told to do by their parents was not always a clear reflection of their parents' religiosity. Arguably, the fact that Fred's parents (like others) were not actively involved in regular participation of religious worship could have added to Fred's gradual move away from religion and development of his non-belief – as the idea of CREDs would stipulate.

What this section has shown us is the complex ways in which participants were brought up in relation to religion. It has also highlighted how the disruption of religious tradition is complex as it involves multiple different forms of connection and disconnection to religion, rather than religion existing as a single entity in people's lives. My findings do not conform to the, perhaps, simple models aiming to explain religious decline. In relation to sociological models such as Hervieu-Léger's (2000) and Brown's (2009), my data question the strength of religion in the first place and therefore question the extent to which a 'break' really took place in an observable way. The findings presented here also fit inconsistently with cognitive anthropological models, e.g. 'CREDs' theory put forward by Lanman and Buhrmester (2017), whilst some examples seem to conform to their argument, others do not. Thus, I have shown how real life does not always follow the procedures expected by models such as CREDs, where religious socialisation is expected to take place in defined ways. What research with non-believing older adults has shown is how cultural and historical contexts can unsettle models and theories such as CREDs.

I will now discuss some of the differences in upbringing between the two locations I conducted my research in to show how specific environments can continue to impact upon participants in unique ways.

Legacies of Sectarianism

Voas and McAndrew (2012) identify the existence of religious and non-religious 'micro-climates', in which socio-economic factors and local neighbourhood cultures can impact upon the likelihood of being non-religious. My research focused on Liverpool and Canterbury as examples of micro-climates, in an aim to explore and account for the ways in which the religious backgrounds and the character of a place might impact upon participants' non-believing worldviews and identities. Wider scholarship has focused on social connections to place and how religion and religious identities can be 'located' in all sorts of ways, including in the physical environment, geographical place, social institutions, as well as more 'metaphorical' spaces (see Knott 2005 and Garbin and Strhan 2017). On the whole, when it

came to the two sites I conducted my research in, there was more variance within the locations than between them. The notable exception to this was discussion of particular local contexts and unique religious environments in which participants were brought up.[34]

One of the main differences between locations was the Catholic and Protestant strains discussed in the interviews. This was quite overt in the Liverpool data, but when cross-checking with the Canterbury interviews, I noticed that this topic came up a few times too, usually in a more general way, rather than central to participants' upbringings. One example of where discussions about sectarian divides from a Canterbury participant were more general, or more removed from personal experience, came from Liam (69, Canterbury) who talked hypothetically about his and his wife's surnames, with his being a 'Protestant surname', and his wife's a 'Catholic surname'. He stated that had they been in Northern Ireland, they would never have met or gotten married, but living in Canterbury, this was never an issue. Some others, such as Frances (75, Canterbury), Jean (85, Canterbury), Albert (80, Canterbury), and Ben (66, Canterbury) spoke about Catholic people they knew and how they were somehow 'different' or unique due to their faith (e.g. they went to a Catholic church or were not involved in school assemblies in a Protestant school), but these comments were made in passing with no extended discussion about the ways it personally impacted upon participants' lives. Others, such as Harry (70, Canterbury), talked about sectarian differences on a more institutional level, comparing the Church of England and the Catholic Church in their policies and views. Meanwhile, participants such as Joseph (67, Liverpool) discussed how his parents were in a 'mixed marriage', which impacted on things like schooling, as his mother refused to send him and his siblings to a Catholic school, showing a much more personal connection and direct impact on daily life.

Whilst discussion in Canterbury was more general and less grounded in personal experience, there were exceptions. Amanda (69, Canterbury), Richard (74, Canterbury), and Kate (67, Canterbury) had more personal experiences of sectarian divides. Amanda grew up in Northern Ireland where these sectarian divisions have a long history and remain strong today. Kate was brought up in a fairly religious Catholic household in the North West of England and regularly mentioned the tension between Catholics and Protestants. Richard, who is Amanda's husband,

[34] Although the findings regarding the religious environment in which participants were brought up shed an in-depth and rich picture of participants lives, these findings cannot be generalised due to the small sample size of this study and could be unique to the research participants.

attended university in Dublin, where he met Amanda, and as such experienced the divisions more strongly there, but for Richard these experiences occurred in his adult life, rather than childhood.

The complex Catholic and Protestant relationship is discussed by Kennedy (2011) and Davie (1994) and was mentioned by numerous participants in Liverpool in various ways. For instance, Orange Lodge marches were mentioned several times by participants, a tradition that has a strong history in Liverpool.[35] Another example of this complex sectarian relationship was reflected in Liverpool participants' memories of childhood. For example, the language used by Protestants ('proddy dogs') and Catholics ('catty cats') to describe one another were mentioned by some. For instance, Judith (73, Liverpool) remembered this kind of language when reminiscing about her childhood:

> Judith: When I was a child there were fights, the Orange Lodge doing their marches 4th July…?
> *Joanna: 12th July.*
> Judith: 12th July, yes. And we weren't allowed to go anywhere near them because – in case there was trouble.
> *Joanna: Right yeah. It used to be quite a division didn't it?*
> Judith: Yeah, it did, a big division. And I do remember that, people name-calling 'catty cats' and 'proddy dogs'. I remember that when I was a child.

A notion of 'otherness' between Catholics and Protestants was expressed by some Liverpool participants, but also by Canterbury participants too, which might be reflective of a time when denominational divisions where more prominent anyway, something that broke down in the 1960s (McLeod 2007).

In Liverpool, continuing perceived differences between the two denominations were also expressed by some. For instance, Carl's wife (80, Liverpool) spoke to me when I was in their home, commenting on how she and her husband were in a 'mixed marriage', with her being a 'lapsed' Irish-Catholic and him being a Protestant – despite both of them being non-believers. As well as ideas of 'otherness', the authority of Catholic figures (e.g. priests or nuns) was

[35] The history of the Orange Lodge is evident with an exhibition that took place in 2019 at the Museum of Liverpool – https://www.artinliverpool.com/events/museum-of-liverpool-the-provincial-grand-orange-lodge-of-liverpool/ . Orange Lodge marches and parades take place on the 12th July every year to commemorate the Protestant William of Orange's defeat of James II, the English and Catholic king.

alluded to by numerous participants in Liverpool. Often this was framed negatively, reflective of the pervasive force these figures had in the lives of participants when they were younger. Although participants in Canterbury made reference to authority figures, again, these were more removed from everyday experiences. For instance, a handful mentioned the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal.

The main contexts in which sectarian differences were talked about was in relation to participants' childhoods, when the divisions that existed were stronger than today. For many, sectarian divides were now seen as quite illogical, but still continue to have an impact on elements of participants' lives today. For instance, Ellen (67, Liverpool) stated:

> Ellen: I do a drum workshop now […] and there's a guy who's Chilean who runs it and he said 'I've done some work with the Orange Lodge' and initially I like [gasps] but then I thought 'oh no, the identity was the drumming'.
> *Joanna: That's really interesting that you still sort-of went 'oh!'*
> Ellen: It's still that instinctive thing, but I'm sure that people I mix with, probably like the friend at work – but maybe they're not as institutionalised as some might still be. But it's really weird what's happened over that period of time. People can change, you know?

The continuing connection to these sectarian differences might be down to a strong connection to place, which, as discussed above can be influential. Where most of my Liverpool participants were born and remained in Liverpool all their life, this was not the case with those in Canterbury. Only two Canterbury participants were born in Canterbury or the surrounding areas, all the others had moved there at some point in their adult lives. In stark contrast, only three Liverpool participants were born outside of Liverpool. Therefore, it might be the case that most Liverpool participants have lived in the same area for almost all their lives and have seen the changing sectarian divisions, and thus have a deeper connection with it. A handful of examples show how moving away from or losing a connection to a particular place can impact upon connections to religion. For example, Ruth (72, Canterbury) cited moving away from her family home to university as influential on her developing a non-believing worldview and her declining adherence to the Jewish dietary laws. Harry (70, Canterbury), Michael (66, Canterbury), Tim (76, Canterbury), John (66, Canterbury), David (75, Liverpool), Ellen (67, Liverpool) and Carl (80, Liverpool) also cited moving to university, and out of the family home, as influential on the development of their non-belief.

Although these sectarian influences are practically absent from Liverpool today (Coslett 2009),[36] Liverpool still sees Orange Lodge marches every year, and an example of a recent clash between Orange Lodge members and customers of an Irish bar in Liverpool in 2017 following a government deal with the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) (Osbourne 2017) may suggest ongoing tensions which remain a legacy in the city for certain pockets of society.

As touched upon above, differences in upbringings, especially in relation to place, have continued to impact upon participants' thinking in some cases. Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman (2018) argue that, for those who are non-religious in environments with a stronger Catholic heritage, there can be a sense of deviance and breaking away from a community, as well as higher anti-religious sentiments, due to the stronger cultural presence of Catholicism. This contrasts with places with a Protestant heritage, where religion is more privatised and has a lesser role in public life, they argue (ibid). In my research however, anti-religious sentiments were found to be prominent for participants in both Liverpool and Canterbury, and from those from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. These anti-religious sentiments were also expressed by those from Jewish, Islamic, and non-religious backgrounds.

In terms of Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman's (2018) suggestion that non-religious Catholics may feel a sense of deviancy due to breaking away from a community, a number of participants did express these sentiments. For instance, as we saw with Ellen above, the sectarianism which was dominant in her childhood continued to influence her. She also described how, in the years when she gradually rejected the Catholicism she grew up with, at times she found this difficult because of the sense of loyalty she felt to those around her. Feeling a sense of deviancy was also expressed by Fiona (66, Liverpool) in her narrative. In talking about her Catholic upbringing, and when she started to question this, Fiona explained that, 'because everybody around me had these beliefs, I felt *I* was wrong and they were right'. Fiona went on to express how she felt guilt for abandoning her faith for a long time. This guilt was also mixed with anger and anti-religious feelings which continued to impact her life for quite some time:

> I mean not *now* but up until reasonably recently friends have said to me 'oh that's that Catholic guilt again' – I'm not sure it's all Catholic guilt, I think some of it's fifties childhood guilt and some of it's *me* and some of its my parents, but it does load you with a pile of guilt, it does.

[36] See Colsett (2009) for a brief history of sectarianism in Liverpool.

Similar sentiments were also expressed by Julie (68, Liverpool). Whilst this type of reaction can be seen more overtly with Liverpool participants, some participants in Canterbury did express comparable experiences. For instance, Kate (67, Canterbury), who was brought up Catholic in the North West of England, remembered feeling guilt when a priest came to visit her in hospital after the birth of her first daughter because she had not been attending church. Yet, there were other participants in Canterbury who were raised as Catholic who did not express any feelings such as these. Equally, Amanda (69, Canterbury), who grew up Protestant in Northern Ireland, expressed how she felt like an outsider because most people there were religious.[37] Yet those brought up as Protestants in Liverpool, and fellow participants in Canterbury, did not express such deviance. How might we understand this then? The majority of participants did not express a sense of deviance, but those who did were either from a Catholic background, or in the case of Amanda, a Protestant background placed within the unique context of Northern Ireland. For Julie, Ellen, Fiona, and Kate, their Catholic backgrounds consisted of strong communal bonds and the Catholicism they were brought up with was central in their childhoods and seems to have had a lasting legacy. As neither Kate nor Amanda were brought up in Canterbury, we cannot say anything about how this environment impacted upon childhoods. But arguably, the issue here is the uniqueness of the participants' milieu and social relations whilst growing up which seems to have had the most impact.

Although these findings do not wholly support Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman's work, they raise some interesting ideas about the contexts in which participants grew up. The differences in the childhoods of participants, in terms of environment, certainly influence the narrative and story people tell. The ways in which the divisions between Catholic and Protestants were drawn upon by a number of Liverpool participants as something they had experienced on a personal level, suggests its long-lasting influence on their religious memories and continued associations. Likewise, the ways in which religion was present in society when participants grew up more generally, allow us to understand the social forces that can impact on people and highlight how individuals do not live in a vacuum, and such religious influences are important to recognise. What we also see is how a participant's immediate religious milieu can impact on feelings of guilt, deviance, or breaking away from a community, for some

[37] Of course, Northern Ireland has a very particular and unique history when it comes to sectarianism, so her case is slightly different.

participants. Thinking about this in the context of Hervieu-Léger's (2000) work, for these participants, breaking away from this religious chain of memory was not necessarily easy, if it even happened at all, and a continued sense of connection remains. This suggests a transformation in the relationship between religious ties and upbringings and non-religious lived realities, rather than a complete separation or break, as some secularisation scholars would describe.

Earlier in this chapter, I referenced McLeod's (2007: 258) suggestion that, '[t]he great majority of those coming to maturity in the 1960s had received a Christian upbringing [… and] this continued to be a significant influence on their thinking and behaviour'. The next section will look at marriages and christenings as snapshots into participants' lives to show how this might be the case. We see how these events were bound up in social relations and how participants continued to experience religious expectations from family and wider society.

Marriages

As others have shown (e.g. Koleva 2013; Lee 2015; Manning 2015), life-cycle rituals and events can be occasions when non-believing and non-religious individuals are confronted with expectations relating to religion and, subsequently, are times when non-believing worldviews and identities might become more explicit. Siegers (2017) discusses how people can turn to religion at certain times due to habitual association between life events and religious traditions, as might be the case with older adult non-believers. Due to the age of my participants, and the remnants of the religious traditions of their childhood, religious involvement has been expected of them at certain times in their lives. This was frequently extended to when they got married, and when participants had children, with church weddings and christenings, in particular, in line with the wishes of family members. The following examples show how non-believing older adults negotiate these expectations, sometimes going along with the norms, sometimes challenging them, and sometimes adapting them to fit their own wishes. Through this, we can see how 'chains of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000) can be continued, altered, and negotiated in relation to these events, and how the social relations embedded in these contexts are significant to what participants choose to do.

Marriage is one of the key life events when cultural connections to religious traditions could continue in several ways, despite most participants already being non-believers at this stage of their lives. There was a relatively even mix in my sample between those who got married in a

church and those who did not. Of those people who mentioned explicitly where they got married, 18 participants got married in a church and 14 got married in a non-religious setting, two of which were second marriages after their first weddings took place in a church.[38] Whilst there was not a significant difference one way or another in terms of where people got married, participants' thought processes behind and importance placed on these marriages, in terms of them being religious or not, was mixed. A number of participants mentioned that they got married in church because it was expected, the 'thing to do', or it was the convention and to do otherwise did not cross their minds. In this way, we see willing continuity in shared religious cultures for some, but the narratives of others showed how there were sometimes external forces pushing or influencing them in one way or another.

One notable influence that various participants touched upon was the expectations of family and in-laws who 'pressured' them into a church wedding, linked to the idea of 'tradition'. For instance, Fred (86, Liverpool) emphasised how his marriage in a church was 'just a procedure [he] had to go through more or less just to satisfy the two families'. Similarly, Anna (80, Canterbury) remembered how her mother-in-law was highly influential in why she got married in church. Anna herself did not want a religious wedding, but she explained that 'it was more than life's worth to do anything different'. This reflects Koleva's (2013) finding that familial expectations can remain an influential factor in considering why non-believers would choose to participate in religious rituals.

Other participants pointed more towards societal pressures in general as influential on their decisions to get married in church, despite not believing. These examples highlight the context of the time and how church and registry office weddings were viewed in a different light to religious ceremonies. For many, getting married in a registry office was seen as less special or less aesthetically pleasing, and some recognised how the context today was very different. For instance, Michael (66, Canterbury) remarked:

> Michael: I think, if you go back to the sixties and early seventies the culture then ... it was *expected* that you got married – I got married in church as well, although we weren't church-goers, it was an *expected* thing that we had got married in a church and actually people will look down upon who got married in registry offices; it was regarded

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[38] Type and place of marriage were not specific questions that participants were asked but asking about marriage was sometimes used as a prompt if participants were unsure of what to say.

> as something ... not quite shameful that's a bit strong, but ... a *proper* wedding would happen in a church.
> *Joanna: Maybe a bit of snobbery or something?*
> Michael: Yes, I think and maybe there's a class element as well, but I don't know.

According to the Office for National Statistics (2019), 1966 onwards saw a rise in the popularity of civil marriages and a decline in popularity of religious marriages, with civil marriages overtaking religious ones in 1977 as the most popular choice. As noted elsewhere, McLeod (2007) notes how changes in culture related to religious decline did not happen at the same rate everywhere, and for Michael it would seem that those changes were not yet reflected in his context, where religious marriages remained the 'norm'.

Two female participants mentioned the stigma and association of pregnancy out of wedlock when people got married in registry offices and not churches. This stigma is something McLeod (2007) shows had begun to break down in the 1950s and 1960s, but the rate at which this happened was uneven across the country. This is something Maryam (70, Liverpool) recounts when talking about her own wedding:

> Well we could have gone to the registry but at that time it was only seen that you'd go if you was pregnant, which I wasn't, and they all thought I was, so that was me getting back at all of the whispers. That was the only reason really, and, er, I've never been back since.

In another example, Carl (80, Liverpool) described the pressure he felt from his wife's friends and family to get married in a Catholic church and recalled how 'they did drag [him] around priests and convents to get [him] to fall in line'. Carl explained how in the end, he and his wife compromised and ended up getting married in a Unitarian church even though it meant a number of his wife's friends did not attend the wedding. Whereas for some participants getting married in a church was just the traditional 'done thing' and not something they had thought a great deal about, and we see how a 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000), linked to religious traditions, could continue quite easily, for others, decisions regarding weddings took a lot more consideration.

A further example of how some participants carefully deliberated getting married in a church was given by Elizabeth (79, Canterbury), who described how there was a great deal of uncertainty about her choice of a religious wedding ceremony:

> When my husband and I got married he – his family had more religion than my family had, but *he* didn't and we actually both questioned why we were getting married in church which I sort-of wanted to [laughs] in a conventional kind of way. We actually went to the priest who was going to marry us and said what about this, you know, are you alright with this? And he said well 'quite honestly the promises you make in church are no different than promises you'd have to make a registry office and, so if that's what – you're not saying anything you wouldn't be saying the registry office', but obviously not going through that the Creed and all that kind of stuff. So he was quite happy to do it so we did actually have a church wedding.

This, and the other examples above, all show how, for some participants, undertaking religious traditions was something they participated in due to the expectations placed on them, despite their non-belief. For some, they felt there were contradictions inherent in this but overlooked these because of the norms of getting married in church that were pervasive in society at the time. However, other participants challenged these expectations and re-negotiated these norms by going against the grain, deciding not to get married in the socially conventional way. It is through these examples that we begin to see breaks in the continuity of religious traditions, we see religious cultures being disrupted with actions related directly to participants' non-believing worldviews and identities taking their place.

For some participants, not having a church wedding was a deliberate and thought-through position, directly related to their non-belief. For instance, Liam (69, Canterbury) discussed how he and his wife had been planning a church wedding but he considered it hypocritical as neither he or his wife were believers, resulting in quite a serious falling-out because of it. Subsequently, Liam decided they would get married in a registry office with only two witnesses, something they avoided discussing in later years, Liam pointed out. Similarly, Joseph (67, Liverpool) described how, with both of his marriages, he *'insisted'* that they would not be in a church because of his non-belief and remembered how he was the first in his extended family to take that route. For Joseph, this disruption to religious tradition did not seem to cause any great tensions in his family, but for Judith, like Liam, her decision against a church wedding had a significant effect. She narrated a conflict with her father:

> Judith: And I never had any plans to get married but as these things go, I met a guy and got married but – I absolutely refused to get married in church and had a fight with my father 'cause I said 'if you are so insistent that I should be married in church, I'm not going to get married, I'm just gonna go and live with him'.
> *Joanna: Oh right ... so what did he say?*
> Judith: So he said, 'I'll pray for you' [laughs].

Judith's refusal to get married in a church was significant to her non-believing worldview and caused notable tensions with her religious father. Judith used her father's religiousness to threaten not getting married at all and just live with her partner, something which was even more scandalous amongst a number of religious communities (Brown 2012). Harry (70, Canterbury) also described his and his wife's decision not to have a church wedding because they considered it hypocritical and remembered how his mother-in-law was so furious that she did not attend the wedding at all. This breaking of 'chains', to use Hervieu-Léger's (2000) language, is closely bound up with social relations, evident through the reactions of some families to the disruption of a shared culture and tradition.

These examples highlight the influence of familial and societal expectations and show how the ways in which participants react to these varies. They also show how the ways in which religious cultures can be disrupted or continued is highly bound up with relationships with others. It is through life-cycle events such as these that the sharing or disrupting of religious cultures can become visible.

Christenings

Like weddings, we also see the ways in which familial and social norms continue to impact on participants through their decision-making around and experience of christenings. In comparison with weddings, the examples of christenings involved much more negotiation, challenge, and transformation in the ways religious cultures are continued, or how new traditions, which reflect participants' non-believing worldviews and identities, can come to light. These findings show how non-belief and non-religion can be substantial and how life-cycle events can act as markers for recognising non-religious cultures. They also show the ways in which non-believing and non-religious worldviews and identities can develop and take form.

For some, christening children was just expected and placed within the context of the time. For instance David (75, Liverpool) stated:

> Yes, well now, you gotta go back to what 1972, 1975 and obviously [his wife's] mum and dad was still alive, you know, my mother was still alive and it was expected in those days that you got your child baptised.

Others expressed similar sentiments, using words such as 'tradition' and 'norm' for explaining their decisions. Married couple, Anna (80, Canterbury) and Tim (76, Canterbury), both emphasised the influence of Tim's mother in why they got married in a church and it was a similar situation in relation to getting their first child christened. Much like her wedding, Anna described how it was easier to just go along with what was wanted, to avoid upsetting her in-laws. But this approach changed with their two later children, who were not christened. Tim put this decision down to himself and Anna moving away from the area where his parents lived; being away from that environment meant he was no longer surrounded by familial expectations. What we see here is how physical distance between the couple and Tim's family led to a transformation in the specific types of influence that were exerted through those locations which had been influential on religious practice – enabling different practices to arise. This does not suggest that these social relations ceased to matter, but the overt influence they were able to have was lessened. This example bears resemblance to those discussed above, regarding how moving away from a particular place, or losing a connection to a place of a religious upbringing can be influential on developing non-believing worldviews and identities. These instances bring out interesting points to consider vis-à-vis 'micro-climates' (Voas and McAndrew 2012). Voas and McAndrew argue that socio-economic factors as well as neighbourhood values and/or cultures impact upon non-religiosity. The examples above seem to suggest that migration between different 'micro-climates' can impact upon secularisation processes. It was through the act of moving away from the contexts of their upbringings and social circles (i.e. influential neighbourhood values and/or cultures) that participants' non-belief developed further.

Despite not believing, then, some participants continued to christen their children and they did so for several reasons. What we see here is not a break in the chain of memory, as Hervieu-Léger (2000) would argue, nor do we see a 'neglect to baptise their children' as Brown (2009: 1) describes as happening with British people since the 1960s. What we see is continuation and a type of performance bound up in social relations, to draw on Day (2011) and Goffman (1959). As McLeod (2007) points out, the ways in which the changes of the 1960s permeated society, including moving away from religion, happened at different rates for different people, in different parts of society. McLeod also distinguishes between different types of secularisation: individual, social, political, and cultural. One can use this framework to describe how, even though an individual may have stopped believing, cultural and social connections to religion can remain, as seen above. But the ways in which participants described these experiences

points towards a sense of agency in the way they ascribe their own meanings to the religious traditions they were undertaking. For instance, Pam (68, Liverpool) discussed how she got her children christened due to pressure from her mother-in-law, but as well as this pressure, she also expressed her own desire for a social celebration. Pam explained how the choice to christen her children was also a way of marking the birth of her child when there were not as many other alternatives to do this in the past:

> I think it's really nice to be able to have a ceremony where you welcome your child and if you don't have a christening there isn't really anything – I mean I know now people have naming ceremonies and stuff like that but that's a bit new age isn't it really? I don't think it went on. And then if you do do it, I think you've got to be quite committed to say 'oh well I'm having a celebration', it's not [ready] made, you know what I mean? I kind of feel like – well I don't know, I just, I didn't do it that way, we just had the christening and it was just a family thing.

Alternatives such as 'naming ceremonies' were not common in the 1980s when Pam had her first child and were considered 'a bit new age' in Pam's mind. Pam did christen her children, proving a sense of religious and social continuity, but this was due to a mixture of familial and societal influences as well as the wish to celebrate the birth of her child in the most common way she knew how. It was only in a 1998 Green Paper (*Supporting Families: A Consultation Document 1998*) that baby-naming ceremonies were signalled as providing official (although not legally binding in any way) non-religious alternatives to celebrating life-cycle events. Baby-naming ceremonies became a service that registrars had to provide, as set out in a corresponding White Paper (Finch 2004). Prior to this, parents may have provided similar types of celebrations for the birth of their child but these would have been unofficial.

Like marriages then, christenings were often events that participants would go along with because it was considered the norm or they experienced pressure, displaying a continuation in the religious 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000). This challenges the idea that for non-believers, changes of the 1960s brought about an automatic end to such religious involvement. For some, christening their children was not something they particularly wanted to do, whereas for others there did not seem to be any great conflict, nor was this something participants felt the need to fight against. Kate (67, Canterbury), Jean (85, Canterbury), Amy (74, Liverpool), and Frances (75, Canterbury), for instance, explained how they christened their children for practical reasons, for example if their children wanted to have a religious wedding when they were older. Their decisions, and sharing of religious cultures, in many respects, were a practical

matter and just a box that needed ticking. Yet some participants were more self-conscious about their decision. For instance, Michael (66, Canterbury) hesitantly narrated how he got his children christened, and his hesitancy seemed to suggest that his decision about getting his children christened had not been something he had considered until the context of the interview. After reflecting, Michael put the decision to christen his first child down to the context and environment of the time. Interestingly however, at the end of the interview I asked Michael if there was anything he would like to mention before the interview ended, and he, again somewhat hesitantly, narrated the following story:

> I mean there's one incident that occurred which we haven't discussed, it's very small incident, but again it's stayed in my mind [...] The previous school I taught in, […] there was a religious instruction teacher, an RE teacher at the school and he was actually ordained and in fact he would wear his dog collar in school, even though it wasn't a religious school […] and I grew quite friendly with him, that's interesting in itself [...], anyway we had a party at our house just after our son had been born and I was – I remember I was – either I or my wife was holding him, I think it was my wife who was holding him actually because – that's right I can picture myself looking at this. And he came over to my son, did the cross on his forehead, and he said 'in the name of the father...' – he *blessed* him and it was done. He didn't say 'would you mind if I blessed your son?', he just came up and did it, very quickly and then said 'oh nice party' and that ... so right. So what a mixture that was – there was such a mixture of emotions I thought; part of me was angry that he didn't ask my wife and I if we wanted that to happen. Then I thought, okay, he's an ordained minister and from his point of view his belief tells him this child needs to be blessed, 'well I'm ordained so I'm going to bless the child'. I was friends with him so he's doing it out of friendship after that as well ... so I didn't begrudge him that if you like. I've – again I understood the impulse behind why he wanted to do it but I was slightly cross that he had done it without asking us, so it's a real mixture of emotions there.

Afterwards, I asked why this had been an issue, considering he got his child christened which would involve some sort of blessing and Michael put this down to having the freedom of choice. He and his wife felt they had *chosen* to get their child christened, despite familial and societal pressures to do so. The friend however did not give them a choice: he did not ask if he could bless their son but just did it. As we will see in chapter 6, these ideas of freedom, agency, and choice, contrasted with enforced religion, are considered important when it comes to bringing up children. What this example shows us is how these liberal and individualist ideals can be challenged in real-life situations.

For others, they were not prepared to go along with the expectation to christen their children, and this could sometimes cause tension or upset within family groups, as also found by

Manning (2015) in her research in the US, exploring how non-affiliated parents bring up their children. For several participants, these situations presented a time of negotiation or challenge. For instance, Elizabeth (79, Canterbury) described how she and her husband's decision not to get their daughter christened caused some tensions within the family. Interestingly Elizabeth, who we met earlier, had questions about getting married in a church and deliberated whether it was the 'right thing to do' or not. But in the decision about whether to christen her children, it appears that Elizabeth had more conviction in her decision and was more resistant to some of the wider expectations, exercising a more confident sense of her own agency in the matter:

> I mean I remember when I first ... after our daughter was born, our first child, and we decided that we were not going to have a christening, we were going to do what my parents had done [i.e. not christen the children]. But [my husband] *had* been christened, and his parents, his mother particularly, did go to church […] but she was very, very upset. She'd actually got the family christening robe out and, you know, was all ready to make a christening cake and all that kind of stuff. And she was very upset when my husband actually told her that he was not having her christened and – oh we didn't have what they nowadays have, I gather sort of 'naming ceremonies' or anything like that, I mean they didn't exist in those days or certainly didn't know about them. And ... but you know I would not have insisted on not having her christened if my husband had wanted her christened, if he'd said 'well actually it's family tradition' […] then I would have gone along with it.

Despite being more convinced of her decision in this context, compared to when she was getting married, Elizabeth still hinted at the fact that the decision to christen her daughter was not something she was insistent on doing; in fact she explains that had her husband wanted to christen their children, she probably would have 'gone along with it'. This suggests that Elizabeth would have continued a 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000), had her husband's desire to christen their children been more prominent, highlighting the social nature of non-believing. After picking up on Elizabeth's reference to naming ceremonies, I asked whether she would have done something similar had they been more common at the time, to which Elizabeth responded:

> Possibly just for the ritual of having a party rather than any particular beliefs or anything like that. I mean we *did,* we did appoint people as – not as godfathers we called them lay godfathers, so very good friends of ours we said you know 'if anything happens will you be responsible as a lay godparent?' […] So you know we – the godparent issue we thought was actually quite important in a way so there was somebody else that took an interest in them as they were growing up other than just family. We were aware of that and so we did actually ask people to do that, yeah.

Interestingly, Elizabeth and her husband performed their own take on a traditional christening by appointing what she called 'lay godparents'. This suggests that for Elizabeth, the desire to celebrate and mark the occasion of her children's arrival into the world was considered important, and she 'borrowed' from religion in creative ways to do this. We can see this in the language she uses – 'lay godparents' – and in the role asked of them, both of which are very similar to that of a godparent in a traditional Christian christening. At the same time, she and her husband chose their own way to mark the arrival of their children by adapting these traditions and giving the ceremony new non-religious meaning. The traditions which helped cement a religious chain of memory are adapted to create new ones along with a new code of meaning – one which fitted more closely with Elizabeth's non-believing worldview. As discussed further in chapter 7, it seems that marking life-cycle events is something Elizabeth considers important. Yet, due to her age and the contexts in which she grew up, religion could be the go-to institution to celebrate these events. These examples allow us to see the development and malleable nature of Elizabeth's non-believing worldview over time and how this impacts upon her decisions at key moments in her life where religious cultures can be shared, disrupted, transformed, or started anew.

For others who also decided not to get their children christened, nor have any alternative celebration, there was not always an in-depth narrative surrounding the decision and it did not appear to be a particularly challenging one. Some participants linked their decision back to ideas of choice rather than 'indoctrination' (more discussion in chapter 6). This is something summed up by Carmel (78, Canterbury) who stated:

> I didn't have my children baptised because I thought '*no*', even when they were younger I thought 'no if they want to become part of the Christian Church then they can do it'. I mean I wouldn't stop them but I'm not going to push them into it or any other religion – they can make up their own mind [...] So I didn't put any influence on them like *I* was influenced you see.

What we see here is a break in religious observance between generations. Carmel abandons the religious traditions her mother passed onto her, fracturing the chain between her upbringing and the upbringing of her daughters – even though religion remained influential in Carmel's parenting decisions in other ways; for instance she still sent her children to Sunday school. As will be discussed in more depth in chapter 6, parental ideas around not influencing children are much more complex than at first glance.

Whilst for some, such as Carmel, the decision not to christen their children was not a particularly challenging one, this was not the case for all. An interesting example was that of Liam (69, Canterbury) who asked for advice from a reverend, who was an old colleague of his wife, regarding christenings. Liam's non-belief was characterised by strong anti-religious sentiments and we saw how when it came to his wedding, he fell out with his wife-to-be because he did not want the church wedding they had organised and they subsequently got married in a registry office. Liam showed more uncertainty about whether or not to christen his first child, worried that if the child died they would not be able to be buried in a church. This is interesting considering Liam's disdain for 'hatch, match, and dispatch' events linked with the church. With his marriage, Liam fell out with his wife regarding a church wedding, as he saw it as hypocritical as he and his wife were non-believers. With his first born, Liam was much more reserved; he did not want to make what he saw as rash decisions, and he thought through options carefully, seeking advice. This shows how social relationships (i.e. the relationship with his wife, his first child, and the reverend) are crucial in shaping participants' experiences and decisions around the continuity of religious cultures (or not). It also highlights the malleable nature of non-believing worldviews depending on the relationship. In Liam's case, the type of social relationship, and who that relationship is with, plays a defining role here. The point is not only that social relationships matter when trying to understand lived non-believing, but that relationships with different people matter in different ways. In the case of Liam's wedding, he had more conviction and ownership regarding his decision because he knew the non-religious beliefs of his wife-to-be. However, when it came to his child, whose beliefs could not be known, Liam felt a different sense of responsibility and did not want to impose his views on his child, considering it important that he was making the 'correct' decision on his child's behalf.

It is through contexts, such as christenings, and the relationships bound up in these events, that we see how what it means to be non-believing is actually lived and experienced by people. Rather than seeing secularisation processes as a metaphorical break, even for some of the most overtly anti-religious, such as Liam, we see how lived experiences highlight the complex connections to religion that can remain in people's lives. These can be approached with significant deliberation or without much consideration, highlighting the ways in which non-believing is not a zero-sum state but that religious cultures and ideas can, and do, continue to play a role in thoughts and behaviour.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that 'chains' are not simply broken in the way Hervieu-Léger (2000) describes but they are amended. New links can be added whilst obsolete ones can be removed as desired for non-believers. Nor has secularisation 'quite suddenly' happened (Brown 2009: 1) and it is not the case that people have 'entirely forsaken organised Christianity in a sudden plunge into a truly secular condition' (ibid: 1). Rather, and much more in line with McLeod's observation, an over emphasis on decline ignores 'religious innovations' (2007: 17). I take this one step further and argue that an over emphasis on decline ignores *non-religious* innovations too. I show how Hervieu-Léger's idea of religion as a chain of memory is a helpful way to understand continuing connections to religion in the lives of my non-believing participants. Her theory is also useful for understanding how new and developing non-believing identities and worldviews can reconfigure, redefine, and transform these 'chains' through non-religious cultures. The findings presented in this chapter conform with McLeod's statement that the religion people grew up with remains a significant factor on people's thoughts and behaviour (McLeod 2007: 258). But my data also provides examples of the ways in which this might actually happen in the everyday lives of non-believers. This chapter shows transformations in religious cultures and the ways participants engage with religion and non-religion and has revealed the salience of social relationships in these circumstances. I argue that, due to the contexts in which participants grew up, expectations from others relating to religious observance are commonplace, as are the negotiations that come with them. My own participants approached these issues in complex and heterogeneous ways, showing how non-believing worldviews and identities can be amendable in certain situations, though they remain bound up in social relations too.

This chapter also contributes a deeper understanding of how place might impact upon a person's understanding and presentation of their non-religiosity or non-belief by drawing on the idea of 'micro-climates', set out by Voas and McAndrew (2012). What is shown is how the sectarian past of Liverpool has continuing impacts upon participants living there and has a strong presence in their narrations of childhood. Whilst sectarian differences were also discussed by participants in Canterbury, on the whole these were more generalised than those in Liverpool, suggesting that place, and religious heritage (following the work of Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2018), can have a significant impact on non-religion and non-belief. I have also shown how the ties that participants have to place are often essentially social, rather than, for example, geographic. Examples of participants moving away from the social contexts

of their childhoods, which brought about a decline in religious observance or the flourishing of their non-believing worldviews and identities, show how proximity shapes relationships between people and the influence these relationships have on daily life. Migration can change the nature of these ties to people and place and highlights the pervasiveness neighbourhood values and/or cultures (Voas and McAndrew 2012) can have on participants' non-belief.

By drawing on the work of Lanman and Buhrmester (2017), my findings show that CREDs processes do not always work in the way the authors suggest. Lanman and Buhrmester (2017) use CREDs theory in an attempt explain declining numbers of religious people, a theory which fits the 'subtraction' model of religious decline (that is, it focuses on the absence of religion rather than the presence of something else; see Taylor 2007 and Lee 2015). Although there were some cases which seemed to conform to this model, there were others that challenged it. I provided examples where issues around religion and belief were not verbalised in the home, but showed how there could still be expectations of religious practice and identification. These findings do not match up with Lanman and Buhrmester's argument which stresses that CREDs fail when verbalised statements are not backed up with practice. However, some of my participants recalled discussion around these topics being absent from or actively discouraged within the home, yet they were still expected to go to Sunday school and a 'Christian' identity was considered attractive and useful. These findings reflect the significance historical contexts have on displays of religious practice or identity in public, and how these can be very different in the private realm.

By focusing on decisions around marriage and christening as snapshots from participants' life courses, this chapter has explored participants' upbringing and the impact this had on their lives. These examples show the ways in which expectations of religion can be challenged and negotiated. The approaches participants undertook in response to such events sometimes reflected their wider non-religious worldviews, where the importance of the individual, choice, and agency are central. This will be further explored in the next chapter. Yet, what these examples have hinted towards, and as will become clearer, is how these worldviews do not always operate consistently in practice.

Chapter 5

Individualism Expressed Through Indifference: Social Embeddedness and Performance

Introduction

An emphasis on the rise of personal choice, autonomy, and the rights of the individual is a salient manifestation arising from the cultural shifts of the second half of the twentieth century, as old and established institutions began to break down and the individual gained a more central position in society (McLeod 2007). Hervieu-Léger (2000) posits these ideals as influential on the break in the religious chain of memory, and these are deeply embedded within secularisation theories.

Existing research has also identified liberalism (e.g. Woodhead 2016) and the centrality of the individual as important in non-believing and non-religious realities, or the state of being 'secular'. The worldviews of non-believers have often been identified as primarily and intrinsically liberal humanist, and as philosophical, moral, or intellectual, rather than social in nature (e.g. Bruce 2002; Zuckerman 2008; 2012; Campbell 2013; Zuckerman 2014; Manning 2015). In this chapter, I will show how these non-believing worldviews and identities are much more socially embedded and intersubjective than previously represented. At the same time, I argue that understanding non-believing worldviews and identities as primarily and intrinsically liberal humanist reflects how they appear on the surface but does not map neatly onto lived experiences at all times, and worldviews and identities can be both shaped and constrained by social relations and contexts.

This chapter argues that liberal values do indeed play a central role in the lives of the older adults in this research. They are embraced in different ways and are expressed through non-believing worldviews and identities, such as an identity of 'indifference' to religion, and sometimes non-religion too. The ways in which the participants employed a narrative of indifference to religion and non-religion shares commonalities with Lee's (2015) notion of

'indifferentism'. 'Indifferentism' is the idea that the 'construction of the self as indifferent can be seen […] as a social and cultural practice with concrete effects' (ibid: 149). I build on Lee's idea of 'indifferentism' as a form of non-religious positioning. Lee, for instance, sees indifference as a 'power move' (i.e. that people claim to be non-partisan therefore more rational then religious people, for example), whereas I posit this identity of indifference as a liberal humanist ideology linking specifically to liberal values that participants deem important. Liberal narratives and discourses in society push participants to express an indifferent and nonchalant position when it comes to non-believing or non-religious worldviews. These narratives can encompass ideas of tolerance and the importance of individual choice and freedom which operate in 'modern' society, ideals which many participants attach themselves to. In certain circumstances, many participants designate the antithesis of these ideals to the realm of the 'religious other'. Despite participants' ideological identification as indifferent, this chapter shows how there is a tension between older adults' emphasis on liberal individualism in their narratives and their embeddedness in social contexts, which means this ideology is not always adhered to in practice.

Whilst I argue that indifference is a liberal ideology that participants identify with, not all claims to indifference are ideological. In this chapter, I also provide examples of how indifference can be real and lived, which reflects the situational nature of non-believing. As ordinary non-believers, I show how for the most part, there is a significant level of indifference and sense of unimportance attached to the role of non-belief in participants' lives. Because non-believing is relational and situational, indifference can have numerous presentations: ideological indifference as well as actual indifference can exist simultaneously in the lives of non-believers.

By drawing on Day's (2010) work, this chapter will explore the performative nature of liberal humanist worldviews, as well as non-religious and religious identities, adopted by participants in certain contexts. My work conforms with Day's idea that belief is performed in social contexts, but I show how this performance can take on a unique form for older adults because of their age. I shed light on a range of situations and relationships in participants' everyday lives where non-believing worldviews and identities, which express individualism and indifference, become muddied as social contexts and relationships mean non-belief becomes important and explicit. We will see how these individualist, autonomous, and indifferent presentations are not always a true reflection of real life, or of participants' self-understandings

of themselves, because of continued social and cultural connections with religious people and cultures. Due to these continued connections, different religious and non-religious performances can ensue and indifference to both religion and non-religion can be set aside. Social relations continue to matter, despite increased emphasis on the individual. Relationships and social contexts highlight the mismatch between what participants claim about their non-believing worldviews and the lived reality, including what they actually do in situations with a 'religious other'. I will show how these contexts are negotiated and rationalised by participants, allowing them to sit comfortably with their indifference.

By thinking about the contrasts between expressions of indifference and more explicit and significant manifestations of non-believing worldviews, the current chapter will show how these non-believing worldviews are not static but are permeable and can change in different contexts. Lived non-belief is thus a complex configuration for older adults. It can occupy several places at once; it can be important, significant, and explicit, whilst being implicit, tacit, or irrelevant at other times, or even simultaneously. By recognising the multifaceted nature of lived non-belief, this chapter hopes to move away from absolute and binary positions which envisage people going from 'religious' to 'non-religious' in a linear manner and remaining in these defined states.

Understanding Liberal Ideals Amongst Older Adult Non-Believers

A cornerstone of secularisation theory and other theories of religious decline is the idea that the cultural shifts of the twentieth century in Europe, most notably those of the 1960s, brought with them new ideas regarding personal choice, autonomy, and the rights of the individual. These are changes my own participants are likely to have experienced to varying degrees due to their age. These individualisation processes are described in relation to religion, spirituality, and related identities in several ways. For instance, McLeod (2007) highlights how the counterculture of the 1960s lay the groundwork for various ideas about individual autonomy:

> The youth culture could present a direct challenge to the churches and their values, in so far as it was associated with values of hedonism, unlimited experimentation, or the individual's right to live life in their own way without regard for any external moral code (ibid: 106).

Although not everyone engaged in the counterculture, countercultural ideas about religion permeated different parts of society, albeit at different speeds, argues McLeod.

As well as changes in the ways people thought about individual rights, there were wider societal changes, such as increased affluence, which meant that people moved away from communities such as the church and communal groups of all kinds, states McLeod (2007). This led to social lives becoming less communally focused than they were in the past and 'the life of married couples focused on the home and the nuclear family, […] as individuals claimed the right to live in their own way without outside interference' (ibid: 123).

Woodhead (2016) also emphasises these trends of individualism and choice, explaining how there is a growing liberalism in British society generally. By this, Woodhead means: 'the conviction that each and every individual has the right if not the duty to make choices about how she or he should live her or his own life' (2016: 255). She notes that this is the case for the majority of the British population, with 'religious nones'[39] being at the most liberal end of the scale. However, the assumed affinity between non-religion and liberalism has been questioned by some, including Woodhead herself (2013) and others (e.g. Laborde 2020), and work from critical secular studies considers secular liberalism, on a state level, as problematic.

The ways these worldviews, identities, and ideals were expressed by participants are not homogenous, reflecting how there is no defined way to be a non-believer. Whilst observing the presence of liberal ideals such as tolerance, the importance of individual choice, and the ability for people to be autonomous beings, these characteristics were not expressed by all participants. For instance, whilst 33 participants expressed these liberal ideals in one way or another, there were three participants who stood out as different. Jean, David, and Diane did not employ the same tropes of liberalism to the same extent as other participants, if at all. Although Jean (85, Canterbury) did have some views typical of liberalism (e.g. she supported euthanasia), she expressed strongly negative views about Islam and Muslims, and had conservative views about gender, in particular viewing working mothers negatively. David (75, Liverpool) expressed his approval of the death penalty for those who commit murder, stating that murder is 'against religious belief' and the ten commandments – this is interesting in itself considering David described himself as an atheist and did not practise any religion. David too expressed his 'hate' towards Islam, although he explained how he agreed with some things he believes that Muslims do, like 'chop people's hands off if they burgle'. Diane (74, Liverpool), who expressed liberal

[39] Being a 'religious none' does not necessarily mean being a non-believer.

ideals in some ways, also voiced her dislike for Islam, Christianity, and religious people more generally, and other participants also expressed broadly negative ideas about religion, often Christianity. It is important to recognise that liberal ideals do not represent a blanket description for every participants' values, and that there can be varying degrees to which people engaged with such ideas.

In general, though, the liberal ideals which are prominent in modern British society (Woodhead 2016) were strongly invoked by other participants. Liberal values employed by participants included principles of equality, fights against injustice in society, human rights, women's rights, the right to abortion, gay rights, being charitable, ideas around morality, and being a 'good person'. These findings have similarities with Brown's (2017) idea of the 'humanist condition', which he considered was central to his respondents' worldviews. Ideas of freedom of choice and personal autonomy were central to the non-believing older adults in this study and, in relation to religion, this included freedom of and freedom from religion. These tropes were included in how participants described their questioning of religion. That is, it was their choice and agency which led them to their non-belief, highlighting parallels between participants' experiences and the changes mentioned by authors such as McLeod (2007), as discussed above. The importance of choice is most visible when participants discussed their own children, as will be explored in chapter 6.

The ways in which liberal values were expressed varied. Some were quite explicit about the importance of liberalism, such as Richard (74, Canterbury), Julie (69, Liverpool), Anna (80, Canterbury), and Ben (66, Canterbury) who talked about liberal ideals being central and influential in their lives. For others, such as Frances (75, Canterbury), Michael (66, Canterbury), and Fiona (66, Liverpool), these discourses were much more implicitly woven into the way they described themselves as autonomous beings or being able to decide what to do and how to do it. Several participants expressed how they did not 'need' religion as they were able to make their own choices as individuals, rather than being 'told what to do' by religion. These ideas often linked with notions of the importance of individual choice and not being forced to do or believe a certain thing. But very few participants were what would be described as individualistic. In fact, several participants explicitly expressed their disdain for overt individualistic behaviour, which some associated with right-wing politics and capitalism, instead stressing the importance of community, collaboration, and helping those less fortunate than themselves. Although writing specifically about young people, Day (2011) challenges

authors such as Smith and Denton (2005) and their suggestion that young people's lack of involvement with religion, and their understandings of themselves as autonomous individuals, is individualistic. Rather, Day argues that, far from being individualistic, 'young people locate the source and maintenance of beliefs in their social relationships' (2011: 90). This chapter also shows how social relations are of profound importance to non-believing older adults which does not necessarily contradict with understanding themselves as choice-making autonomous individuals.

As we saw with Jean, David, and Diane above, however, expressions of liberal values are not always consistent and whilst a person may hold a liberal position about one issue, this might not extend to another issue. For instance, Joseph (67, Liverpool) expressed liberal ideals strongly in his narrative, but what his case also shows is how these ideals are incorporated into daily life is not always straightforward and immediate, but can develop over time. This contrasts with ideas such as Brown's 'humanist condition' which posits that these liberal ideals, or 'humanist values' as he calls them, just 'exist' within people. In particular, Joseph discussed how his liberal views were not as mature when he was younger; he remembered how he was not a 'good feminist' when younger but changed and developed his views regarding women's rights over time. Joseph's position on more recent topics in mainstream discourses, such as transgender rights, is still evolving, but he explained: 'and the logic of it, you know, if everyone's equal, well everyone's equal aren't they?' There are parallels with Strhan's (2015) work amongst evangelicals, who, she argues, work hard on developing their faith; faith is not something that always comes easily. Likewise, Joseph's example highlights how liberal ideals and approaches can develop and, as we saw with Jean, David, and Diane simply being a non-believer does not mean homogeneous approaches to seeing and understanding the world.

Understanding the 'Indifferent'

The heterogeneous ways in which participants could express liberal ideals was also found to be the case with expressions of indifference. Indifference could be both ideological and real. Although in this chapter I will be discussing indifference as an identity, building on the idea of 'indifferentism' set out by Lee (2015), it is important to state that, again, these expressions were not the case for everyone. Twenty-five participants expressed an identity of indifference to religion and, sometimes, non-religion; a position of not caring, or that their non-belief was unimportant. For some this was demonstrated through explicit statements, for others it was subtler, as will be shown below. Yet, there were some participants, such as Liam (69,

Canterbury), who were quite explicitly not indifferent. Liam expressed anti-religious views quite readily, as well as clearly stating the role non-believing has on his life. As such, these ideas were not expressed universally amongst participants, but were expressed by a substantial number of them, offering a unique approach to understanding how non-believing worldviews and identities might interact and feed into one another. Because expressions of indifference and liberalism were multifaceted, my analysis related to this operated on different levels. On one hand, there are participants who explicitly expressed possessing liberal values or being indifferent, whereas for others this is much more implicitly woven through their narratives and the way they talked about certain things. Additionally, for others, indifference could be a lived-reality. Because of the varied ways these worldviews and identities are presented, they are not always easy to identify and do not easily reflect the notion of 'tradition', although as we see in chapter 6, they can be passed on.

Attempting to identify and understand the 'religiously indifferent' is a task numerous scholars have undertaken. A recent edited collection collated by Quack and Schuh (2017) showcases the increasing body of work on religious and non-religious indifference and the multiple forms indifference can take. The idea of indifference to religion has also been closely linked to some strands of the secularisation paradigm, with arguments that widespread indifference would be evidence that secularisation has 'happened'. One scholar who endorses this argument is Bruce (2002: 42), who states: '[i]n so far as I can imagine an end point [to secularisation], it would not be self-conscious irreligion; you have to care too much about religion to be irreligious. It would be widespread indifference'.

My own work is an attempt to understand the lived reality of the ordinary non-believer (i.e. recruited from the community and not belonging to a non-religious organisation), and what became clear is that, for many non-believing older adults, their non-belief just did not mean that much to them in daily life: they were indifferent. That said, 'indifference' is an ambiguous term. It is used by different people in different ways, participants and academics alike, and indifference can be hard to capture. Lee (2015: 29, italics in original) articulates this point:

> [Indifference] sits some place *between* the state of being without religion and of rejecting religion [...] It implies knowledge of a religious other as well as a dismissive stance towards that other. It can also imply religious and non-religious practice, so long as the practitioner remains somehow detached from that practice.

We see this with some examples from the previous chapter. Some participants got married in church or christened their children out of a sense of tradition, and for some, this was not an issue of contention, nor something they felt the need to fight against. For Lee, indifference encompasses a lack of meaningful engagement with religion. She highlights the complexity of the term and how people can claim indifference without this actually reflecting their relationship with religion. The findings in this chapter conform to this observation and show how some claims of indifference should be treated with caution.

Building on this work, I want to emphasise how this indifference can be linked to certain narratives participants employ which are connected to wider discourses in society. Related to this idea of 'narrative', Cotter (2017) proposes a similar approach, suggesting that we see indifference to religion as a 'discursive act', rather than a person actually being indifferent; this could avoid mislabelling people with terms that are already complex and ambiguous. As such, the way I use the term 'indifferent' throughout this chapter is to reflect these overarching narratives participants displayed throughout the interviews, as well as actual indifference and the lack of importance that religion, and indeed non-religion and non-belief, have in daily life. There is not one way to be indifferent, it can be ideological and it can be real. Recognising the role particular situations and relationships play in both of these presentations of indifference allows us to understand lived non-believing more fully.

In seeing indifference as ideological, I show how narratives of indifference have underlying complexity and incongruity in reality and appear to sit in tension with the fact that participants' lives are socially embedded. Lee (2011) asks why people would classify themselves as indifferent if it does not actually reflect their position. The data from the interviews with my participants show some reasons why this might be the case: because numerous participants hold liberal ideas such as tolerance, autonomy, choice, and/or anti-evangelism as important in their daily lives. The liberal ideologies that participants embrace have a distinct place in participants' self-understandings as not being tied down to, or emotionally invested in, partisan views, about being autonomous, and avoiding conflict. This can embody a distinct non-religious leaning in some situations, for instance, participants often want to differentiate themselves from religious people, and claiming the irrelevance of their non-belief is one step in this direction.

Despite some of the ambiguities of what is meant by indifference, a wide collection of research tries to grasp who these indifferent people might be. Bagg and Voas (2009) argue that gradual

historical changes have led to a shift in behaviour patterns concerning religion. They discuss how, in Britain specifically, religion and non-religion have very little role in public life and are considered private matters, with public expressions of faith, or overt non-religion, considered peculiar. As we will see, these findings speak to my own, my participants frequently expressed a notion of acceptance of other people's religiosity, as long as it does not impinge on participants' own lives, and there could be a variety of reactions from participants when religion crossed this threshold. Bagg and Voas put forward that British people are, overall, fairly tolerant of religious and non-religious viewpoints, as long as neither are extreme. What Bagg and Voas argue is that, because Britain is not a strongly religious society, both religion and atheism are positions which a significant number of the population are simply indifferent to, not caring enough one way or another, a stance the authors class as 'secular'. In light of this, they state that the ways in which people live their lives without God are varied. Some people are militant atheists, some join Humanist associations, some continue to participate in various religious practices, others simply do not care. For Bagg and Voas then, this 'triumph of indifference' is an example of well-developed 'secularity' in Britain, essentially presenting a similar argument to Bruce (2002).

However, other scholars argue that indifference to religion is actually considerably overstated. As mentioned above, Lee (2015) highlights how, in reality, those who describe themselves as indifferent 'often displayed a range of engagements with and commitments to religious, spiritual, and non-religious cultures' (ibid: 145). Bullivant (2012) also suggests this is the case with his phrase 'religious non-indifference'. Lee discusses how her participants did not always notice the dissimilarities between their claims of indifference and their contrasting narratives and argues that indifferentism 'is an identity that is visible and performed in social settings' (Lee 2015: 147). For Lee 'indifferentism' can be a stance which differentiates from other stances, e.g. from 'religious', 'non-religious' or 'spiritual' stances. She argues that claiming indifference often allows 'people to differentiate themselves from the partisanship, irrationality, unthinkingness, or other undesirable characteristics that are seen to constrain the religious mind and sometimes the non-religious one too' (ibid: 150). This was also found amongst my participants: in claiming indifference, or a synonym for this, participants distance themselves from both believers as well as strong and vocal non-believers. They see themselves as more accepting, tolerant, and level-headed because of this. They are not blindly following doctrine, as they see many religious people doing, nor are most on a crusade to challenge the views of believers, something articulated by Rebecca and Harry:

> I don't want to impose my beliefs, I mean too many religions, certainly in the past, considered it the right thing to do is impose their beliefs on others. I just don't accept that. So I wouldn't try to impose my belief on anyone. (Rebecca, 70, Canterbury)

> I was listening to an interview of Christopher Hitchens, obviously made years ago, and he made the same point, [he] says 'well you know I wouldn't go around knocking on people's doors persuading them to be a non-believer'. […] In fact, it wouldn't interest me in the slightest trying to persuade someone else to not believe. Well why would I? (Harry, 70 Canterbury)

By situating themselves as uninterested and indifferent, participants set themselves apart from those who are seemingly so caught up in religious matters that it impacts upon their daily life. But there can be varying levels of what someone is indifferent to, as will be explored below with further examples from participants.

Through not caring, participants detach and differentiate themselves from established traditions, such as the religious ones they were brought up with. In this chapter, I build upon Lee's (2015) notion of 'indifferentism' as a form of non-religious positioning but argue that claiming religious indifference is not only a non-religious position. My findings take this one step further by being explicit about how ideological identifying as indifferent can be – to be exact, this is a liberal humanist and individualist ideology.

I will now explore how indifference was expressed by participants, highlighting how, for much of their everyday life, they *are* indifferent and their non-belief plays a latent role in daily life. I show how indifference can be real and reflects the situational and relational nature of non-believing for ordinary non-believing older adults. I will then approach these narratives in a more critical manner and explore the ways in which this indifference can be a performance which can be set aside in certain situations when social relations and contexts present a challenge.

Narratives of Indifference

The interviews I undertook with older adult non-believers focused on their life-histories and topics of conversation ranged from mundane everyday memories to some of their most personal stories. As Seale (2000: 46) argues, '[n]arrative is […] a pervasive feature of human social life, since through a myriad of acts, both small and large, both routine and extraordinary, we engage in self-defining activity through the telling of our stories'. Stories are always influenced by the

wider social context and dominant cultural narratives and 'through our stories, we indicate who we have been, who we are and who we wish to become' (Andrews 2000: 78). In this context, the ways in which participants expressed indifference through their stories are reflective of the type of identity they wish to portray.

The ways in which participants narrated their non-belief were often unassuming, sometimes carefully considered, and at other times, discussed without any obvious sign of reflection. The words participants chose and how they articulated events can highlight the difficulties some had at certain parts of the interview. It became apparent that, at times, I was asking them to describe meaning in relation to concepts that, in their eyes, were irrelevant. Through their narratives, it becomes clear that participants' non-believing worldviews and identities cannot fit neatly into comprehensive and boundaried statements. Rather, '[n]arratives have the potential to expose the great diversity of human experiences, the multiple dimensions of lives, and the contingent and transient nature of meaning-making processes' (Bradbury and Sclater 2000: 198). In this way, we are able to understand participants' indifference as something which can be both ideological *and* lived.

The first example comes from Amy (74, Liverpool). One of the tropes Amy drew on several times throughout the interview was her 'ambivalence' towards religion from a young age. For instance, when asked when she first realised or thought of herself as a non-believer, Amy stated:

> Well it is difficult that, really, because I don't know that I ever *did* [believe], so I can't say with any certainty that I ever actually did [realise]. I'm not saying it didn't *want* to [believe] – but I wouldn't say there was a 'oh I don't believe' [moment], no I wouldn't say that. Rather ambivalent.

'Ambivalent' was a word Amy used several times, for instance when explaining her marriage in a church, when discussing bringing up her children, and her social circle, describing how her friends know she is 'ambivalent towards [religion]'. So for Amy, her ambivalence towards religion, as well as her non-belief, is a narrative she applies and actively reinforces in relation to different parts of her life. This description about herself links more widely to her understanding of herself as 'above' religious matters in many ways. Throughout her account, she emphasised how she intellectually questioned religion from a young age and how she could see past the ways that adults would use religion to their advantage. She positioned herself

against religion at various times, seeing religious people as narrow-minded, when she herself was never one to be 'told what to do'. Amy's ambivalence is a conscious construction of the type of identity she is trying to present, one where not voicing any 'strong opinions' is something she deems important. The caveat here is that, to Amy, this message is in and of itself important and she does place value in feeling that others recognise her position.

A number of other participants presented similar narratives in relation to their life-trajectories, in which they see religion and non-belief as things that have not really played any great role in their lives, and continue not to. This is summed up by Albert (80, Canterbury). Albert grew up in London during the Second World War and never had any great faith, expressing that he was 'never really very interested' in religion. When asked in the interview if he could think of anything that might have influenced his non-belief, Albert stated:

> I'm trying desperately to think because sometimes the influence is so tiny you wouldn't even notice it at the time, would you? But I think, I think I'm pretty confident that it came out of my being a lazy and *impatient* person, just *not* wanting anything that I considered instinctively to be garbage. I just didn't wanna do it. Just haven't got time for it. Couldn't be arsed, you know? There was *more* that I wanted to do, even if it was practising catching in the cradle with other people from the cricket team or something, you know; just wasn't relevant.

Here, Albert remembers how during his childhood, religion 'just wasn't relevant' in his everyday life. He also explains this to be the case during his early adulthood, getting married and bringing up a family, as well as today. In a similar vein, Joseph (67, Liverpool) remembered how 'it wasn't some great rejection, but I just started questioning [religion] and was just sceptical and you know, agnostic about it all really'. For some participants then, developing non-believing worldviews and identities were often journeys that were deemed unimportant and something they were largely indifferent towards, rather than 'some great rejection', as Joseph puts it.

For many older adults, their non-believing worldviews and identities developed quite gradually, rather than emerging from an experience of some life-changing moment. As such, their narrative about being unaffected by religion is something they continue to relate to. For instance, when asked if being a non-believer plays any role in his daily life today, Peter (71, Liverpool) stated:

> No, it doesn't play any role. I mean religion is irrelevant to me, I just don't believe in it but I don't go around worrying about the fact that I don't believe in it. I'm not going to be a deathbed convert. [pause] It's there, other people do it, I don't, it doesn't have any effect on me. You know, indifferent if you like.

Likewise, Pam (68, Liverpool), on being asked the same question, replied:

> Erm I don't think it makes any difference. Not that I'm aware of anyway. So er ... it's not something that I get out of bed thinking 'today is a non-believing day!'

We can see here from Pam's statement the varying levels of unimportance that her non-belief has. She explains how she does not think her non-belief makes a difference to her everyday life, suggesting that she does not think about it. She then goes on to say 'not that I'm aware of anyway', suggesting that if she has thought about it, it has not made any lasting impact on the way she sees her non-belief. She then states quite explicitly, and in a jokey manner, how she does not get out of bed and think 'today is a non-believing day', further reiterating what little role being a non-believer plays in her lived reality.

These handful of examples reflect a wider narrative in some participants' life-stories. Some explained how they never really believed in God to begin with and so religion, and their non-belief, was never a big deal to them. Others explained how despite being brought up with some element of religion, continuing with this did not interest them, they did not engage with religion, or religion simply did not feature in their everyday lives. For most, these narratives continue to dominate the way participants talk about religion and their non-believing worldviews and identities; as things they do not give much thought to, as things they do not discuss with friends or family, or as things that do not tend to feature enough in everyday life that they would have a special or distinctive role.

These findings contrast with what Brown (2017) reports in his book *Becoming Atheist*, where he conducted life-history interviews with a similar demographic to my own. Brown's participants tended to follow a path of 'becoming' atheist when they were younger, followed by a long stint of indifference, then becoming more confirmed in their atheism when middle-aged or in their older years. Where Brown's participants' atheism became more confirmed in their older years, this was not situationally specific, as I observed, but was more of a general feeling they had. This did not seem to be the case with the older adults I interviewed: they did not describe years of indifference then more recent importance and salience of their non-

believing worldviews or identities. However, as I will show, although there may be situations where indifference is set aside, this is not persistent and these are unique situations, and overarching indifference is returned to for my own participants at other times.

Indifference as Real

Where the above examples provide explicit statements and portrayals of indifference, participants' indifference can also be subtler, and in many ways, more 'real'. Brown (2017: 13) argues that '[t]he typical atheist of the period since 1960 is hidden, self-concealed, inarticulate, difficult to locate because he or she rarely volunteers for the role and, in most cases, is too disinterested to put a hand up to be counted'. Whilst I do not suggest this is always the case, I hope to show what this might actually look like with the following case study where I provide a glimpse into the lived reality of an ordinary non-believer.

My interview with Robert (69, Liverpool) lasted around 20 minutes. Prior to the interview, Robert explained how he had been trying to 'rack his brain' in order to have something 'useful to say'. Of the list of statements I used to recruit participants, Robert chose statement A – 'I don't believe in God'. The interview started with me discussing this statement and asking Robert if there was any term he would like to use or identify with throughout the interview, to which he replied: 'I wouldn't say atheist 'cause it sounds a bit extreme'. Later he went on to explain: 'an atheist to me is someone who preaches anti-God, you know what I mean?' As such, with his initial statement about atheism, I thought Robert may have engaged with ideas around labels, identity, and non-belief to a certain degree, but this turned out not to be the case. Robert's example perfectly captures 'everyday' and lived non-belief where indifference can be real.

Robert had lived in Liverpool all his life and was brought up loosely in the Protestant tradition and, like a number of other participants in Liverpool, he remembered the strained relationship between Catholics and Protestants whilst growing up. He talked about his Catholic friends and the influence the priest had on their lives as well as pressure they received from their parents, something Robert never experienced, but recalled how his friends' stories put him off the idea of religious authorities. His parents were not particularly religious; they did not go to church but sent Robert to Sunday school because of the influence of his maternal grandmother (although Robert preferred the youth club associated with it). Robert thought his mother might have believed slightly more than his father, but was unsure because religion and belief were

not talked about at home. He started to question notions of God when he was around 14 or 15, or when 'you're old enough to think for yourself', as Robert put it, highlighting his sense of agency and autonomy in the process. When I asked Robert to expand on this, he explained: 'it was probably just er [long pause] it's just so unbelievable isn't it? You know, scientifically, you just think – it's just so – it just can't happen'. When I asked for more details about this and whether science was salient in relation to his non-belief, Robert replied 'no, I don't think so, no [...] it's just the general thing, you know?' Robert's reference to 'the general thing' in relation to science may reflect not only his lack of engagement with issues around religion and his non-belief, but also normative assumptions around science and non-religion in society (Lee 2019).

Robert had his children christened because of family expectations and tradition but insisted that he and his wife did not influence the children in any way after that. Much like his own childhood, issues of religion, belief, or non-belief were not discussed with his children and he assumes they have the same non-religious beliefs as him. When asked further about the role of religion or non-religion throughout other times of his life, I was met with short replies such as 'occasionally' or 'no, I don't think so'. When asked about relationships, after a long pause, his reply was '[l]et me think... no. I don't know anyone who's that religious to be honest'. Towards the end of the interview, I asked Robert whether not believing in God made any difference to his everyday life, and was met with simple replies of 'no' and with him stating that: '[n]ever ever thought about becoming religious or anything [laughs]'.

Robert expressed his tolerance in relation to other people's beliefs, explaining how if people want to believe, it is up to them, especially if it helps them. He then, in a joking manner, stated 'well I might do one day if I'm lying in bed dying of cancer or something; [laughs] you might turn'. For Robert then, the unimportance and triviality of his non-belief is highlighted in this joke about turning religious when he was dying. His flippancy in relation to a potentially serious topic shows the extent to which his non-belief plays little role in his life.

When the interview came to an end, Robert asked whether he had been useful. I told him he had, and he then interjected, stating: 'I think people you grow up with or friends you grew up with influence you more than anything. It's like you know if you grow up with a crowd of lads who smoke, you tend to smoke don't you?' I then asked whether he still speaks to such friends to which he explained that he did, but religion is not something they talk about. The finishing

example of the similarities with his friends and how religion or non-belief never came up highlights how, for Robert, both religion and non-belief have had latent roles in his life, spanning from when he was a teen and continuing to the present day. Although religion and non-belief may be latently 'there' under the surface for Robert, they are not important enough for Robert to engage with or of any practical consequence. Most of Robert's discussion around religion was in relation to others (e.g. friends or grandmother) and the only substantial involvement with religion in his adult life, that he can remember, was in relation to the christening of his children.

Despite the briefness of his responses, cases like Robert's are in fact rich and accurate examples of lived non-belief and indifference. The nature of such accounts highlights the sense of indifference felt by a number of older adults where non-belief is not at the forefront of their identity. Other examples of this type can be seen with Rebecca (70, Canterbury) whose interview was also short and consisted of many one-word answers and short replies and followed with questioning whether or not she had been useful. Rebecca explained how she took part in the interview mainly to help out, rather than having some great interest in the topic. But we also see examples such as David's (75, Liverpool) and Jean's (85, Canterbury), whose interviews were longer in length, but where conversation about non-belief made up a very small proportion of topics discussed. With Jean, the topics focused more on fashion, her children, her glamorous life-style, her likes and dislikes. Jean would intermittently throw in statements such as 'I don't really think about religion *at all'*. For David, much of the conversation focused on his life-achievements, his family, and some anecdotes from his life. In these instances, very tenuous links were made to the topic of non-belief or relatively short answers given when I asked a specific question, before returning to the topic they wanted to talk about. These examples suggest that non-belief for some plays little role in daily life and, subsequently, their lived realities are not structured around being non-believers.

Whether it was one-word answers, other topics being discussed, or explicitly stating how other issues, be it politics or the environment, were more important, being a non-believer was not always something participants had a lot to say about. But a lack of knowledge or engagement with the topic also highlights the ways in which participants could be indifferent. For instance, several participants were unsure about language and terms such as 'atheist' and 'agnostic', often asking me what they meant or whether they were using the correct word to describe themselves. This reflects how the extent to which participants engage with these issues

epistemically is limited, as well as in-depth engagements with non-religious discourses regarding non-belief and non-religious identity. This may be very different for members of non-religious organisations who may have access to a ready-made ‘toolkit’, giving them more certainty regarding their non-belief and more accessible frames of reference.

There was also a considerable lack of knowledge from participants about the religious or non-religious identities of those in their social circle. This is discussed by Lee (2015) who, through asking questions about participants’ social circles, showed how the level of engagement or knowledge people have with a certain topic can speak volumes about the importance it has on people’s daily lives. Worth keeping in mind is that, for some participants, not knowing the religious identification of a friend or family member, or only knowing the basics, may be remnant of the era in which participants grew up. As we saw in the previous chapter, Carmel (78, Canterbury) explained how topics of religion, politics, and sex were things she was told to never discuss. This idea of certain topics not being discussed in British society in particular is highlighted by Nash (2017: 36) who argues ‘[w]here such exclusion is in any way successful it actively creates an indifferent space, in fact providing the conditions in which forms of indifference are not simply the norm but are actively encouraged to be desirable’. This notion of religious identities as being private and not intruding into the public sphere was also expressed by participants, and Bagg and Voas (2009) describe this as a ‘British’ characteristic. Thus, not discussing issues around religion and belief could be a reflection of a lack of interest, but could also be a reflection of a type of public persona and identity participants wish to employ.

Tolerance

As we saw with Robert, participants often talked about other people being religious, and how they had no objection to this. A concept that came up in a number of discussions was that of ‘tolerance’ and that people should be free to believe whatever they like, or as Frances (75, Canterbury) put it ‘each to their own, darling’. For some, this tolerance could be a true reflection of a participants’ indifference, and this simply not mattering, as with Robert. Whereas for others, the notion of tolerance could be linked more prominently to a liberal humanist ideology. For instance, Harry (70, Canterbury) also drew on this trope of tolerance, explaining how if God, or some similar figure, brings comfort to people then that is fine, despite it being a psychological comfort only, in his view. By contrast, Julie (68, Liverpool) more explicitly expressed her tolerance and respect for the religious beliefs of others by stating ‘[a]nd

you know what Joanna, I one hundred and ten per cent respect everybody's religion, even though I don't *believe*, I would never ever put them down'. Whether ideological or real, a message of tolerance was one that these participants appeared keen to convey.

This narrative of tolerance, and the rights of others to believe whatever they want, was employed by numerous participants to present themselves as different to religious others, whom they see as intolerant at times or as evangelising – which as non-believers, they consider themselves as not being. Nash (2017) considers whether increased religious tolerance, as well as the influences of relativism, which has come to dominate society more generally in the twentieth century, is influential on narratives of indifference (Nash 2017: 35). He states:

> [D]issension, strife, conflict and any attempts by religious practitioners to suggest their primacy over other groups or belief systems potentially provokes the accusation that these individuals are breaking some sort of tacit modern social democratic compact. If, in a social democratic society, we are all tolerant and respectful then some of the actions such as preaching, proselytising, criticising opponents and assertions of their own claim to truth (actions which many religious groups would see as a necessity) appeared to disturb a social status quo (ibid: 36).

In the light of my participants' narratives, these ideas are expressed not only to portray themselves as tolerant, modern, and accepting people, but also to differentiate themselves from the religious 'other' whom they often see in opposition to the values of modern society. Of course, this is not to say my participants are not tolerant, modern, and accepting people, or that all religious people are not, but one should recognise that these discourses are evident in society more widely and are influential on participants' individual narratives.

However, as with most things, there are levels of complexity when it comes to the lived reality of ideas such as tolerance. Where some expressed complete tolerance, for others, this had caveats attached. This is something Rebecca (70, Canterbury) expressed, stating: 'I mean it's a matter of people, if people want a belief they can have a belief, I just don't agree with them if they're religious that's all'. In a similar vein, Ellen (67, Liverpool) stated 'if people want to believe that's fine but if … as long as you're not going round oppressing other people because of it, which opens a whole issue doesn't it?' What we begin to see here is how indifferent identities, and accompanying liberal ideals, interact with real life and how the two do not always match up. The ways in which these discrepancies operate is further explored below and

I will show how the expression of liberal values though indifference can be both rooted in, and constrained by, social relations and contexts.

The Situational Importance of Non-Believing Worldviews and Identities

Despite the overwhelming sense of indifference, which helped to express a sense of differentiation from religious others and displayed the type of identity rooted in liberal values that participants wanted to associate with, this does not always reflect real life. There are multiple examples from older adults' narratives which show how indifference is not fixed, nor always real, but is situationally and contextually specific. Moreover, whilst the contexts surrounding some relationships might be an example of how non-believing worldviews and identities are irrelevant, and indifference to religious and non-religious matters exists, relationships can also be illustrative of where non-believing can become significant and noteworthy. Tomlins and Beaman (2015: 14) state that 'people tend to exhibit certain aspects of their faith or lack of faith depending on the shifting variables that they are presented within any given situation'. Similarly, lived religion scholar McGuire (2008: 12), states:

> At the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary, or even coherent. We should expect that all persons' religious practices and the stories with which they make sense of their lives are always changing, adapting, and growing.

The examples below show how the lived reality of non-belief conforms to these suggestions: it does not always follow a 'logical' path but certain contexts are influential on how participants' non-believing worldviews and identities adapt and present themselves. In these examples, we see how the veil of indifference – be it real or an ideological narrative – can be lifted in certain contexts. The liberal humanist ideology that participants draw from can be strained and we are given insight into how this identity of tolerance, choice, and non-conflict can be difficult to maintain.

The first example we will consider comes from Maryam (70, Liverpool), who at various times in the interview expressed her indifference and that she was autonomous and unaffected by religious people and issues. Maryam was born in 1948 in Liverpool. Her father, from Somalia, was Muslim and Maryam guessed her mother was from somewhere in South East Asia, but she was not certain, and she did not know what her mother's religion was, if she had one at all. Growing up in Liverpool, Maryam described the divisions between Catholics and Protestants and recalled how she was often asked 'are you a Catholic or a proddy dog?' to which she

explained that she used to tell people she was Protestant because she 'had to be something'. Maryam became suspicious of, and opposed to, organised religion from a young age, despite continuing to engage with it at various times of her life, such as her wedding and the bringing up of her children. Nonetheless, she frequently expressed how she was indifferent to religion and her non-belief, even stating that 'I forgot I'm a non-believer'.

However, before the interview had started, I was given a glimpse of how her non-belief was in fact important, within the specific context of the interview, reflecting the situational and relational nature of non-believing. She explained how her husband had suggested that I, the interviewer, might be religious and try to convert Maryam, to which she explained:

> And I said 'don't be so ridiculous' […] 'and don't undermine me like that'. I said 'if I'm not happy I'll just say I don't want to continue now'. I said 'that's it' […] 'there's no need to talk to me like that', so he said 'no I didn't mean...' I said '[husband's name], if I thought I was under threat', I said 'I'd cancel even now'.

We can see from this small snippet of pre-interview chat that Maryam's indifferent attitude towards religion and her non-belief had the potential to shift, here becoming important in relation to the interview. She was ready to fight her corner, so to speak, in the event that I would try to proselytise. Moreover, the fact that Maryam reacted quite strongly to her husband's suggestion might link to her past experiences of being confronted with unwanted religion, forcing her to fight against or challenge it. This example shows us how the line between the indifference and significance of non-belief is permeable; it is context specific and is not fixed. For Maryam, this situation could have gone one of multiple ways, but due to the fact that I was not religious nor did I try to convert Maryam, her non-believing worldview stayed relatively tacit in the situation with me. Of course, I was interviewing Maryam about her non-belief and asking her about certain situations, and, as we will see, she gives examples of where her non-belief does play an active role. In the interview, though, Maryam's presentation of indifference remained because of the perceived non-threatening nature of my intentions.

Unlike the context of the interview, an example of how indifference might be challenged comes from a story Maryam told, immediately after saying she forgets she is a non-believer because it is irrelevant in her life:

> Maryam: I used to say 'God bless us'. I've stopped saying that 'cause I think 'why am I saying that'?
> *Joanna: That's interesting, so you consciously think about maybe the language you use?*
> Maryam: It's about sleep I think because people say 'goodnight, God bless' and I think it comes from that, 'cause that's when I say it [long pause] I don't know. That's only happened the last, you know, couple of months but I've just stopped again, cause I think 'I'm not saying that. Why am I saying that?' So it's annoyed me [laughs].

This example shows how, despite explicit narratives of religion being irrelevant to her, Maryam's non-belief holds a great deal of importance when it comes to her use of language. Maryam consciously avoids certain language with religious connotations, suggesting that, in reality, she does not actually forget she is a non-believer. Crucially, Maryam's veil of indifference is undermined by her emotive reaction to the use of language. At the same time, when I asked Maryam about consciously thinking about the language she uses, she did not see this as a contradiction and attempt to explain this incongruity; rather, she talked about the origin of the phrase. This suggests that she did not even recognise the contradictions between her saying she forgets she is a non-believer and actively avoiding religious language, and her indifference towards religion, the role of non-belief in her life and her visceral feelings of annoyance when this status quo is breached.

Indifference, then, can become challenged or set aside when participants are confronted with religion in some way. Such instances can be in a more general or removed manner than those above. For instance, Anna (80, Canterbury), Jean (85, Canterbury), Joseph (67, Liverpool), Tim (76, Canterbury), and Pam (68, Liverpool) note how they get irritated when reading articles in the news about religion. The idea of someone's non-believing worldview or identity only becoming important when confronted with religion was also found in Klug's (2017) research in Texas and California. Klug found that there were preconditions to indifference amongst her participants. Where participants felt pressure from religion or felt it had infringed on their personal lives, threatening their individual rights, indifference often turned to a negative evaluation of religion. Klug explains how 'indifference does not seem to be an intrinsic characteristic of people as such but, in fact, seems to be dependent on circumstances that are perceived as voluntary' (ibid: 226). Klug's findings share some commonalities with my own and give further weight to the idea that indifference can be a narrative reflecting the type of tolerant and accepting people that participants present themselves as and how these can be set aside when religion or religious actors impinge on their lives uninvited.

A further example which shows how indifference is challenged when confronted with religion comes from Rebecca. Rebecca's interview was very short and consisted of many one-worded answers and she often expressed indifference towards issues of religion, non-religion, and non-belief. She voiced notions of tolerance, yet this attitude changes when religion impinges on her private life:

> Rebecca: Well I think anybody who wants to try and convert other people is a danger, I'm afraid they're ... if you want to have that belief, *fine*, but converting other people is infringing on their personal space you know, their peace of mind or whatever you call it, so yeah I don't like people coming round trying to convert.
> *Joanna: When you get people knocking on the door and stuff, what do you do?*
> Rebecca: [sighs] I just say 'look you're wasting your time, so don't bother' and I hope they go away.

When confronted with religion or religious people, in this instance a house call from Jehovah's Witnesses, Rebecca's non-belief becomes significant and evokes emotion and strong feelings. This example of Jehovah's Witnesses' evangelising and confronting participants' sense of indifference was described by a handful of other participants too, with some explaining how they ended up arguing back, standing their ground or challenging them. This reflects Quack's (2017: 211) observation that '[p]eople largely indifferent to religion are likely to have various "dispositions" towards religion that may be activated and intensified in other situations'. Likewise, Remmel (2017), writing on religious indifference in Estonia, explains how being indifferent in Estonia is relatively easy because religion does not have much of a public presence, but negative reactions are evoked when religion becomes visible. Similarly, Burchardt (2017: 86) observes that '[b]eing indifferent to religiosity in private life is very different from being indifferent to the role of religion in the public sphere, or in public spaces'. These ideas suggest the importance of considering a move away from absolute positions (see also Nash 2017) or 'pure' states of religion or non-religion, and belief or non-belief, to ones that are more situationally and socially sensitive and employed in these different circumstances. Indifference, then, can be challenged, and non-believing worldviews and identities can become significant and explicit in certain social situations and through certain relationships. These relationships can be intimate or more abstract and removed. The ways in which participants negotiate these relationships, so that they sit comfortably with their liberal and indifferent positions, will be discussed in the next section.

Interestingly, Kate (67, Canterbury) gave a complex example of the contextual significance of non-believing worldviews. Far from her non-belief being something she 'doesn't think about', as she had earlier stated, the following story shows how this is not always the case in practice. We see here how a religious identification can be called upon in certain situations, showing how identities can be used in different ways to suit a person's needs or context and showcasing continued cultural connections to religion. In giving an example of in-laws coming over from Canada, who she described as Ishmaeli Muslim, Kate recounted going for a walk in London with an aunt of her daughter-in-law:

> I was having a walk with an auntie who's my age in London and we were right by the Ishmaeli centre which is sort-of Kensington way, so we walked there and she wanted to go in. Now, she is Muslim and Ishmaeli. Well, she would have been allowed in later on at the service time, and not just to go in anyway. I mean they've got this hugely expensive, beautiful building. No she couldn't just go in but she could go the service but *I* wouldn't be allowed in, because obviously I'm a non-believer. And not Muslim. And I just said to this – you know, this is *these days* where you wouldn't even be allowed in the building, it's just like 'what?!' You know? It's bad enough being a woman and only being allowed in a bit of it if you do go in, but erm, I just said [...] and I do this occasionally in spite of being not believing it [laughs], erm I said 'well thank goodness *my* church isn't like that. It's more welcoming than that'. You know I just felt like, I felt *really* offended, felt really offended that I'm a non-believer so I wouldn't even be *allowed* in their building.

This example is thought-provoking on numerous levels. Firstly, Kate draws on being a non-believer here and states that she would not be allowed into the building because of her non-belief. This suggests that either she told the people at the centre (which seems unlikely) or that she is now adding the importance of her non-belief when telling the story because of the interview being undertaken. Adding, adapting, and revising stories in order to make a meaningful point is something common to life-history narratives (Portelli 1991). Whether or not it is 'factual' does not detract from the point the Kate is making. Either way, her non-believing worldview, which earlier in the interview Kate stressed was unimportant, became significant in this situation, when it became a barrier to her desire to do a particular thing, and when her liberal values were considered threatened. Of further interest in this story is the fact that Kate then draws on her Catholic identity to make a point to the 'religious others' she encountered. This suggests that Kate's non-believing worldview and identity can be both unimportant and important simultaneously. This particular situation also contrasts with Kate's other examples of going into places of worship without any similar issues. In these other situations, neither Kate's non-believing worldview nor her Catholic identity surfaced and thus

her indifference did not need to be suspended. This situation shows the complex, and sometimes contradictory, reality of lived non-believing for older adults. It also shows the ways in which people do not simply leave all religious connections behind, as some secularisation arguments would posit, but how non-believers can continue to draw upon religion in certain contexts.

These examples challenge the indifferent identity that participants claim and show how such an identity, and related ideals, do not hold in all situations. When religion intrudes into participants' lives in unwanted ways, indifference does not always remain and some of the liberal ideals bound up in the indifferent identity can be set aside. It is also in specific relationships that we see the identity of indifference challenged even further.

Relationships: Continued Connections

Situations in which indifference is set aside and non-believing worldviews and identities become significant are frequently bound up in wider relationships which are intersubjective: from relationships with strangers to close family and friends. The relational nature of non-religion and non-belief has been emphasised by a number of authors, including Day (2011; 2012) and Lee (2015), who show how, for many, belief and non-belief or non-religiosity are not insular, but have real-life and wide-ranging consequences which can impact on, and be impacted by, social relations. The following examples show how participants' non-believing worldviews, whilst being socially embedded, can be a barrier to relationships with religious others. An individual's non-belief can set limitations in relationships but these can also be negotiated, set aside, or overlooked. My findings show how there is a tension between older adults' emphasis on liberal individualism, including their indifferent identity, and their embeddedness in social contexts which challenge these narratives.

A number of participants explained how, because they are non-believers, relationships with believers or religious people would be limited or even avoided altogether, which contrasts with claims of indifference, tolerance, and acceptance. For instance, despite stating that he does not care what other people believe, Peter (71, Liverpool) later stated 'I go out of my way to *avoid* religious people; you know, people who were always quoting the Bible are not somebody I want to associate with'. This suggests that, for Peter, indifference does not extend to current and potential relationships. This idea of avoiding relationships with religious individuals altogether was expressed by others. For instance, Paul (85, Canterbury) explained how his non-

belief determines the people he would choose to associate with, and even though he has some religious acquaintances, there is ‘a limitation in the amount of confidence and friendship you would exchange’. Whilst notions of ‘each to their own’ (as Frances articulated it) might be ideologically important for participants, as is being seen to strive to uphold these liberal ideals, this does not always extend to their personal relationships.

Despite these apparent avoidances, almost all participants mentioned having some sort of relationship with someone who was religious and their narratives show the varied and innovative ways in which people negotiated and rationalised these relationships in order to allow them to sit comfortably with their indifference. For instance, some explained that when the religious beliefs of another started to impinge on their lives in some way, either by it being brought up in conversation, or them being too openly ‘religious’, this was when it became a problem and participants’ acceptance stopped. This reflects Burchardt’s (2017) and Remmel’s (2017) observations that, when the lines between religion in public and private contexts are blurred, indifference can be challenged. We see this expressed by Ruth (72, Canterbury) who explained: ‘[t]he thing is, I think my attitude shows ... now it’s particularly *Christians* that shove it in your face. And I don’t ... I *do* show how I feel and I get *cross*.’ She mentions a particular religious friend whose house has various religious memorabilia, something Ruth recalled with visible discomfort, shifting in her seat and changing the tone of her voice as she described how this made her angry. This discomfort was extended to her Orthodox Jewish brother and his family, explaining how it was the external display of religiosity she did not like, but that she was accepting of private and individual belief.

It is evident from the narratives of others, however, that there can be more complexity in the way people negotiate these relationships with religious people in daily life. One way this negotiation might work is to avoid certain topics of conversation or to stick to other shared interests. A useful example is provided by Michael (66, Canterbury) who explains his thought processes around potential relationships with religious individuals:

> I think I’m quite open, quite an open person. I don’t – if someone says to me ‘I’m religious and I’ve been religious all my life and I believe in the grace of Lord Jesus Christ’ and so forth, my instinct is not to say ‘well I’m sorry I can’t talk to you again’. I would *never* say that. So I would just feel ‘okay, that’s fine’ so it wouldn’t, I hope, intrude on our relationship. It would be, possibly, something then that would never be mentioned once they knew that we didn’t share that. And that’s probably what’s happened in my life, is that if I know someone is overtly religious and that might be

likely to cause a problem between us, it's probably something that's not mentioned, pushed down, suppressed. That *one* thing.

Where a friendship with a religious individual exists, numerous participants explained how religious topics would be avoided with that friend, either because there would simply be no need to bring it up, or in order to avoid a conflict with that person. This demonstrates how indifference can be a performed ideal but, in Michael's case, such a relationship could only be successful if both parties exercised censorship of their religious and/or non-religious worldviews. Interactions in these relationships were often explained with phrases such as 'we don't discuss it', 'we avoid it' or 'I keep quiet', and the focus is on other things instead. Strhan's (2015) work also highlights how religious individuals can avoid certain topics of conversation (e.g. about Christianity) with particular people, often work colleagues, and in particular contexts where being outwardly religious is not the norm. She explains how many felt anxiety at the thought of spreading the word of God with colleagues or non-Christian friends, showing that religious people also participate in this type of negotiation in certain relationships. Catto's (2017) work found similar themes, reporting that people would not discuss religious matters too openly to avoid conflict and tension in certain social interactions. Catto suggests that this avoidance of certain topics 'implies anxiety rather than indifference regarding religion's position in society' (Catto 2017: 78). This suggests that although people may want to come across as indifferent and above matters of differences in religion, as it links to a liberal ideology which they deem important, this is not always the case in practice. However, as seen above, participants could employ strategies to navigate around these obstacles, in a way they feel does not invalidate their worldviews.

A final example of these caveats and negotiations around particular relationships will be shown through Diane. Born in 1945 in Liverpool, Diane grew up in a Catholic family and attended convent school. Diane remembers arriving at a non-believing worldview instantaneously at the age of 12 when her sister read a passage to her from the book *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*.[40] The particular passage was about the suffering of a kitten and brought about questions of how an all-loving God could allow such suffering. For Diane this was a life-changing moment; she turned from believing and even considering becoming a nun, to

[40] *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) was a prominent and influential book written by Robert Noonan, under the pen name Robert Tressell and was influential among left wing and socialist circles in the twentieth century. The book engages with themes such as anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism, 'class war', working class identities, and poverty (see Ó Donghaile 2018).

complete disbelief in God. Diane's narrative and stories surrounding her non-belief throughout her life were highly emotive and heavy in anti-religious sentiments and there were various examples of where she had clashed with religious people, often having major disagreements and conflict. This was noted alongside other times in the interview when Diane expressed that she was tolerant, did not care about others' beliefs, and found the whole topic uninteresting. In discussing how she participated in religious practices when younger because it did not matter to her, Diane then stated:

> I found it hard to reconcile apparently intelligent people who could believe all the mumbo-jumbo, well codswallop, you know? *But* having said that, there's no way I'd disparage anybody for their beliefs, *in fact* my own kids, I didn't have them baptised obviously, my philosophy there was, if they take an interest in religion it's up to them, and funnily enough they've read extensively about religion, certainly the two boys have, and my daughter married for the second time. He's Muslim and she's *converted.* […] Erm, oh don't get me wrong, she's not – my daughter's very headstrong and she's not wearing a hijab or anything *stupid* like that, walking letterboxes [laughs]. Sorry.

Just these few lines encapsulate the complex and contradictory nature of some of Diane's comments and the stark differences in the nature of her views about religion in different situations. Diane ranged from expressing tolerance of people's beliefs and it not mattering, to using terms such as 'walking letterboxes' in reference to certain types of Islamic dress (see BBC 2018).[41] However, despite having altercations with religious people in the past due to Diane's non-belief and her views on religion, with her daughter she explained how it is an unspoken agreement that issues of religion will not be brought up. Otherwise, in Diane's words, they would 'clash something terrible'. Here we can see how lived non-belief, expressions of indifference, and the presence of liberal ideologies result in a complex configuration of worldviews and identities for older adults. In this instance, non-believing can play an important and unimportant role simultaneously. It has been important in situations where Diane has fallen out with someone religious, with her non-religious beliefs being centre-stage, and it can also be unimportant enough that she can seek to encourage and promote choice and independence of thought among her children. Yet, she still holds and expresses strong views about Islam and deems some topics of conversation with her daughter as off-limits. The type and strength of relationship is important; Diane is prepared to set religious differences aside (or at least keep quiet on the matter) to maintain the relationship with her daughter, but this did not extend to other relationships she discussed.

[41] The phrase 'letterbox', referring to types of Islamic dress, was used by current Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Diane's example above sheds light on occasions when participants who think of themselves as liberal and indifferent to the beliefs of others use strikingly illiberal language which challenges this self-understanding. It was not only with Diane where we see this happening. For instance, Gillian (65, Liverpool) presented herself as a liberal, tolerant, and accepting person, who had no issues with the beliefs of others, but when talking about Mormonism, stated: 'I would ban it [the Mormon church]. I believe it's a cult, I believe it's dangerous, I believe it's unpleasant'. Likewise, Julie (68, Liverpool) who at several times in the interview expressed her tolerance for other people's beliefs, and who expressed liberal ideals, also described religions as 'cults'. The final example comes from Frances (75, Canterbury), who had earlier explained how working as a nurse in several different countries had made her more accepting and tolerant of other people's beliefs, summed up in her phrase 'each to their own', later went on to discuss her experience of working in Muslim countries. In talking about one experience, Frances stated: 'a lot of these Muslim countries, they immediately brand me as a Christian … but I still have to wear all their stupid kit, you know? Put my face on like this [referring to covering her face and hair] …'. These examples highlight how self-professed liberal ideals are not all they seem, and intolerant language used by participants can sometimes challenge these liberal ideals and claims of indifference.

These cases highlight how non-believing worldviews, such as liberal values expressed as indifference, are not fixed and are constrained and influenced by social contexts and relationships. Sometimes, the ideological position of indifference is challenged, other times it is not. The examples show how some think about their non-believing worldviews and identities and the impact it has on relationships hypothetically (i.e. avoiding a relationship with a religious person) and then the everyday reality shows how these hypothetical situations do not always match the lived reality and there are caveats, exceptions, and negotiations with certain relationships. Likewise, some explain how they are indifferent, tolerant, and unaffected by the religious beliefs of others, yet this changes when this impinges on their personal life. What this shows is how non-believing worldviews and identities, such as indifference, do not have a uniform presentation in everyday life.

Performative Non-Belief: Situational and Social

As the above examples show, there can be a tension between participants' narratives regarding their liberal individualism (i.e. tolerance of other's beliefs and a neutral and indifferent position taken) and the identity participants want to uphold in relation to this, and examples of their

relations with others in social contexts. These contexts reveal limitations in their indifferent persona. In relation to issues of belief, non-belief, religion and non-religion, attempts to make sense of these contradictions have been approached by numerous scholars.

The embeddedness of participants' lives in social relations and contexts has been made clear in the preceding examples. In thinking about how non-believing worldviews and identities may operate socially, I turn to Day (2010) (see also Day and Lynch 2013) who advocates looking at belief as something which is performed, and as 'arising from and shaped by social relations' (Day 2010: 9). This includes beliefs of both a religious and non-religious nature. Drawing on her research in North Yorkshire, Day argues that belief is context dependent: it can be used in different ways to different ends, related to a certain identity that people create. This fits well with the examples I have discussed above and Day's (2010) notion of 'performativity' is appropriate for exploring how multiple stances can coexist within the non-believing worldviews and identities of my participants. In the previous chapter, we saw how participants performed religious rituals to please family members, for example. Additionally, with Kate's example above, we saw where religious identity was drawn on in a particular situation to make a point. Thus, non-believing worldviews and identities for participants, whatever they may encompass, are evidently not static, but, as we have seen, change with the context in hand and can take on different forms depending on that context and the social relations embedded within it.

Day further argues that, '[t]hrough the quality of emotion and corporeal experience in human relationships, performative belief is how people can adjust to given social contexts, expectations and aspirations' (ibid: 26). This is something I argue takes on a unique form for older adults. Because of the age of my participants, social expectation regarding the performance of religious belief and practice is strong (see all chapters 1-4 and chapter 7). This is both due to the fact that older adults as a cohort tend to be more religious and as a legacy of the times in which they grew up, where religion, and, in the UK context particularly, Christianity was a more dominating force in society (McLeod 2007; Brown 2009; Brown and Lynch 2012). As a result, pressure to conform with religion at different stages in their lives has been something my participants have had to negotiate in various ways. This is a challenge which is arguably not applicable to younger cohorts whose break from religion, if they even 'broke' from religion at all, was not met with as much struggle, as also noted by Brown (2017) in his research with atheists exploring religious decline since the 1960s. This is also hinted at

in findings from Madge, Hemming, and Stenson's (2014) study amongst younger people: they found that some of those who were atheist and agnostic had not experienced many barriers, and being a non-believer or non-religious was not a struggle nor something they had to fight for.

A major element of performative belief that Day emphasises is how it can 'produce identities that actors strategically create to adapt to and integrate themselves into various social situations' (Day 2010: 28). Findings from my own data show how non-believing older adults also perform their non-believing worldviews and identities in these ways, for instance a performance of indifference as a manifestation of liberal values. This was an identity that many participants performed in the interview. I would also argue that the performance of non-belief by participants can also be in opposition to integrating themselves into social situations. It can be to differentiate and to distance themselves from a certain group or from expectation of religious practice, as evident in examples from chapter 4 where some participants purposely chose a non-religious marriage. But performative belief can indeed be employed to help keep the status quo, for instance keeping family members happy, to reflect the normative ways of doing things, or to avoid stigma. The different ways in which my participants perform non-belief or belief in different contexts might be a way of providing older adults with a sense of control they otherwise feel they do not have. Equally, they can decide that their non-belief is unimportant enough in certain situations and perform religious practices or remain muted on the topic, in order to maintain or strengthen other relationships with religious individuals with whom issues of religion or belief are of secondary importance. Performance, then, can be both protective and as well as enabling. These different ways of performing non-belief are returned to at various times throughout this thesis reflecting participants' engagement with religious and non-religious cultures and traditions over the life course.

Conclusion

This chapter has shed light on a significant element of the non-believing worldviews and identities the older adults in this study express, which are bound up with liberal ideals such as autonomy and individual choice, and often presented through an identity of indifference. I have considered arguments by authors such as McLeod (2007) and Hervieu-Léger (2000) who posit the rising importance of the individual in society as influential on the decline of religion. These cultural shifts of the twentieth century are significant in secularisation arguments and I have shown how such shifts have indeed played a role in participants' lives. I argue that the idea of

not caring and being indifferent reflects the move towards ideas of the individual as important and people as autonomous beings and how this identity is often used to differentiate from the religious other and from established traditions.

The findings in this chapter contribute to existing work on religious indifference by arguing that claims of indifference can be a narrative, a façade, and an ideal identity associated with certain liberal values in society. I have built on Lee's (2015) notion of 'indifferentism'. Instead of seeing indifference primarily as a 'power move', linked specifically to a non-religious position to help differentiate from religious people, as Lee does, I widen this and posit this identity of indifference as a liberal humanist ideology which links specifically to values participants deem meaningful. However, whilst indifference is an expression of liberal values and individualism, this exists in tension with their embeddedness in social contexts and relationships. This advances our understanding of the relationship between liberal humanism and non-religion or 'secularity' because it shows both the ideological and social nature of this relationship, rather than it being primarily philosophical, intellectual, or moral (e.g. Bruce 2002; Zuckerman 2008; 2012; Campbell 2013; Zuckerman 2014; Manning 2015. Crucially, my data show how an indifferent identity, and participants' self-understandings of that indifference, is not always a reflection of real life, due to continued connections with religious people and cultures. Participants, then, play an active and selective role in negotiating these relationships and contexts, in ways which can sit comfortably with their indifference. Thus, understanding non-believers intrinsically as liberal humanist does not always map neatly onto relational lived realities of non-believing older adults.

Adding to this complexity, what I show is that, for ordinary non-believers, at other times in everyday life, indifference can be real. Non-belief does not always play a significant and active role in daily living and participants' lives are not structured around their non-belief in God. This only becomes important in certain situations and through key relationships. When non-believing worldviews and identities become important in social life, this is contextual, linked to the choices people make, and how they negotiate these choices with people around them. Performance of non-belief, non-religion, or belief and religion, can also be a vehicle for older adult non-believers to integrate or distance themselves from certain social situations. Conceptualising non-belief in this way offers a truer reflection of how participants actually live. These examples show how non-belief and non-religion are relational, situational, and intersubjective in nature, adding to the work of Day (2011) and Lee (2015).

The data discussed sheds light on the lived reality of these non-believing worldviews and identities, showing how they are malleable rather than fixed. They are multi-layered and can occupy several places at once depending on the context. Despite this, this chapter also shows how non-believing worldviews and identities are substantial. Just because approaches can change, this does not mean they are insignificant or invalid, but reflects that people do not live in 'pure' states. This is also shown by drawing on Day's (2011) work and I argue that non-belief can be understood as a performance located and embedded within social relations. I show this by highlighting how indifferent identities can be challenged, negotiated, or set aside in certain relationships and contexts across a wide range of participants' experiences.

Where this chapter has highlighted how liberal ideals are reflected in how participants talk about themselves and situations throughout their lives, the next chapter considers how these ideals are even more overt in how participants narrated bringing up their children, where narratives around the importance of choice are crucial.

Chapter 6

The Reality of 'Choice': Micro-Processes of Transmission

Introduction

This chapter will examine the changing processes of socialisation in childhood, paying attention to what participants transmit to their children in terms of non-believing and non-religious cultures and worldviews, and how this may occur. This chapter sheds further light on the intersubjective nature of non-belief, and I show how relationships between parents and children are key in shaping non-believing worldviews and identities. In chapter 4, we saw how the contexts in which participants grew up had a long-lasting impact on their thoughts and behaviour. Chapter 5 explored how breaks and transformations in the religious 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000), and broader societal changes, brought about new ideas, identities, and non-believing worldviews. However, we saw how these liberal worldviews, which could be expressed through an identity of indifference, did not always hold true in real life. This chapter will consider whether and how these values are passed on to the next generation, and some of the complexities around this. We see a transformative shift between old traditions and new ideals and that the two cannot always be easily separated.

As touched upon in the previous chapter, the 1960s is often considered to be catalyst for propelling new ideas into wider society, such as the breakdown of religious communities and more emphasis placed on individual choice. Furseth and Repstad (2006) suggest how with the emergence of these new ideas comes a sense of differentiation between younger generations from older – between the 'old' ways and the 'new'. Writing about a US context in particular, Wuthnow (1998) and Roof (2001) offer insights on why 'Baby Boomers', as well as their parents' generation, shifted in their religious and spiritual lives, from having beliefs and identities handed down and feeling a sense of duty, to actively seeking new and individualised ways to express themselves. These too are linked with new life-style choices and the idea of a 'spiritual marketplace' (for an overview, see Lynch 2007). This increased individualisation of religion and seeing it primarily as something which is a choice can also be seen with the famous

‘Sheilaism’ example described by Bellah *et al* (1985) where one participant, Sheila, articulated her belief in the following way: ‘It’s Sheliaism. Just my own little voice’ (ibid: 221). Likewise, the ‘subjective turn’, which encompasses notions of autonomy, individual freedom, and the importance of person-centred approaches in education, health care, and consumer culture, also reflects shifting attitudes towards the individual (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Heelas *et al* 2005; Beck 2010). Madge, Hemming, and Stenson’s (2014) work exploring youth and religion emphasises similar points. They show how the ideas of personal choice and negotiation are expressed by younger people as being important, whereas religion, for them, is not something to be handed down and taken-up unquestioningly; rather, it is something they themselves negotiate and develop (see also Strhan and Shillitoe’s [2019] research amongst non-believing children). Thus, narratives of a move towards agency, autonomy, and freedom of personal choice are not new, but are common amongst those who have experienced the changing nature of religion and where prescribed identities, beliefs, and belongings are no longer a given. As we saw in the previous chapter, these narratives have been adopted by my own participants and are encompassed within an identity of indifference. However, it is the way in which older adult non-believers reflect and discuss their own child-rearing practices where narratives of agency, autonomy, and freedom of personal choice become even more overt and explicit.

This chapter begins by showing how agency, autonomy, and freedom of choice are considered central for participants when bringing up their children. Liberal values and ideals are meaningful and participants actively wish to pass them on. However, despite these narratives, the reality of bringing up children is much more complex, and I show how liberal worldviews can manifest in ways which are culturally contingent and reflect certain social structures. I will go on to argue that bringing up children can also be a time when offering freedom of choice for children can come into contrast with participants’ own wishes and desires. As such, drawing on ideas around choice set out by authors such as Bourdieu (1984), Giddens (1991), and Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), this chapter will critically consider how ideas of ‘choice’ operate. What is further shown is how the idea of an autonomous and choice-making individual does not always stand up to scrutiny, with a multitude of continuing cultural and social connections operating in participants’ lives which can impact upon decisions around parenting. I will also show how both implicit and explicit forms of transmission of non-religious and non-believing cultures can limit such freedoms in several ways. Building on Hervieu-Léger’s (2000) idea of religion as a chain of memory, this chapter will continue to

explore how religious and non-religious cultures may be shared between generations, or disrupted and transformed. The chapter will not only consider narratives around participants bringing up their own children, but it will also hark back to participants' own childhoods and show how transmissions of religious and non-religious cultures are evident there too.

In exploring issues around choice and transmission, this chapter, then, highlights how parenting decisions can be shaped by social institutions, such as gender. Narratives from non-believing older adults show how men and women approach issues around socialisation differently. With women, both in terms of participants themselves and their mothers, what we see is implicitness when it comes to transmitting non-believing worldviews. When female participants discussed their own childhoods, we see more uncertainty in terms of what they remember their mothers believing (or not). We also see the ways in which women sometimes repress their voice and wishes when it comes to issues of non-belief in an attempt not to influence children. By contrast, with men, what is evident is more explicitness and overt expression of non-belief or non-religious identities. Again, when participants discussed fathers, there were more instances of their fathers being outwardly and outspokenly non-religious. Likewise, with male participants, we do not see repression of voices or opinions when they were bringing up their children and see more instances of them being open about their non-belief.

What we see in this chapter is individualism becoming a thread in the new worldviews and traditions emerging through transmission. However, rather than 'breaking-chains' causing a complete breakdown of communal belonging, as Hervieu-Léger (2000) would argue, we see transformation in how these ideals, such as the importance of the individual, are gradually incorporated into new worldviews and traditions that can be shared between people over time. Liberalism provides new sets of values and existential beliefs, helping people to understand the world and their place within it, arguably providing new links in a 'chain of memory' between generations. In exploring how non-believing worldviews can be passed on between generations, rather than just a failure to transmit religion, this chapter further complicates the idea of 'CREDs' that Lanman and Buhrmester (2017) adopt. As discussed in chapter 4, the authors use CREDs theory to argue that it is more likely that religious belief will be transmitted from parents to children if parents back up their verbal statements with practice (i.e. stating the importance of going to church, and then actually going to church). This chapter shows how, although there may be a lack of discussion about religion and belief as well as parental non-performance of religious practice – which means children do not take religious practice on,

according to CREDs – there is also a performance of new beliefs and as well as a performance of neutrality in certain contexts.

The Importance of Children's Freedom and Ability to Choose

In the context of how participants narrated their own childhoods, when enforced religious participation was perceived to be the norm, the following section will show how participants' memories of their childhoods have influenced their approaches to bringing up their own children. A common theme in participants' narratives was the importance of their children having freedom of choice and the ability to choose their own beliefs and/or their religious or non-religious identities. As a side note, something to consider here is that participants' narratives are a re-telling of how they remember their own childhoods and the childhoods of their children. As discussed previously, these stories might not be 'factually' true but are re-remembered and re-told to emphasise a certain point. As such, feeling they were 'forced' to participate in religious practices when they were children might be a result of participants' current worldviews providing them with a lens through which to understand their pasts – that is, their right as individuals to make their own choices was overlooked. Or, it could be that their experiences pushed them towards such liberal worldviews, as an attempt to establish themselves as autonomous from the perceived enforcement of their childhoods. Whichever the case, these liberal worldviews, including the importance of the individual and choice, are central in discussions around the socialisation of their children.

This increased emphasis on choice has been discussed in previous chapters. In relation to bringing up children in particular, McLeod (2007) explains how, with regards to church-going from the 1960s onwards, and most notably in the 1970s and 1980s, 'parents were less willing to enforce attendance if the child showed reluctance. This was partly because of changing styles of parenting, with greater stress on listening to the child and respecting her or his wishes' (ibid: 203). This change in parenting style can map onto the timeline of my participants and their children and contrasts with that of participants' own upbringings. Changing societal contexts allowed for these approaches to parenting to become more normative in society in general, argue authors such as McLeod and Brown. Brown (2009) argues that those who were parents in the 'long 60s' started to break away from Christianity and that '[t]he next generation, which came to adulthood in the 1970s, exhibited even more marked disaffiliation from church connection of any sort, and *their* children were raised in a domestic routine largely free from intrusions of organised religion' (2009: 190, italics in original). In this way, and although

Brown typically emphasises the importance of the 1960s as a time when secularisation quite suddenly 'happened', Brown's work sometimes also suggests that a clean break from religion, and with it new approaches to parenting, sometimes took a couple of generations to fully settle. Looking at how participants brought up their children provides insight in how approaches to religious socialisation might change over time. Moreover, the idea of a clean break coming about in the next generation may also explain why many non-believing older adults have continuing connections and involvements with religion, whether they valued and/or acknowledged this or not (see chapters 4, 6, and 7). Regardless, some of the main tenets and changes attributed to the societal changes of the 1960s gave way to new approaches in thinking about society, individuals' places within it, and how this related to religion.

McLeod explains how ideas around giving children choice in religious matters started to develop in the 1960s, as did backlash against ideas of forcing children to do things which 'seemed so much in conflict with contemporary ideas of free self-development, and a horror of anything that might suggest "brain-washing"' (2007: 206). These ideas speak to the experiences of my participants, who would often express their desire not to 'indoctrinate' their children into religion and the importance of their children to make up their own minds. In line with these ideas of 'free self-development', as pointed out by McLeod, numerous participants conveyed how the ideal approach to bringing up their children was to allow them to be able to decide for themselves, once they were old enough, whether or not they would like to be religiously involved or not.

Literature from childhood studies and parenting culture have also commented on approaches to bringing up children in the 'correct' way, and some of the conflicts between what is 'best' for children versus what parents want. For instance, Lee *et al* (2014) comment on opinions on parenting decisions which are deemed crucial to children's wellbeing (e.g. common narratives of breastfeeding). Further, Furedi's (2002) work discusses the notion of 'parental determinism' which is the idea that parents have paranoid thoughts that they are somehow failing their child through their parenting choices – something this fear of indoctrination, seen with my own participants, could be reflecting.

Even though participants expressed their desire to allow their children to make their own minds up on matters of religion, participants also expressed the importance of other ideals which they wanted to pass onto their children. These included the importance of questioning the 'status

quo' and not taking societal norms at face value. Although this is not unique to non-belief *per se*, it links in with wider ideas of what participants deemed important in their current worldviews, identities, and practices which linked back to their own childhoods, where religion and other institutions had more of an authoritative force and many participants themselves questioned these instructions and norms. The idea of questioning and being critical of established institutions is a narrative numerous participants drew on in the interviews, linking to notions of agency, autonomy, and freedom. These ideals were not only considered to be lacking in religious people but as important ideals for their children to embrace.

Sociological arguments have debated ideas around the importance of choice in society more broadly. For instance, Giddens (1991) and Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) see cultural traditions replaced by 'choice' and, within this, a growing importance for individuals in creating their own biographies, and choice subsequently becomes necessary in society. As Giddens (1991: 81) states, today 'we have no choice but to choose'. These ideas are also demonstrated by Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) who explain how, in contrast to traditional society, modern society has become more decentralised and the expectation is that people choose and construct different parts of their identity: the focus is now on 'living a life of one's own' (ibid: 27). This is, they argue, a central component in modern society.

The notion of living one's own life was embraced by many participants, explaining how they wanted to break away from the expectations that their family, or society more generally, might have had for them.[42] Through individualisation, people, in modern Western society at least, are no longer supplied with biographies as they would have been in the past, Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) argue. In this argument, categories such as social class, gender, and religion, which contributed towards a person's identity are no longer supplied and ready-made. Instead, people must now construct their identities themselves, choosing from the options available to them: '[t]he choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author or his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time' (ibid: 22-23). Thus, Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim argue that choosing different aspects of identity and biography has become a key part of modern society, and this encompasses all areas of life and identity, including religion.

[42] However, as argued in chapter 4, and as will become clearer in chapter 7, continued social expectations meant 'living a life of one's own' did not always happen.

The following examples highlight how this importance of choosing infiltrates ways in which participants narrate bringing up their children. As well as focusing on the importance of choice, these examples bring into question what the key messages participants passed onto their children were. What we see is a mixture between liberalism and non-religious values which are expressed as important and meaningful. It is often these liberal ideals which are at the forefront of what participants wish to transmit to their children, and notions of non-religion are sometimes encompassed within these values. Ben (66, Canterbury), for instance, explained his and his wife's decisions in bringing up their children:

> Yeah I mean as I said to you earlier, I'm quite liberal and I wanted them [his children] to make their own mind up for *anything,* including religion so that it was – It's up to them really, they either go with it or they don't. [...] I didn't want them to think 'you definitely shouldn't be religious' or 'you definitely *should* be religious', you know, if they wanna be, they wanna be.

Central to Ben's narrative when talking about his children was the idea of not wanting to force opinions of any sort on them and that to do this would not be 'right'. But also crucial to his narrative is the idea of being 'liberal' and this is the key word he uses, not non-believer or non-religious. For Ben, part of this liberal identity includes freedom of and from religion. This idea of passing on liberal values was also expressed by several other participants, linking back to a number of liberal ideals discussed in the previous chapter, such as tolerance, not imposing religion on people, and seeing belief as something private. When talking about the upbringing of his children, John (66, Canterbury) stated:

> I'd like to feel, you know, this sounds a bit strange, I'd like to feel that I haven't influenced them in terms of their religious belief, *either* way, it's purely – then again, I'd like to feel that I haven't really influenced them in their ethical or moral lives because it's – as far as I'm concerned, I'd perfectly – it's their call, the way they are and the standard by which they live their lives by.

When I asked how he thinks he would have answered questions from his children on the topic of religion or belief, John explained that:

> Erm, my guess is that I would have said it was up to them to discover their own religious beliefs. And so we didn't go through baptism or confirmation or that kind of thing, because at the age of 10 or 15, or whatever, I think our judgement as parents is 'you just don't know', you know? How can a 12-year-old know what to choose? I don't

> believe they can. And there's an aspect where you can sort of *brainwash* children into something that doesn't serve them well, and if they come to religion later on that would be – that's fine, yes don't mind that at all, that's not a problem. I feel it's a much truer way of erm...

This kind of narrative was repeated by numerous participants, emphasising the right of the child to choose their own religious or non-religious paths and the importance of parents not to influence in this respect. Although in John's case, he expresses how he does not know how a child *could* choose, several authors do point towards the fact that children do have agency, even when they are assumed not to (Strhan 2019; Oswell 2013). At the same time, John and his wife did not present any religious options for their children to choose from. For John, it seems there are quite definitive ideas of what he thinks his children should encounter, namely liberal humanist ideals, and what his children should not encounter, specifically 'something that doesn't serve them well' – in this case, religion. Already from the outset, we see how choice, from John's perspective, is one-sided and non-religion is considered the normative, and neutral, position for his children to take.

The examples above highlight this changed approach in parenting and the importance of choice, not 'brainwashing'. Allowing children to choose their involvement in religion was a privilege many participants themselves did not feel was afforded to them when they were children. This parenting approach was often expressed with phrases such as:

> '[I]t's *totally* up to them, it's not anything of interest to *me*. But it's for them to decide themselves'. (Richard, 74, Canterbury, talking about his children)
>
> '[S]he was never forced to go [to church]'. (Gillian, 65, Liverpool, talking about her daughter)
>
> '[N]either [my wife] or I put in, if you like, any force on their attendance at church'. (David, 75, Liverpool, talking about his children)
>
> 'My philosophy was ... you don't impose your beliefs on your kids. If they want to become involved in religion when they're *able* to make the choice, that's fine'. (Diane, 74, Liverpool, talking about her children)

These examples show a non-invasive approach to parenting, involving neither forcing, nor even seeking to influence their children. Whilst grounded in the idea of choice, this approach nevertheless often involves removing options or not meaningfully providing options to choose from.

Whether or not choice was actually being facilitated, for participants the idea that their children should be able to choose whether or not to have any involvement with religion, and not to be 'indoctrinated', was extremely important, and nine participants also expressed how this extended to their freedom in relation to non-religion and non-belief too. For instance, Robert (69, Liverpool) stated: 'I would never preach, you know, say "there's no such thing as God" and whatever. I think they've [his children] obviously formed their own opinions, I think'. Ellen (67, Liverpool) also emphasised how she did not indoctrinate her children into *not* believing. Likewise, Peter (71, Liverpool) expressed similar sentiments when talking about his son:

> I probably have told him that I didn't believe at various times but I never *forced* it on him, I never said 'you must be an atheist! You must be a non-believer, read Richard Dawkins!' He made his own mind up. But he knew what I was, he knew that I wasn't religious.

We again see the emphasis on children being able to make up their own mind and not being forced to do one thing or another. But interestingly, Peter states how his son knew he was not religious, which brings into question the extent to which there was complete freedom for his son to make up his own mind and which choices were available for his consideration. This is something which will be discussed in more depth below.

Not every participant took the approach of simply not involving their children in religion at all to give them a 'choice'; in fact, some participants did involve their children in religious practices, much like participants had experienced when they were children. In these examples, we see continuity between generations, where carrying on a 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000) is considered important for diverse reasons. This contrasts with the examples above and helps draw out how the different, but widespread, narratives around children choosing can be associated with varied practices. For instance, Kate (67, Canterbury) explained the way she provided her children with some sort of religious education so that they would have something to make a choice about:

> Erm, well I think – I think they just had a chance to make their own choices. They had enough – I mean they didn't have the amount of church as I did – but they had enough understanding that they could make *some sort* of decision themselves. I hope.

For Kate, giving her children some sort of religious – in this case, Christian – knowledge was important; she saw it as central to understanding society and religion's place within it. Crucially though, it was then up to her children whether they wanted to carry on with this or not.[43] As we saw in chapter 5, Kate drew on her Catholic identity when confronted with a 'religious other', and she drew on this identity and her religious past at various times in the interview. Thus, involving her children in religion is perhaps a reflection of how religious identification remains somewhat important for Kate, something she is affectionate toward, and that she felt her children should be knowledgeable about. Examples such as this resonate with Day's (2011: 90) work where she relocates belief in social relations. Day points out the importance of family in co-producing and maintaining certain types of beliefs, identities, and practices. Whilst Kate is a non-believer, this religious belonging remained important and something she wanted her children to experience in some sort of familial way. Similarly, despite Fiona (66, Liverpool) emphasising her children's free choice, she also thought it important that her children had some sort of Christian knowledge in order to understand society more fully, stating: 'I'm glad they were taught about Christianity because that is part of our culture, those stories, the Bible stories and I think there's a big gap if they don't know what our society is based on really'. For Fiona, personal religiosity is not her consideration here, but rather she places the importance of her children being exposed to Christianity down to understanding religion's place in society, which Fiona regarded as historical, traditional, and as cultural heritage.

The pervading idea of the importance of giving children choice is discussed in Manning's (2015) work, where she explores how 'none' parents in the US raise their children. Like my own participants, insistence of choice from Manning's participants did not just relate to bringing up their children, but to all elements of their non-religious worldview, as Manning calls it. Zuckerman (2012) found similar tendencies in his work amongst apostates, where choice and the avoidance of 'brainwashing' were central to parents (see also Thiessen's [2016] work based in the US). In Manning's and Zuckerman's view, choice is central and unique to non-religious outlooks and parenting, but, as discussed above, McLeod (2007) and Brown (2009) argue that changes in society have meant that everyone has taken this approach to parenting, whether religious or not. The centrality of choice is not only in relation to parenting

[43] When referring to their children's choice on 'religion', most participants were in fact referring to Christianity, and it was going to church that was often used as an example, rather than going to a synagogue or a mosque. As such, 'choice' was often only between two things – Christianity and non-religion. Hemming (2011) talks about Christianity being the 'default religion' (2011: 447) in schools, even when space is supposed to be given to non-Christian religions too, this is not always the case.

or religion and Heelas *et al* (2005) posit that the 'subjective turn', encompassing notions of choice and the turn to the self, is something happening across various aspects of social life. What my data indicate is that this idea of choice is linked to wider liberal ideals that participants want to pass onto their children. Indeed, the assumed affinity between non-religion and liberalism has been challenged by some (e.g. Woodhead 2013; Laborde 2020). Whilst these liberal ideals may encompass elements of non-religion, they are broader than this, including notions of freedom, personal autonomy, and the rights of the individual to live their life as they wish.

Indeed, it is important to consider that Manning's and Zuckerman's work is based in the US, where the religious market is much more animated and choice about religion in general plays a much bigger role than in Britain, and where the language of individual choice is much more overt (Norris and Inglehart 2011). Nonetheless, some useful insights can be drawn from their work. Manning's participants, like my own, had a variety of strategies when it came to bringing up children. Manning found that some of her participants chose to 'do nothing' and emphasised the importance of letting their child decide completely. Others thought it important for their children to have a wide knowledge of lots of different types of worldview (religious and non-religious) with the hope that they would have all the information they needed to decide. Contrastingly, this was not a practice adopted by my participants. Some of Manning's participants also returned to their childhood religion to allow their children a choice whether or not they wanted to take up that religious path, a strategy that aligns with Kate's (67, Canterbury) parenting decisions. What both my own and Manning's findings show is the multifaceted approach taken to bringing up children and how, although the liberal worldviews underpinning these approaches might be similar, they are visualised and enacted in very different ways. What we see is not necessarily a blanket approach to parenting but diverse ways in which liberal ideals are embraced and passed on and shared through the micro-processes of socialisation.

The 'micro-processes' of how non-belief might be transmitted are also explored by Strhan and Shillitoe (2019), whose research with children shows the multiple routes by which non-believing and non-religious cultures may be passed down, developed, and negotiated. They point towards the importance of the family and school, as well as children's own agency to

creatively negotiate their non-religious identities.[44] Strhan and Shillitoe (2019: 1096) draw on Scourfield *et al* (2012: 92; 2013: 20) to try and avoid a simplistic notion of beliefs being passed down in a linear direction (from parent to child) and touch on a bi-directional approach to transmission. They recognise children's agency in socialisation processes rather than presenting them as passive receptors. What these authors show is how the term 'transmission', and theoretical thinking about transmission in childhood is problematic because it often misses children's agency. By using life-history interviews with older adults, we are able to see elements of this bi-directional approach, to an extent. Participants not only draw on their own childhoods, but also their role as parents and grandparents which can open up different ways of thinking critically about socialisation decisions about agency and choice narratives.

I will now discuss the ways in which participants remembered and narrated these micro-processes. I argue that, although ideas of choice might be central to participants' narratives, this choice is limited in additional ways. I also show how the ways in which religious and non-religious cultures and worldviews are shared between different generations can be shaped by social institutions, such as gender.

Gendered Transmissions

In this section I will discuss some of the 'micro-transmissions' of socialisation to highlight what, and how, ideals are passed onto children and how the notion of freedom of choice sits within this. I will show how emphasis on choice plays out in complicated, and often limited ways in reality and, when bringing up their children how participants were pushed and pulled towards different elements of religion at different times. Through the examples below, I show how narratives around socialisation have a gendered element to them, providing a clear example of how choice-making remains constrained by social structures. We see how women repress their own voices and wishes in order to facilitate the choice of their children and how men can be more overt in their non-belief. This section shows the complexities behind issues of socialisation and sheds light on some of the limitations on ideas such as freedom of choice, both of participants themselves and of their children.

[44] Although I have focused mainly on the family-unit, other ways of transmitting non-believing and non-religious cultures were discussed by participants. These included the importance of peers (this can also be observed in religious transmission e.g. Singh 2012; Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2014), bad religious experiences, exposure to ideas from books, and also eras such as the 1960s.

The following examples explore the ways in which four female participants narrated their experiences of being pulled into participating in religious-related activities when bringing up their children, despite these being activities they would rather not have been involved with. Pam (68, Liverpool), Maryam (70, Liverpool), Jean (85, Canterbury), and Laura (77, Liverpool) all mentioned how they went along with religious-related events or activities when their children were younger, often related to school or children's clubs such as Scouts or Brownies. These examples show how these women were expected to engage with religion on behalf of their children because of the importance of social bonds and the assumed needs of their children as being more important in these moments than participants' non-belief. Not only did these women participate in these sorts of activities because of the importance of social bonds between them and their children, but in many heterosexual couples throughout the twentieth century, childcare duties more often than not continued to fall to women (see Pilcher 2000). Their actions muddy the arguments by those such as Lanman and Buhrmester (2017) on CREDs, discussed in chapter 4: in contrast to their model, Pam's, Maryam's, Jean's, and Laura's engagement in religious practice was not accompanied by any verbalisations of why this practice is important; rather they kept quiet on matters of religion and belief to avoid their true views becoming explicit. The four examples highlight very different ways of understanding choice, worldviews, transmission, and the influences of parents on children.

The first example comes from Jean (85, Canterbury) who talked about the importance of going along and supporting her daughter in religious-related activities linked with the Guides:[45]

> Erm, obviously there was – she had to go to services and that. I mean, you know, if there was a service at the school or whatever, you know, you went *along*. I didn't – I didn't sort of think 'oh we've got to go to [my daughter's] service' or whatever, I didn't think – we never took prayers and that, you know [my husband] would say well 'do we have to go?' and I'd say 'yeah, yeah we must, we must give her support'.

Jean's narrative sheds light on her indifferent identity: in chapter 5, we saw Jean expressing how religion did not seem to mean anything to her, and these events seem to suggest that this extends to situations around bringing up children. That is, her narrative suggests that she and her husband did not have strong feelings regarding religion in relation to their daughter's life. Like other parts of her life, Jean went along with cultural aspects of Christianity with no great

[45] Clubs such as the Scouts or Guides were historically set up in relation to religion, with a focus being on spiritual and moral development. Mills (2012) highlights the ways in which clubs such as the Scouts now adjust religious focuses to take account of the diversity of children in attendance.

meaning attached to it and with the notion that it is 'harmless' enough. But what stands out here is how Jean differentiates between her approach to her daughter's involvement and her husband's. He expressed reservations about going along, but for Jean this was socially important and necessary as it was about showing support in an important relationship. This shows similarities with Day's (2011) work which positions belief in the social and emphasises the importance of social relationships.

Maryam and Pam also gave examples of participating in religious-related activities, whilst both strongly emphasising that it was not something they particularly wanted to do. Maryam (70, Liverpool) explained how she thought being involved in religion was important in some way for her children, perhaps a reflection of her mixed religious upbringing where she felt like she never really 'belonged' anywhere. She explained:

> [W]hen you're younger [religion is] not a big part of a young person's life somehow. But as you get older you get pulled into it in different ways, you know, your children might want to go to Brownies or Cubs, well that's church involved erm so there's a link there. Then there's – so there's always, usually with them kind of activities there was always a link to church, so you get drawn in as I was – well not really drawn in, I had to go, had to be part of something, you know, for the children's sake, not that I wanted to.

This idea of fitting in and its importance for children was something that Maryam came back to at various times of the interview. But overriding this feeling of being 'sucked'[46] into religious practice was the importance of her children's agency in deciding, whilst still giving them the option of fitting in with religious norms, even at the expense of Maryam's own wishes.[47] She also explained how she did not tell her children about her non-belief, as this would not have been 'helpful'.

The ways in which having children can raise questions about the role of religion is a point also raised by Manning (2015) and that it is often when bringing up children that a person's non-religious worldviews become more important or overt. In a similar vein, Pam (68, Liverpool), gave the example of her son joining the church choir, explaining:

[46] Being 'sucked into' religion through her children is a phrase Maryam used later on in the interview.

[47] Although clubs such as Brownies or Cubs have religious elements and associations with religion, there are lots of other secular activities within them.

> And then my eldest son joined the church choir because they got pre-empted [sic] to the youth club, and he wanted to go to that. I did my very best to talk him out of it, but he wanted to go and because he was only seven when he started, I had to go with him and sometimes the services were only 45 minutes, so we had to cross quite a busy road, it wasn't very far away but I stayed.

Despite trying her best to talk her son out of joining the choir, Pam later went onto explain how she tried to be as neutral and non-committal as possible when it came to her children and religion. For example, Pam discussed how she would answer her children's questions a certain way so as not to expose her non-religious viewpoints, although she recognised that she did try to sway her children's decisions:

> Well I suspect because children are quite innocent aren't they, you know, you can perhaps *not* answer things without being too much against [...] I suspect that I was probably reasonably non-committal. Although, as I say, when he wanted to join the choir I did try really hard to talk him out of it, I did say 'ooh, I don't know about that, you know it's a big deal and you have to go every week and you've got to do what you're told' and all this kind of thing, from that point of view not saying, you know, you can't do it because I don't believe in it, so er – but no, no he wanted to go so he went.

Pam's reflections illustrate how self-understandings of neutrality and liberalism can go hand-in-hand with behaviours and practices that strongly encourage non-religious norms rather than choice.[48] Although Pam's aim was to allow her son choice and freedom when it came to his engagement with religion, her attempts to discourage her son from attending choir reveals a tension in her child-rearing experiences where her own desire for him not to attend ultimately gave way to her son's wishes. She explains how she did not explicitly express her views on the matter, rather repressing them and citing other reasons when trying to discourage her son from joining the choir.

Lastly, Laura (77, Liverpool) narrated experiences of involvement in religion due to her daughter and, like Maryam, she explained how she did this because she thought it was important for her to be integrated into social networks. Laura explained how attending a religious-related event was 'awful', but kept this to herself:

[48] See Woodhead (2013) and Laborde (2020) for wider discussions around the assumed relationship of neutrality and liberalism in society more generally.

> My daughter was in the Brownies because, again, I thought it was integrating her into local society, and we went to the – that meant you went to church parades once a month, I think [pause] and I thought 'it's awful this'. […] She thought it was awful as well, I mean, nothing to do with me, she said 'mum I don't want to be part of this' – I went along with it, I thought I'm not saying anything, you know, she was part of the Brownies but she said 'I don't want to do that'.

The parallels between Laura's and her daughter's views suggest that their outlooks are communicated between them and highlight the intersubjective and social nature of these views (e.g. 'I thought 'it's awful this'. […] She thought it was awful as well') – although it is questionable as to whether Laura sees the parallels. For Laura, not expressing her views explicitly and 'going along' with the religious practices was done so that her daughter would think Laura was neutral and allowing her to decide for herself. Here, Laura wanted to emphasise that she had nothing to do with her daughter's decision, but that she came to it of her own volition. This shows how Laura values ideas around letting children's religiosity or non-religiosity develop, free from outside influences. This reflected the way Laura talked about her daughter in general: she explained how her daughter was always outspoken about things, was very opinionated, and that Laura herself had little influence on her views, outlooks, or worldviews, maintaining this narrative of non-influence.

These four examples show how for these women, bringing up their children meant they were confronted with religion in various and sometimes unwanted ways, but, ultimately, all went along with it due to the importance of the social relations in these situations. The balance between wanting their children to have choice, be integrated in society, and participants' own views on the matter were sometimes at odds. This speaks to some literature which argues that women are more involved in religion than men because of ideas around the benefits to family life and well-being (e.g. Glock 1967) and, whilst this literature is discussing religious women, my data suggests this might also be the case for those who are non-believing and non-religious too. This could also be down to the fact that in many heterosexual households, child care, as well as other domestic labour, falls to the women (see Pilcher 2000; Pilcher and Whelehan 2004), and as a result they typically end up taking their children to extra-curricular clubs. Maryam's, Jean's, Laura's, and Pam's reactions to their children's participation in religiously affiliated groups could be seen as a performance, in that they perform 'religiously' by going along with their children's religious involvement and, in doing so, also perform neutrality by keeping their real views on the matter hidden. This was considered to be the best option for the sake of their children, showing how the lived reality of being a non-believer does not mean a

predetermined stance on issues of socialisation, or a single set of practices. Rather, it is one of performance, negotiation, and weighing up the best available options in any given situation.

The examples set out above share commonalities with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach and work on performance. Goffman states that, in order to avoid conflict or other outcomes, such as embarrassment, with others, an individual 'is expected to suppress his [sic] immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he [sic] feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable' (1959: 9). People's actions, then, are very much defined by particular situations. Goffman argues that there is a 'frontstage' and a 'backstage' to every performance.[49] 'Frontstage', argues Goffman, is the presentation of the self to others: in the cases above, this is the four women performing in a certain way to their children. There is then the 'backstage' where these performances lapse. In the case of these four women, this would refer to their 'true' feelings about the situation – that which they were 'admitting' to during our interview. This performed neutrality reflects wider non-believing worldviews which are expressed through indifference (as discussed in chapter 5) which can encompass ideas of tolerance and freedom. However, we also see how, in Pam's case, it can be hard to maintain neutrality and parents can want things to go their way. Where they might claim tolerance to the religion of others, this might not necessarily extend to situations closer to home, such as bringing up their own children. As Manning (2015: 143) articulates: '[w]e all want for our children to have freedom of choice – until they make choices we do not like'.

As well as the examples given above, we see this approach to children's choice discussed by others. As discussed briefly in the previous chapter, Diane's (74, Liverpool) daughter converted to Islam through marriage. Diane expressed how she did not agree with this, did not particularly like it, but that, ultimately, it was her daughter's choice. She stated: 'I mean she knows my views and I wouldn't say to her 'ooh ooh' you know, that's her choice, I mean for goodness sakes she's fifty-odd now'. Diane's narrative encapsulates this idea of performing neutrality, evident in how she thinks she allowed her (adult) daughter to choose, downplaying the role her opinion might have on the matter. Likewise, although this was not something that actually happened for Ellen (67, Liverpool), in discussing what she might have done had her children wanted to become involved in religion, she stated:

[49] Goffman defines performance as 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants' (1959: 15).

> Probably would have thought [whispers] 'oh God no' but I wouldn't have said 'you can't' – I wouldn't have said 'you can't cross this door', because it's a personal decision at the end of the day, isn't it?

Like the above examples, Ellen highlights how she would have repressed her views if her children had wanted to be involved in religion, even though she would have secretly disliked this. As will become clearer below, in reality, Ellen thinks she will have influenced her daughters unwittingly, despite her neutrality and discourses around free choice.

What the above examples have shown us is how ideas around the importance of 'choice' for children can sometimes come into conflict with what parents themselves believe or want for their children. The cases of these four women highlight how their own views and voices were put aside in order to allow their children to experience such choice, albeit after some discouragement, as in Pam's case. These examples show us how participants attempt to perform neutrality in these situations by keeping their 'real' views and opinions hidden. It was not just with these four women that we see clear examples of women holding back opinions when it came to their non-belief. For instance, Julie (68, Liverpool) and Anna (80, Canterbury) explained how they would not make their non-belief known, in relation to their grandchildren, seeing it as 'not their place' to do and something which could go against the wishes of their own children. Amy (74, Liverpool) also expressed how she would not convey any 'strong feelings' to her children when they were younger on the topic of religion and/or belief, as did Kate (67, Canterbury). Carmel (78, Canterbury) also explained how she would not question or contradict anything her children had learned in school about religion to avoid confusing them. This approach of non-influence, then, can take several forms when bringing up children.

Whilst none of my male participants expressed repressing their voice in this way, this does not mean it did not happen, but what is important to consider is how this is remembered and narrated (or not) by participants – hinting at different approaches to understanding ideas around influencing children and limiting their choice. Likewise, there were a handful of examples of when women did not repress their voice, but were open about their non-belief with their children. Nonetheless, men, both participants' fathers and male participants themselves, seemed to be more explicit than women about their non-religious or non-believing identities and worldviews when bringing up their children. Generally, this involved overtly expressing

their atheism or conveying disparaging comments about religion in the home. These examples will be discussed in more depth below.

Not only do these examples show us the complex ways in which parents can negotiate issues around choice and parenting, they also challenge claims by authors such as Brown (2009) regarding women's role in religious or non-religious socialisation. Brown argues that 'women were the bulwark to popular support for organised Christianity between 1800 and 1963, and [...] it was they who broke their relationship to Christian piety in the 1960s and thereby caused secularisation' (ibid: 10). Likewise, McLeod (2007: 186) argues that:

> Right up to the 1960s it had mainly been mothers who had taught their children prayers or made sure they went to Sunday School, and who had hung up crucifixes and pictures of saints or of biblical scenes on the walls of the home. The distancing from religion and the church of many women of the 1960s generation was a key factor in the weakening of the religious socialisation of the next generation.

In contrast, as the above examples show, for some of my female participants, this was not the case. In fact, they actively facilitated their children's religious education and knowledge, even though it conflicted with their own non-believing worldviews and their wishes. This not only points to the way in which activities and organisations aimed at children are entangled with religion in Britain, but also the challenge non-religious parents face as they navigate themselves and their children through this landscape, while also wishing to practise more liberal, choice orientated parenting methods.

The next section will further delve into how this importance of choice can be limited in certain ways through implicit and explicit transmission of non-religious and non-believing worldviews by parents. It will show how religious and non-religious cultures may be shared or disrupted through socialisation and how this can be further contrasted along gendered lines.

Explicit and Implicit Transmissions

The influence parents have on children's religiosity, or non-religiosity, has been emphasised by numerous scholars. For instance, through analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey, Woodhead (2016: 249) states that 'children brought up Christian have a 45 per cent chance of ending up as 'nones', whereas those brought up 'no religion' have a 95 per cent probability of retaining that identification'. Crockett and Voas (2006) stress the role of parents too: they see

the lack of parental transmission of religiosity as influential on the growing numbers of the non-religious in Britain (see also Voas 2010; Voas and McAndrew 2012). However, the data gathered in these studies are by proxy and rely on adults reporting on behalf of their children's beliefs. In response to this, a growing amount of literature which focuses on the lives of children seeks to look beyond mere decline and highlights the micro-processes through which non-religion can be transmitted (e.g. Hemming 2017; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019). Bengtson *et al* (2018) also point towards the importance of parents when it comes to transmission of non-religious worldviews. Their research, based in the US, looks at parents explicitly socialising their children into such worldviews, which contrasts with a substantial amount of work that cites non-religiosity as a type of rebellion from religious parents (e.g. Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977; Hunsberger and Brown 1984; Leavy 1988; Manning 2010, cited in Bengtson *et al* 2018: 260). Bengtson *et al* give the example of the passing on of 'humanistic values' (ibid: 268) across generations[50] and cite one particular participant who explains how she sees these values as coming from her family. Bengtson *et al* challenge the notion that non-religious worldviews are merely down to the absence of religion; rather, they show how they can be substantial and embedded in social life (see Lee 2017: 148). In their analyses, they found that having a non-religious father is more influential than having a non-religious mother. However, my data suggest that mothers and fathers are both influential, albeit in different ways, with examples of mothers' influences generally being more nuanced and implicit and fathers' influences tending to be more explicit.

As mentioned, despite emphasis on choice and freedom for children when it came to religion, the ways in which children are brought up can limit this to an extent, as also highlighted by Manning (2015). In particular, the transmission of non-believing and non-religious cultures to children (either implicitly or explicitly) can place a boundary on this idea of free choice. As the previous section highlighted, and as will be further explored below, the ways in which religious and non-religious cultures might be shared and ruptured can also be split along gendered lines.

One way in which freedom of choice may be limited is through explicitness of non-belief by parents. To illustrate this, I will now highlight both participants' memories of their own

[50] The generations involved in Bengtson *et al's* study included 'pre-1946 generation' (those born before 1945), the 'Baby Boom generation' (those born between 1946-1964), 'Generation X' (those born between 1965-1979) and the 'Millennial generation' (those born 1980 onwards).

childhoods, and those of bringing up their children. Through participants' narratives about their own childhood we see how knowledge of their parents' non-belief could be influential on their own. For instance, Peter (71, Liverpool) describes how his father's atheism was influential, explaining how he 'took it from home really'. Peter never really believed, nor had the presence of religion in the home, so absence and non-involvement was reinforced. He describes his mother as 'perhaps […] a sort of believer, but she was never a churchgoer', suggesting that his mother's beliefs and worldviews were not as well known to him or overt. This kind of explicit non-religiousness from a father was also mentioned by Julie (68, Liverpool), who explained that her father was an atheist, whilst her mother was religious. Pam (68, Liverpool) also described her own atheist father similarly:

> I mean my dad has always been very against religion, *all* of my life which is probably where a lot of what I feel comes from. You know, as a child I can remember him saying 'all this God stuff is a load of rubbish' and all this kind of thing

Again, like Peter, when Pam talked about her mother, there were inklings of her beliefs and worldviews but these were much more elusive. Pam explained how she thinks her mother did not have a 'religious leaning' due to hearing her mother express reservations about the Catholic faith in which she was brought up. However, anti-religious or non-religious expressions were never overtly expressed by her mother and there was not the level of explicitness as there was with her father. As we saw with the examples from the four women above, 'religious' practices or involvement did not reflect their views on the matter, and their examples showed how hiding non-religious views from children can happen. Therefore, participants' uncertainty around the beliefs of their mothers may be reflective of this gendered dimension.

When it came to descriptions of mothers from participants, we can observe more implicit ways in which non-believing and non-religious cultures could be known or transmitted. The following examples demonstrate the important role mothers had in the development of some participants' non-believing worldviews, despite the subtle and tacit manner of such influences. For instance, Anna (80, Canterbury) recalled how she saw her mother's socialism and non-religion as being intertwined, and recognised how this influenced her own questioning and development of her non-believing worldview. Frances (75, Canterbury), born in 1943 on the Isle of Wight, also mentioned her mother and grandmother and the situation of their lives and how they impacted upon her by transmitting certain ideas:

> And my mother erm, was born in Yokohama at a time when my grandfather was a silk trader and he took his two daughters with him to Yokohama and erm, she was born in Yokohama and lived there for seven years. So I think, probably, Roman Catholicism wasn't the most appropriate thing there and the nanny, her nanny, was Japanese. So I think – my mother's very knowledgeable and my grandmother, on that side, very knowledgeable about Buddhism and er, they took a lot of the ideas from it in their gentleness and their tolerance of other people.

When later asked if there was anyone who Frances thinks was particularly influential on her current worldview, she explained how her grandmother was, and when asked to expand she stated:

> Erm, I think she was heavily Buddhist, that sort of thing; I think she was very Eastern. She spent all her life as a young wife abroad, so she lived in lots of different countries and I think that her attitude – it's more of a way of living than actually anything *specified*.

Frances cites her grandmother as being influential, particularly her tolerance and gentleness which was influenced by the Buddhist context of Japan. As we saw in the previous chapter, Frances frequently expressed tolerance and the idea of 'each to their own' as central to her non-believing worldview today. What we see here is not necessarily a transmission of disbelief in God which is being passed down, but non-believing worldviews and cultures, including values such as tolerance, which are central to what it means to be a non-believer and the lived reality of non-belief for Frances. This is evident with other participants; how substantial non-believing and non-religious cultures are handed down through 'ways of living' as Frances puts it, rather than non-belief being 'specified' to children, so to speak.

Elizabeth (79, Canterbury), born in Tehran in 1939, lived in various countries as a child due to her father's job. She explained how she and her siblings were not christened because her parents wanted to give them the choice and allow them to make up their own minds – not the norm amongst most participant narratives. Elizabeth described her father as an atheist, which would likely have been quite explicit for her to remember, as he died when she was only 12 years old. She describes her mother's family as religious but expresses that her mother herself was never really a 'strong believer'. In describing how her mother brought Elizabeth and her siblings up after the death of Elizabeth's father, she explains:

> Very much brought kids up as she wanted – well what she wanted, as we saw it, was – rather than spend an hour and a half in church on a Sunday all pressed up, what *she*

> wanted to do is go out into God's beautiful world and walk with her dogs or ride with her horse or whatever it was she was doing. And that was the way that she felt that she was, you know in a sense, *worshipping*, worshipping a God-like figure, although she didn't call him God. Erm, so that sort of rubbed off on me a bit.

Although religion may have been practically absent in Elizabeth's home life, it is in this absence we see the presence of other ways of experiencing the world which were important to Elizabeth and influenced by her mother. These findings speak to Koleva's; Koleva states that 'secular attitudes and practices' (2013: 120) can be passed down through family generations. The examples given above show exactly what these 'attitudes and practices' might actually look like in real life. The approach Elizabeth's mother took to 'worshipping a God-like figure' rubbed off on Elizabeth and she adapted this approach with her own children: instead of worshipping a God-like figure, for Elizabeth the meaning of this activity was grounded in respect for nature itself. What Elizabeth's mother passed onto her was transformed through the ways in which Elizabeth passed this onto her children, but a sense of continuity between these generations remained. The above examples capture the minutiae of transmissions of non-believing worldviews, details that cannot be adequately captured in studies which only record whether people have clear religious or non-religious identities (e.g. Voas and McAndrew 2012; Woodhead 2016). This implicit non-religious transmission was also found by Strhan and Shillitoe's (2019) research with children. Whilst Bengtson *et al's* (2018) work looks at explicit transmissions of non-religious worldviews, they also state that such worldviews can be transmitted implicitly too, 'through example' (2018: 268). However, the actual micro-processes of this transmission are not given in any great detail by Bengtson *et al*. My data, discussed above, provide more depth in understanding what these might actually look like, for example through ideas and practices related to gentleness and tolerance or worshipping nature.

Although participants often expressed their agency in their break away from religion and the development of their non-belief, the excerpts above also reveal the ways in which their own parents influenced them. These implicit and explicit transmissions, found within both participants' own upbringings and those of their own children, raises the question of the extent to which complete freedom and choice in relation to religion and non-religion is actually the case. Bourdieu (1977; 1984) argues that choice is an illusion and that cultural 'dispositions' are hidden within 'choice'. He argues that there are certain dispositions in regards to what choices are available to people and thus what people 'choose' is in fact pre-determined. He states: '[t]he practical 'choices' of the sense of social orientation no more presuppose a

representation of the range of possibilities than does the choice of phonemes; these enacted choices imply no acts of choosing' (Bourdieu 1984: 476). My data do not suggest that there are 'no acts in choosing' when it comes to religion: in fact there are instances were children chose to get involved in religion in different ways, and a handful of participants explained how their, now adult, children believe and are involved in religion. However, my findings do suggest that parents are significant in passing down certain identities and values which shape those of their children and limit complete freedom of choice.

Sowing the Seeds of Non-Belief

The influence parents have on children in relation to non-religion is established in scholarly work, e.g. Bengtson *et al* (2018), Manning (2015), Woodhead (2016), Voas and McAndrew (2012). The following examples show that, as a consequence of the strong emphasis on personal choice and autonomy that permeate discussions around parenthood, participants themselves do not always recognise their own influences on their children. One way in which we see this happening is how participants narrated being open with their non-religious views with their children and the presence of outwardly non-religious or anti-religious views being expressed by participants at home. Berger and Luckmann (1966) emphasise how parents influence their children and pass on all sorts of behaviours and values through socialisation in general, and non-religious behaviours or values are not exempt from this.

As noted above, while emphasising the importance of not influencing his son, Peter was open with his son about his non-belief. Nick (67, Liverpool), also explained how he made it quite clear to his daughters that he did not believe in God. Yet, he did still emphasise that it was their choice by explaining, 'I used to say to them "you must think about these things and believe what you want" and they both go – both of them went "yeah I don't believe it either" [laughs]'. Nick's example highlights multiple things. Firstly, as we have already seen, Nick, was explicit about his non-belief. Secondly, the idea of giving his children choice remains central. What we also see is the importance of relationality, here as he describes his children as saying '[we] don't believe [in God] *either'* (my emphasis), not just that they did not believe in God. This shows how the idea of autonomy and choice, which relies on the idea of being socially detached, has limitations for understanding the reality of the social world. Although Nick, like many, might use language of autonomy and choice, what is clear is how people remain embedded in the social lives of others (as we have also seen in earlier examples). What this shows us is that non-believing worldviews are part of an exchange and cross-influence which

is shared between people. As Lee (2015) advocates, non-religious and non-believing people remain socially attached and talk in relational ways. Bengtson *et al* (2018: 268) stated that non-religious worldviews can be transmitted implicitly 'through example'. Zuckerman (2012) also argues that instances such as the likes of Peter's and Nick's described above are something that children notice, and this has the potential to influence children's non-belief or non-religious identity. Children observe their parents' behaviour, argues Zuckerman, even if overt non-religious socialisation is not taking place. Relational approaches to conceptions and understandings of non-religion and religion are evident elsewhere (e.g. Campbell 2013; Quack 2014; Lee 2015; Strhan 2019; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020) and within sociology more widely (e.g. Crossley 2011). These approaches highlight how the interconnecting relationships between both non-religion and religion and different actors in people's lives can impact on people's lived experiences.

As mentioned in chapter 4, Liam (69, Canterbury) explained how he had had some uncertainty about not christening his child in case it somehow had negative consequences. He then went on to explain:

> It was important to us, to me and us, as parents or soon to be parents that we weren't going to wreck our child's life with our own particular beliefs. I think I do believe that these sort of, I was going to say extreme, hmm – the people who are strongly religious can impose quite awful things on their children and I'm hoping that I haven't imposed my strong *non*-belief things on my children. I've left *them* to decide as much as possible.

I then went onto ask Liam how he might have dealt with the topic of religion if asked about this by his children, to which he replied:

> They never *really* did, that I can recall, it was never an issue – of course something you don't realise perhaps until late on is that the passing on of your views is a sort of osmotic process. Erm, when – we'd all be sitting around watching the television and you'd see the man waving […] the incense burner, and muttering these words in *Latin*, I used to say 'mumbo-jumbo!' [laughs]

Here we can see a complex situation where wishes to not influence children, and letting them decide as much as possible, is also combined with outwardly disparaging comments and views about religion within the home. Notably, this example from a male participant contrasts with the examples from the four women discussed earlier in this chapter. What we see are examples

of how children might be exposed to non-religion even when parents are consciously trying not to do so. Liam himself recognises that perhaps him passing on his views as an 'osmotic process' was not something he realised he was doing until later on in his life when he could stand back and reflect. This was also expressed by Harry (70, Canterbury). When asked about bringing up his children, he critically discussed how children can be influenced in various ways, even if this was unintentional:

> I think we just tried to answer questions honestly um, you know, and said things like well 'some people say that, some people say this' and 'some people believe that'. And of course then the inevitable question comes 'well what do you believe?' And then you have to say what you believe or don't believe and I don't – I mean I've got two children and neither of them have any faith. Now whether that's indoctrination, I don't know ... [laughs] it is a difficult one because I, you know ... Richard Dawkins quotes 'there's no such thing as a Christian child there's only a child of Christian parents' – Muslim or whatever, you can't – you're not *born* a Christian or Muslim or any other ... or any other set of beliefs, those beliefs are ... come to you through, largely through your parents, you know, at least, you know, as a child. But then, you know, if I were to level that criticism to somebody, you know, somebody of faith then they would level the same criticism back at *me*. How do you know – how do I know I haven't indoctrinated my children *not* to have a faith? I don't know! I would like to think that we were more open-minded about it and that we ... we didn't – we certainly didn't *stop* them or *prevent* them from experiencing church or reading things which would pose that point of view if they want you to read the bible, you know.

In this example, we see how Harry's critical reflection of the choice he gave his children is bound up with his wider ideas of what religious and non-religious people are like. In talking about himself and his wife as non-religious parents, Harry states that he thinks they were more 'open-minded' than religious parents. Harry recognises the fact that he might have 'indoctrinated' his children into having no faith, but emphasises that this probably was not the case because of his open-mindedness. As argued in chapter 5, participants often differentiated themselves from religious others and expressed how being a non-believer was in contrast to how they perceived believers to be, and this extended to bringing up children too. Whilst choice remained a central narrative in Harry's story, we see how this idea of 'choice' may be weakly supported in real life. Harry uses the phrase 'we certainly didn't *stop* them or *prevent* them', indicating a rather limited way of facilitating choice in practice.

While some of my participants may have been explicit about their non-belief with their children, approaches of intentionally socialising children into non-religious or non-believing individuals was not found, also the case in Strhan and Shillitoe's (2019) findings. By contrast,

Bengtson *et al* (2018) found that in a number of the families they interviewed, 'a nonreligious identity has been imparted intentionally and deliberately from one generation to the next' (ibid: 268), including 'a rejection of organised religion, a scepticism toward theism, and a concern for humanistic values' (ibid: 268). Likewise, whilst Manning (2015) recognises the variance in parents' approaches to socialisation, with some examples of implicit socialisation, she also sheds light on those parents who actively socialise their children into non-religious communities, such as the American Humanist Association, and enrol their children into the associated educational programme. The lack of deliberate non-religious socialisation amongst my participants may reflect the different religious environments between the US and Britain. It may also be reflective of the fact that my participants do not belong to non-religious organisations; as such it would be unlikely that they would enrol their children into such organisations. Also, due to the historical contexts in which participants were bringing up their children, alternatives such as these might not have been as widespread or well-known as they are today.

Other participants acknowledged that the simple fact that religion was absent from their homes was influential on their children's non-belief or non-religiosity to a great extent, as also found by Strhan and Shillitoe (2019). On the other hand, some participants reflected that such 'absence' was not always as straightforward as it seems. For instance, Ellen (67, Liverpool), whom we met earlier on this chapter, talked about how she kept her non-religious views hidden in an attempt to facilitate choice in her children. She went on to discuss how her children did not have much religious exposure when they were younger and also did not experience extended family enforcing religion, which Ellen deems influential. However, despite her attempts to keep her views hidden from her children, she mentioned that she may have 'sown the seeds' for their non-belief today. This idea of 'sowing the seeds' is something I asked Ellen to expand on, and she explained '[w]ell not consciously, er sort-of you know, told them they've gotta believe this, but the fact that they saw that I could have an independent life without going to church'. For Ellen, an absence of religious practice can encompass the presence of a different kind of practice, i.e. having an independent life without religion. This fits with Ellen's wider non-believing worldview where autonomy is important.

Although some participants recognised the implicit or explicit ways they may have influenced their children, others did not. Diane (74, Liverpool) explained how she did not impose her non-belief and non-religious views on her children, but that they were left to decide. However, in

email correspondence after our interview, Diane revealed she had contacted her children and the following excerpt from her daughter's email made it quite clear that Diane did not keep her non-believing worldview or identity to herself, as she thought she had done, but was quite open about her views:

> I would say that you showed very strong anger and hatred towards religion and often dismissed believers as stupid. I think this is understandable given your appalling introduction to religion and the problems with Catholicism in general.[51]

Although these examples do not show that parents *de-facto* transmit non-believing worldviews to their children just by being non-believing parents (this was not always the case, e.g. Diane's daughter did believe and converted to Islam), they do raise some interesting points to consider. The examples show us how the idea of choice and freedom for children is often not as simple as it may first appear. Out of the 37 older adults I interviewed, 34 had children, and of these, 26 expressed this idea of their children having choice (both in terms of religion and sometimes non-religion) as being important, and as we have seen above, approaches to this vary. For some, choice means providing some aspect of religious education, be it through school, clubs, or through books, whereas others saw giving their children no religion at all as a choice, though this poses questions around how a child can choose if they have nothing to choose from. What we see is that, despite these narratives, non-believing worldviews were transmitted in implicit and explicit ways, even when parents tried their best not to, or, in Diane's case, considered themselves not to have done, but their children's memory of this is different. This further limits the extent of free choice and the autonomy of children to decide for themselves. The examples set out above demonstrate ways in which parental influence might actually happen in daily life and gives us as an idea of the micro-processes by which certain non-believing or non-religious cultures may be transmitted across generations, and 'chains of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000) can be continued.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to existing literature in further understanding the processes of non-religious socialisation and how non-religious transmission might occur. I argue that the liberal ideals central to non-believing older adults can be shared between generations but that the

[51] Permission was sought and granted from the participant to use this email correspondence in the presentation of the data.

modes of transmission are complex. We see a combination of an absence of religion, in some respects, and also the presence of other cultures and worldviews.

One of the central elements of participants' narratives around bringing up their children was the importance of their free choice and autonomy when it came to religion, and, at times, non-religion. This was considered to be in contrast with participants' own upbringings, where perceived religious enforcement was the norm. It was also considered important that participants, as parents, did not unfairly influence their children. However, engaging with the work of Bourdieu (1984), Giddens (1991), and Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), I argue that the idea of an autonomous, choice-making individual does not always stand up to scrutiny, and there are a multitude of continuing cultural and social connections operating in participants' lives which impact upon decisions when bringing up children. Through parenting decisions, liberal humanist worldviews can manifest in ways which are culturally contingent and reflect certain social structures. This notion of free choice is not always as simple in practice and can be limited in several ways, including implicit and explicit transmission of non-believing or non-religious values from parents. This can be through outwardly disparaging comments on religion in the home, through worshipping nature, or imparting ideas of tolerance and gentleness. In practice however, it was often non-religion or Christianity which were the only real choices for a number of participants, and approaches to how 'choice' should be facilitated varied between parents. Likewise, we saw examples of how participants did not always recognise the influence they had on their children, whilst other participants were more reflexive of the ways in which their observable behaviour and statements could impact on their children's decisions when it came to religion and belief.

What this chapter also shows is the importance of social relations and the impact this can have on issues around socialisation and transmission. Extending ideas from Day's (2011) work on the social nature of believing and applying this to cross-generational relationships, I found there to be a high level of sociality between parents and children, which challenges the idea that people are autonomous and detached social beings. Rather, worldviews seem to be developed intersubjectively and shared between generations in unique and meaningful ways. That said, the ways in which there are parallels between parent and child beliefs are not always overtly recognised by participants, and perhaps overlooked, due to the strong emphasis on personal choice and the taboo of 'indoctrination' or limiting their children's autonomy.

Whilst this chapter recognises the important role parents play in the sharing and transmission of non-religious worldviews, it shows how such transmission can be shaped by social institutions, such as gender. It was noted that mothers would often, although not exclusively, repress their voice and opinions regarding religion and I drew on Goffman's (1959) work to show how these mothers would perform neutrality in certain situations. I also showed how mothers could remain influential on non-belief but that this was in tacit and implicit ways. Whilst fathers could also be influential, this is often in more explicit and overt ways: they were more likely to be open about their non-belief and not perform neutrality to the same extent as mothers. This in turn further challenges the idea of 'CREDs' put forward by Lanman and Buhrmester (2017). I argue that although there may be a lack of discussion about religion and belief, as well as parental non-performance of religious practice, which means children do not take religious practice on, according to CREDs, the current data show how there can also be a performance of alternative beliefs and of neutrality. These findings show the complexities behind issues of socialisation and shed light on some of the practical limitations on ideas such as freedom of choice both of participants themselves and of their children.

In this chapter, we see how individualism can become a thread in worldviews and traditions emerging through transmission. However, rather than this individualism causing a complete breakdown of communal belonging, as Hervieu-Léger (2000) would argue, we see a transformation of traditions as these ideals are gradually incorporated into worldviews that can be shared between people over time. New sets of ideals and existential beliefs, heavily tied to liberal humanism, provide renewed links in a 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000) between generations and help people to understand the world and their place within it.

This chapter, as well as chapters 4 and 5, show the generational connections in the way religious and non-religious and non-believing cultures can be shared and transformed. The chapters depict how historical contexts and changing societal norms have impacted upon different elements of participants' lives, as well as the relationships bound up in them. I argue that the religious cultures participants grew up in were transformed, allowing new non-religious worldviews to come about. In this chapter, I expanded on this, displaying how non-religious worldviews can be transmitted across generations in multiple ways. In the next, and final, discussion chapter on the topic of end-of-life, I will demonstrate how, although death remains an incredibly social event in the life course, it is also extremely personal and should be treated with particular integrity. Through this, I show how non-religious worldviews and identities can

develop and change over participants' individual life-trajectories and how such worldviews and identities are sometimes uncertain and malleable.

Chapter 7
Death & Dying: Sociality, Expectations, and Uncertainty

Introduction

Death, dying, and contexts around end-of-life more widely, have been identified as important in existing literature for exploring the worldviews and identities of older adults, yet little is known about approaches to end-of-life from the perspective of an ordinary non-believer. As discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis, many of these studies treat death, and contexts around it, as existing in a vacuum or occupying its own special category. This, arguably, leads to a partial understanding about how people think about or approach end-of-life. In this chapter, by recognising death as part of the life course, and seeing it as embedded within social relations rather than detached from them, we can begin to understand approaches to end-of-life in a more holistic manner. Recognising death as part of the life course, this chapter further allows us to see how participants perceive religious and non-religious changes across generations by exploring the ways participants negotiate religious expectations surrounding death. Participants' narratives also show how non-believing worldviews can change over a lifetime, because contexts around end-of-life present themselves as key moments in peoples' lives which can lead to change and development in regards to identities and worldviews. Death can be an opportunity for other existential beliefs to become more prominent and participants showcased a wide range of beliefs about what (if anything) happens after death, which connect participants to both their predecessors and descendants in unique ways.

Furthermore, by exploring participants' narratives we can see how situations around death can become a time for questioning and uncertainty. Whilst religion has been cited as playing an important role in helping cope with the death of others, it has also been found that key life events, such as losing a loved one, can be a time of uncertain and conflicting beliefs for believers (Coleman *et al* 2007). This suggests that beliefs are not static during later life, especially during bereavement, but are malleable in response to some life crises (Coleman *et al* 2002). The current research found that this was also the case for non-believers too, and I demonstrate how death can be a catalyst for uncertainty and questioning both religious and

non-religious beliefs, showing how people may not be 'purely' non-religious at all times in their life and that worldviews and identities can change. This also shows how secularising processes do not happen as a linear process in real life. Whilst there may be occasional uncertainty, end-of-life contexts shed light on the importance of the integrity of non-believing worldviews and identities for participants. As death can be a time of importance, but also questioning and uncertainty, as well as being a social but also an incredibly personal event, this chapter shows the value of moving away from binary thinking about religious belief and non-belief, to instead recognise the ways in which people's identities and worldviews are multi-dimensional. In situations around death, this chapter shows how non-believing worldviews, as well as religious traditions, can be drawn upon to help make sense of, or find meaning in, end-of-life – further challenging the idea that people go from 'religious' to 'non-religious' in a linear and comprehensive manner. Worldviews and identities are not necessarily fixed and the practices that people may turn to do not always fit into neat categories that conform to non-believing on the surface.

A question I was often asked about my research was whether I was interviewing older adults to ask about death, or whether I was looking at older adults because they might become religious as they age. These questions came from both academics and non-academics alike. There is a selection of literature that argues that people become more religious as they age (e.g. Bengtson *et al* 2019) and as they become closer to death (e.g. Koenig 2006; Coleman, Mills and Spreadbury 2011), although others stress that it is in fact older cohorts that are more religious than younger cohorts and that it is generation, and not age, that is associated with religiosity (Voas 2010). On a related note, existing research also claims that religious beliefs, practices, and traditions are a source of comfort; provide meaning for people as they prepare for death; can make people more accepting and less fearful of death; and can be a source of coping with the death of another (Ardelt 2003; Wink and Scott 2005; Daaleman and Dobbs 2010; Hui and Coleman 2013; Spreadbury 2013). However, others suggest that it is the strength of a belief system, be it religious or not, which is important in helping people deal with challenges associated with end-of-life (e.g. Wilkinson and Coleman 2010). Yet, ideas that people turn to religion at the end-of-life, become more religious as they age, or as they get closer to death, as well as the assumed benefits of religion, were ideas that several participants held. This was mostly in relation to others becoming more religious or other people drawing from these benefits, but sometimes this applied to participants themselves. This hints towards enduring assumptions and ideas which not only impact upon the ways participants understand

their own lives, but also how others might expect to see and understand older-adulthood. This includes expectations of religiosity, especially in relation to end-of-life.

Recent research has begun to explore how the non-religious might approach these issues beyond a health and wellbeing disciplinary focus. Writing specifically about a US context with members of non-religious organisations, MacMurray and Fazzino (2017) found that non-religious people are often confronted with religion by other people around them when it comes to end-of-life, something they have to fight against in various ways. Because of the strong cultural presence of theism in the contexts in which MacMurry and Fazzino conducted their research, their findings show how non-religious people often feel overlooked and marginalised in their attempts to deal with end-of-life in a way that is meaningful for them. They also find that, for non-religious people, issues around death often become a source of conflict with others. The ways in which non-religious people construct meaning has been explored by Manning (2019) who undertook research with older adults at the end-of-life, most of who were living in care homes. Her research shows that people can gain meaning from non-religious sources too, such as drawing on family, laws of nature, or the 'circle of life' to explain and find meaning in death.

Building on this nascent area of research, this chapter echoes MacMurray and Fazzino's finding that participants often experienced social expectations and pressure to conform to religious norms, showing how contexts around death, like other events in the life course, are socially embedded. In these contexts, tensions with others often culminate when there are conflicting individual wishes. What my findings reveal is that participants dealt with these expectations in diverse ways. Whilst MacMurray and Fazzino's research was conducted with members of non-religious organisations, my research instead gives an insight into the ordinary non-believing older adult and shows how death is not always a time when non-religious people might completely 'do-away' with religion altogether, as MacMurray and Fazzino argue, but a time when religious norms can be used in particular ways to suit non-religious ends. In reacting against expectations of religiosity, my own participants also expressed how their non-believing worldviews could sometimes help them understand end-of-life in a meaningful way, but, in contrast to Manning's research, my findings come from a broader, 'everyday' perspective, rather than research with those facing end-of-life in a care facility. In so doing, I advocate moving beyond the all-too prevalent view that older adults are solely useful in telling researchers something about end-of-life.

Death, like other life-cycle events, cannot be understood without paying attention to the importance of social relations and intersubjective realities, by which I mean paying attention to the connections between participants, contexts, and things, as well as how people understand these connections. Previous chapters have shown how participants' non-believing worldviews and identities can be negotiated through social relations with others and how an identity of indifference, as an expression of liberal values, is embraced by participants. When it comes to death, it seems this is something participants do not see themselves being indifferent about. Why this might be the case is not within the scope of this thesis to answer, but this chapter offers some suggestions, including death being existentially important, a way of coping or having a sense of control, or the fact that one's own death is a deeply personal experience. This chapter offers food for thought in regards to how non-believing older adults approach and understand death and, whilst social relations remain key, both with the living and the deceased, echoing Day's (2012) notion of 'extraordinary relationality', this chapter also shows us how death is considered to be something that should be treated with integrity related to one's own beliefs.

This chapter begins by showing the prevalence of death in older adults' lives, as well as how contexts around end-of-life are social. I show how funerals present themselves as occasions of heightened social expectation and argue that religious funerals are still considered the norm for participants. I discuss the various ways in which participants negotiate these expectations, shedding light on both continuity and transformation in relation to religious cultures. I then go on to argue that contexts around death can act as a catalyst for questioning religious belief as well as non-believing worldviews, bringing about feelings of uncertainty and instability. These highly intersubjective contexts are instances where non-believing worldviews and identities can be re-formed and further developed. Following this, I show the important and complex interplay between social ties and a sense of individual integrity when it comes to beliefs and non-believing worldviews by discussing how participants approach considering their own deaths and their funeral wishes. Finally, I highlight the multifaceted nature of non-believing worldviews by shedding light on the various ideas participants had regarding death and beyond, demonstrating how there can be understandings of continuity between generations and how relations with others can sustain after death.

Death: A Common Feature of Life

A key aim of this research was to avoid reducing older adults' lives, experiences, and stories to death, as done by many of those studies, mentioned in chapter 2, which focus on coping, bereavement, and plans for end-of-life. Consequently, I did not ask about end-of-life in the interviews and, when first analysing the data I was unsure of how to approach discussion around death, due to not wanting to reduce participants' experiences to this one theme. However, the fact that many participants voluntarily talked about death hints at its importance in their lives. Most participants (30 out of 37) talked about death to varying degrees, and all in some substantial way (i.e. more than just saying, 'and then my mother died'), and, specifically, in relation to non-believing worldviews and identities.

Death is something that everyone goes through; both one's own death and the death of others. As such, death can be both incredibly personal and social. Not surprisingly then, the importance of social relations in the lived experiences of death were just as strong as with other key life events discussed in this thesis. In my interview with Liam (69, Canterbury), he described his main involvement with religion-related activities, and he used a phrase of his mother's to describe these occasions – 'hatch, match, and dispatch' – relating to births, marriages, and deaths. In this thesis, the narratives of my participants have helped to guide us through these key milestones of their lives, and death was often considered to be particularly close to home for participants, as Liam expressed quite poignantly:

> [B]ereavement starts to play a bigger part in your life as you get older, so I now find I'm going to funerals of people I've known for lots of years and relatives, you know the generation above me, and there's always a sort of religious service … I go to the crematorium and there's a religious a service and I think to myself 'yes, it's mumbo jumbo but I'll go along with it the sake of appearances', if you like, because you don't want to offend the nearest and dearest of their deceased. So yeah I'll go along – I go along with it, play my bit.

Of course, not every participant was quite as tongue-in-cheek as Liam, but what Liam's point shows is that, for my participants, death is a pronounced feature in their lives, and also one imbued with all sorts of social and relational ties.[52] These ties can bring with them certain expectations, as Liam indicates by explaining how he goes along with things 'for the sake of appearances' and not to offend the grieving family. As alluded to in the excerpt from Liam's

[52] As will become clearer in the following discussion, these social relations and ties can be human, non-human, and also with the deceased.

interview, funeral rites provide a window through which to explore how end-of-life is embedded within social ties and interactions, and the next section will explore this in more detail.

Funerals

The complex interplay between participants' non-believing worldviews, how these are expressed, and how these sit in relation to others is evident in relation to end-of-life, and, in particular, in approaches to funerals. Woodhead (2016; 2017) argues that in Britain, non-religious funerals have become a 'new norm'. Even up until as recently as the 1980s, she argues, one knew exactly what one was getting with a funeral, and this would be a Christian service with a well-known blueprint. She states that '[w]hen non-religious funerals started to occur they were regarded as odd and deviant; people used to feel uncomfortable and to mock' (2016: 259), and suggests that even in the early 1990s, these were still unusual. This has changed, she argues, and nowadays not only is a Christian service not the norm when it comes to funerals, but people now have increasingly more choice about every single aspect of these services. However, whether this 'new norm' is the case for my participants' generation is arguable. In fact, a number of participants explained how, when it came to funerals, there was frequently an expectation of a religious service, most often by family members.[53] For my participants, the 'norm' still has religious connotations, perhaps showing how cultural change may not happen quickly, and that 'chains of memory' (Hervieu-Léger 2000) can continue in transformed ways. This expectation of religious observance because it is the norm is something MacMurray and Fazzino (2017) highlight in their work based in the US, and they suggest there is a lack of a non-religious 'toolkit' for people to draw on at end-of-life. Woodhead's work suggests that this might not be true for some sectors of society in the UK, however, close work with older adults suggests their experience more closely resembles those in the US.[54] For

[53] It is important to note that the funerals that participants discussed have happened at various times over their lives, and as such the funeral norms in these contexts will differ. i.e. talking about someone having a religious funeral in the 1950s would not be unusual, but participants also discussed more recent funerals.

[54] Of course, the religious contexts of the US and the UK are very different, but with non-religious developments in the US evolving at a slower rate than those in Western Europe, the things non-religious people in the US experience *now* may hold more similarities to what my older adult participants have experienced in the past, and continue to experience today. Bagg and Voas (2009) suggest that one reason for these differences is down to the social acceptability of non-religion in the US and Britain, with it being much more socially acceptable in the latter. In 1971, Colin Campbell (2013) argued in his book *Towards a Sociology of Irreligion* that the profile of the 'irreligious' was predominantly white, male, and educated. This, he argued, was a reflection of the emerging countercultural movement whereby people, such as the type mentioned above, held a privileged position which allowed them to adopt new ideas and express them publicly without much consequence. However, this is something he argued would be expected to change over time. Existing research has shown how this profile has shifted in countries such as Britain. For instance, Voas and McAndrew (2012) show how it is no longer male and educated people who make up the majority of non-religious. In terms of

instance, despite not wanting a religious funeral herself, Carmel (78, Canterbury) explained how, when her husband (who was also a non-believer) died, she organised a religious element in the funeral with a 'minister saying a few words', because it was the 'thing to do'. A number of other participants explained similar situations. For instance, in talking about his father's funeral, Peter (71, Liverpool) explained how, despite thinking his father was an atheist, they had a priest come and say a few words at his funeral. In these examples, we see how religious traditions can carry on unchanged and unquestioned.

This idea of 'going along' with religious norms in relation to funerals was also expressed by Michael (66, Canterbury) with regards to his mother's funeral, but with Michael's example we see how continued religious tradition can be adhered to outwardly, but challenged and questioned privately. Michael's example also shows us how his non-believing worldview had developed in several ways over time. Michael recalled:

> I haven't talked about this yet. So my mother's funeral, I remember sitting there again in a small church in a little village near Coventry where she went to live after my father died. And I'm sitting there in the church and the family is there; I'm and there are people around me praying and singing the hymns. I sang the hymns and I also said the prayers which are that stage – I was in that stage where, as I mentioned earlier, I would not say my prayers, would be quite uncomfortable with that […] but because it's my mother's funeral something told me I ought to say the prayer because of the people around me whom I knew, because they're family, friends, so isn't that interesting? So I said the prayer and I remember thinking at the time sitting there 'why are you doing this?' So I wouldn't say I was leaning at that point more towards being religious; I would just say that the question came and I did it and I realised that I suppose I was doing it for my mother, who I mentioned had an underpinning of religious belief, if you like. I was doing it for her but also very definitely because of the pressure of feeling part of a family group, most of whom were praying.

Here, we see the strength of relational bonds, even with those who are deceased (in this case, Michael's mother) and how a sense of duty to others can remain highly influential. This was also found by Koleva (2013) who highlighted the strong influence family can have and the

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education they find that the observations connecting non-religion and higher education has been reversed stating that: '[g]raduates born prior to 1956 are less likely than their non-graduate contemporaries to have a religion; for years of birth from 1959 onwards, it is the people without higher education who on average show higher levels of no religion' (Voas and McAndrew 2012: 38). Thus, Voas and McAndrew argue that in Britain, education is no longer a predictor of non-religiosity. In the US, however, the profile of the non-religious still resembles the white, male, and educated model (see Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Kosmin and Keysar 2009; Zuckerman 2009). A report by Understanding Unbelief (Bullivant *et al* 2019) suggests the classic humanist profile associated with dominant non-religious cultures and organisations is stronger in the US (and Brazil) than the UK (and Denmark). They find that atheists in the US seem to have a more coherent identity as atheist which is linked to ideas of rational humanism.

feeling of duty towards other family members. Going along with such norms is not necessarily something participants were passive in; in fact, Michael explained how he questioned why he was praying. But the relational bonds appeared to be stronger than Michael's own uncertainties about the situation. Putting aside his own feelings of being uncomfortable, Michael participated in a highly social religious tradition, providing a link to his mother and the beliefs she had held when alive.

Yet participants did not always conform with these norms, even when they felt outside pressure and expectation to do so. One example came from Elizabeth (79, Canterbury) who recounted her husband's funeral, held a year before I interviewed her. She explained how she and her children decided to have a 'celebration of life' rather than a religious service, despite her husband's wishes for a religious service. The increased prominence of a 'celebration of life' is highlighted in Engelke's (2015b) ethnographic work with Humanist celebrants in England, showing shifting societal approaches to end-of-life. Elizabeth explained how 'a number of people *might've* thought that we would do it differently', but that she would have felt hypocritical doing this, because neither she nor her husband ever went to church or believed. Instead, she and her children incorporated other elements they thought her husband would have wanted:

> None of us believed in an afterlife or resurrection or anything like that and so we just – yeah there was a cremation service and then we went out to the countryside and just scattered his ashes around some beautiful trees and whatever. And we felt that's what he would have wanted.

She goes on to explain how her husband's sister was a regular church-goer and so Elizabeth's daughter read a small excerpt from a psalm as a 'token gesture'. Elizabeth expressed how she thinks some of the religious people in attendance had 'slightly raised eyebrows' and were surprised about how she and her family had decided to undertake the service. Interestingly, when talking about the decision, she referred to it as 'our' decision, mentioning her children's role in the process too. This reference to her children suggests Elizabeth draws on them as a social anchor to justify going against her husband's wishes. This is seen, for example, in the phrase '*none* of us believed in an afterlife' (my emphasis), even though this was something she admitted made her feel guilty. Not only does Elizabeth's example allow us to see how relations play a significant role, it also shows how she and her family negotiated the expectations and mechanisms that come with such social relationships.

Another interesting point highlighted in Elizabeth's case is how the conviction of her non-believing worldview developed, as evidenced by the way she describes the negotiations she made in different situations at different stages in her life. In getting married, we saw Elizabeth going along with the norm of a religious wedding, even though she had some uncertainties about her decision; advice from a vicar swayed her choice. When her children were born, Elizabeth and her husband's decision not to get their children christened was one which caused great upset to her mother-in-law. In that situation, we saw Elizabeth's creativity in having 'lay godparents' for her children, very much adapting from a traditional christening, and she explained how she would have got them christened had her husband wanted to. Finally, with the death of her husband, we see much more conviction in the way Elizabeth approached this situation, where again, expectations of religiosity continued to be present. Here, Elizabeth was more certain in her decision to have a non-religious service, recognising how other people may have processed this but explaining '[b]ut it was right for *us* and, well, I don't really care what other people think'.

Here, we can see how ideas of choice and the rights of the individual are not always as simple as they may first appear. This situation displayed a clash between what different individuals wanted; Elizabeth, her children, her husband, and wider social relations. The decisions Elizabeth made were always in relation to others, who helped decide on which path to take in these key life events. Whilst her decisions might not have always been to everyone's liking, they reflect how Elizabeth understands the different stages of her life along with the development and conviction of her non-believing worldviews in relation to, and with support from, those close to her.

Tensions arising from decisions about funerals were also evident in the example given by Jean (85, Canterbury), who explained how her son was upset and angry with her when she arranged a non-religious funeral for her husband. However, Jean emphasised her right to decide:

> I think [my son] would have liked a religious service for his father, but by not having one it didn't *hurt* anybody and it was my – *my* decision and it was my husband, it should be *my* decision as well.

As with Elizabeth, we see how ideas of choice are problematised, bringing about questions such as: Which individual's choice is more important? Who should get to decide in certain situations? Although Jean did not specify what her husband had wanted in terms of funeral, and his wishes remained muted in her narrative, we see a clash between what Jean wanted and

what her son wanted. What Jean's and Elizabeth's examples also show us is how expectations of how to approach funerals can cut across generations too, as influences do not always work in a linear fashion, that is, the older generation impacting upon the younger generation. Elizabeth's children were influential in her decision to have a non-religious ceremony and, although Jean did not change her decision based on her son's expectations, it was still influential on the way she narrates her decision.

Other participants described similar expectations of religiosity when it came to funerals, but their narratives show how approaches to this take different forms. For instance, in discussing the death of her late husband, Amy (74, Liverpool) explained how she adopted a 'mix-and-match' approach when it came to the funeral. The funeral was described by Amy as a 'faith service' which incorporated elements of a traditional Christian service with elements of Buddhism, a tradition Amy had become interested and involved in whilst her husband was in a hospice:

> [W]hen my husband died I did want him to – I did want a church service but it wasn't – you see I hadn't been – I wouldn't have been able to do this years ago, I had a bit of a problem in the sense that, you know. I had to explain to them that this was not – it was a faith service really, it wasn't – it wasn't particularly Christian and actually the opening prayer was a Buddhist, so it raised a few eyebrows.

In this example, we see how Amy references the past, explaining how she would not have had this option previously, but how changes in society have allowed her to take this path, despite the 'raised eyebrows'.

Having the Buddhist elements in the funeral reflected the development of Amy's non-believing worldview. Buddhism was something she started to become involved in when her husband was ill, as a chance to escape from the emotional stress she was experiencing. During the interview, Amy presented me with the book she was currently reading, entitled *Buddhism Without Beliefs*.[55] For Amy, these Buddhist teachings spoke to her because of the lack of preaching and hierarchy, and she described the teachings as a 'philosophy to live [her] life by' rather than a religion to follow, which focused on the individual in the here and now. She explained how this Buddhist philosophy also allowed her to have control over her own life, a freedom she

[55] *Buddhism Without Beliefs* (1998) is a book written by Stephen Batchelor which focuses on Buddhism's practical applications in everyday life, rather than Buddhism as a belief system.

feels is not the case with religions such as Christianity. Here, building on the discussion from chapter 5, we see how non-believing worldviews can have the importance of the individual at heart and can also encompass other religions which people see as more ‘genuine’ and relevant than the Christian traditions they were brought up with. This use of other religions and blending them with other values to make a more personalised worldview has been addressed by numerous scholars. Experimentation with other worldviews and traditions has been highlighted by several authors in different ways, e.g. ‘spiritual shopping’ (Roof 2001), the idea of ‘alternative’ spiritualties (McLeod 2007), ‘new age’ (Brown 2012), or the ‘Easternisation of the West’ (Campbell 2007). It was notably in the 1960s when these approaches to spirituality started to become more widely experimented with, they argue. Interestingly, in Amy’s case these Buddhist ideas were not something she experimented with earlier in her life, but more recently. Amy’s ‘mix-and-match’ use of Buddhism also reflects what Manning (2019) found in relation to end-of-life for non-religious older adults – that people can draw on their non-believing worldviews to help them cope with stress and the death of a loved one. Amy’s example shows how non-believing worldviews can also develop through dealing with difficult situations, such as loss. These can be a bricolage of other religious and non-religious worldviews and comfortably incorporate religious and non-religious elements.

Other participants remembered similar experiences in regards to differing wishes or expectations when it came to funerals, but this sometimes went beyond ‘raised eyebrows’. For example, Julie (68, Liverpool) gave the example of when her atheist father died and some of the issues she faced within the family regarding a non-religious funeral:

> I looked after him at the end, and he had Parkinson’s disease and lots of different things, you know, and I had to carry out his wishes for being buried. And of course he didn’t want a religious setting, all he wanted was to go in a box and go to the cemetery. No church, no sermons, nothing. He didn’t even want a priest or anyone, and he just wanted to go in the ground next to me mam and that was it. But bloody hell, trying to get that through to my brothers and sisters. ‘Cause they were saying ‘it’s not right, it’s not right’ and ‘oh no, we’ll just get the priest’ and all this, you know? And I said ‘no, no, no’. So consequently I was sort of – they didn’t speak to me for a while. ‘Cause I said ‘what do you think is gonna happen if he doesn’t have a priest?’ I said ‘he never had one all his life, why is he gonna need one when he’s brown bread?’ [laughs].

For Julie, this experience had similarities to other social expectations she had experienced over her lifetime. Growing up in a strongly Catholic and working-class environment, Julie was often met with assumptions of her religiosity and the expectation of religious participation by those

in her social circle. When she went against these assumptions she was often met with shock from those around her. Her experiences share similarities with what Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman's (2018) work suggests, that being non-religious in a Catholic context can be a 'marked act of deviance that places one outside the community' (2018: 213) and can lead to a polarisation between non-believers and believers.[56] In the situation of her father's funeral, this may well have been the case, as Julie maintained the importance of what her father would have wanted, which, as an atheist, was no religious involvement, wishes that other family members were not so accepting of.

These examples highlight the ways in which social expectations continue to matter in all sorts of ways when it comes to end-of-life, yet how people react to or deal with these expectations differs. For some, going along with norms is an easy and unproblematic option; for others, such as Michael, going along with the religious norm was met with more ambivalence. Others will challenge the cultural default of religion for end-of-life services and sometimes develop a 'mix-and-match' approach to a funeral service, embracing non-believing worldviews as well as religious traditions to fit both the wants and needs of the deceased and of the grieving. Likewise, non-religious funerals can also be opted for. Due to the social nature of such events, we also see the clash between individual preferences and how questions around who has most authority in situations around end-of-life can bring with it strained relations, or even feelings of guilt. The rights of the individual are important, but who that individual may be is not easily defined and what the living want can sometimes supersede the wishes of the deceased.[57]

Death as a Catalyst and a Time of Questioning

As evident with funerals, the death of a loved one can be challenging, and how participants responded to such losses over their lifetime can also tell us something about how non-believing worldviews may develop and change over time. One of the aims of my research was to explore the stability of non-belief over participants' lives and to see whether there are moments where non-believing worldviews or identities may have been questioned. On the whole, participants communicated the stability of their non-believing worldviews over time: that is, they had not switched between not believing and believing. This stability is consistent with other research (e.g. Pasquale 2010; Coleman, Grama, and Petrov 2013; Brown 2017) and adds more empirical

[56] See chapter 4 for a more in-depth discussion around the impact of place and religious heritage on the experiences of the non-believing older adults in this study.
[57] This will re-emerge as an important theme when considering the attitudes of older adults towards their own deaths, which I will discuss later in the chapter.

depth and offers an alternative to existing work on non-religious identity which suggests that identities can be 'liminal' (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010) or 'fuzzy' (Voas 2009) and that people continue to change between different religious identities at different times in their lives. It is important to note, however, that several participants did explain how instability and switching may have been the case when they were younger and were beginning to question belief in God. This reflected how, as for most the development of their non-belief was gradual rather than instantaneous.

Although only a few participants experienced instability of their non-belief, something that seemed to run through these examples was their relation to the death of others. This may reflect Coleman *et al's* (2002) findings that beliefs are not static, especially during bereavement, but can change in response to life crises. What this section shows is that older adults' non-believing worldviews are not monolithic, unchanging entities that exist in a vacuum. Non-believing worldviews can be permeable, changeable, and respond in unique ways to unique situations. For some, the death of a loved one might be the final straw which helped guide them away from religious beliefs (more discussion below); for others it can make them question their current non-believing worldviews. These examples not only allow us to consider the impact death might have on participants' worldviews, it also gives us insight into how, and why, participants' non-belief might be questioned and change. If non-believing older adults were asked only about their approaches to death (like the focus of several past studies) it is possible that some of these intricacies would be missed, but, due to the life course approach taken here, we are able to see how death can have a transformative and influential impact of non-believing realities.

One example showing how the death of a loved one can lead to a state of questioning and uncertainty comes from Kate. Kate (67, Canterbury) recounted experiences of instability, or as she called them 'wobbles', in relation to two deaths: one was the young grandson of a friend who died quite suddenly of meningitis, and the other Kate's father who died when she was 30. In the aftermath of her father's death, Kate recalled how, in the weeks following, she strongly felt 'some sort of presence and, not – not a ghost just, sort of, some sort of presence'. She recounted one event whilst with her mother:

> Yeah maybe it was a comfort for mum. We sat in the car and I said, 'you can sort of feel he's here watching us'. Did I say it to comfort her? Did I really think it? I don't know exactly at that time. It's quite a long time ago now.

Here, comforting her mother was of central importance to Kate, and whether she actually believed what she was saying is something Kate cannot remember. Nevertheless, what is clear is that Kate's relationships with her mother and deceased father were important in the situation. This mirrors what Day (2012) terms 'extraordinary relationality', which reflects the ways in which relationships with others do not end with death and can continue to be powerful. The uncertainty Kate experienced lay in the fact that she felt there was 'something more', making her temporarily question her non-belief in God.

With the grandson of her close friend, Kate explained how she prayed and visited Canterbury Cathedral to request a prayer be said during a service. Additionally, Kate recounted the following story about visiting a Catholic church with her friend:

> Kate: I went into church with my friend, 'cause she is Catholic, the granny, and you know, it was the first time we'd seen them so we went along to their church. And you know you have the candles?
> *Joanna: Yeah.*
> Kate: Candlelight is – it's just a sort of link to up there – or whatever you want it to be. But it's something special about light and candles always used in the services and like at Christmas and Easter and special things so … You know, we just lit a candle and I just said 'oh blow this, let's just light all of them', and we just filled the whole stand and lit all of them and somehow it just [pause]. I went with a friend as well who knew them and it was just a nice thing to do. So you sort of say a prayer, but who to? Goodness knows.

In this context, which Kate described as a 'wobble', Kate's narrative suggests that she was not necessarily doing this for herself so much as for her friend – a 'nice thing to do' – showing how the relationships in this context were significant. Whereas Kate sees these instances as 'wobbles' in her non-believing worldviews, I would argue that they are also a reflection of ongoing connections to religious cultures. This is something we have seen with Kate in previous chapters, e.g. when she used her Catholic and non-believing identity when not being allowed into a place of worship, and she also brought her children up with elements of religion as she thought it was important. The fact that Kate understands the contexts around death as 'wobbles', but does not see the other examples of a continued connection with religion in this way, points to the fact that, for Kate, her non-believing identity and worldview is not necessarily fixed or coherent. Moreover, continued connections with religious cultures may not necessarily be recognisable to Kate in some contexts (e.g. drawing on her Catholic identity),

but are seen as incongruous with non-belief in other contexts (e.g. the examples around end-of-life). Cases like these are examples of how a lived approach to studying non-belief brings to light the complex reality of how non-believing worldviews and identities interact with continued religious connections in daily life – something secularisation theories do not always account for.

As for Kate, the connection to candlelight is something Jane (68, Canterbury) also mentioned. Jane was forthright when outlining her beliefs and opinions and was, at times, quite explicitly anti-religious. Although not expressing instability of her non-belief, the following story shows how even the most outspokenly non-religious can turn to familiar religious traditions in response to loss, perhaps because non-religious alternatives are unavailable or unknown:

> Jane: I love going into churches every time I go abroad or round the – I try and go to the cathedral as often as I can, *weirdly.* 'Cause it's such a peaceful place and I lost my mum and I lost my sister and I like sometimes to go somewhere where I can think about them and there's very few places you can go to where it's quiet and almost spiritual – and I light a candle! […] Everywhere I go I light I candle.
> *Joanna: Why?*
> Jane: Because it then – I think candles focus you, in a church situation, focus you on your thoughts and so I will sit down and think about my sister and my mother and what I've lost and the hole in my life, massive holes and – I mean I live a very, I'm retired but I live a very busy life and sometimes need time to stop and think about the meaning of life. Hmm, funny innit?

Here, Jane engages in an act of remembrance in a religious setting. Although she does not necessarily attach religious meaning to this, it helps her think about and connect to her lost loved ones, providing a sense of continuity in their relationships and to help her think about the meaning of life. What this example shows us is that, just because someone is a non-believer, this does not mean non-religious alternatives are always employed in response to life events such as these, nor does it mean that religious connections disappear from people's lives. Jane could have easily lit a candle at home to think about her mother and sister, but instead she undertakes this in a cathedral. This further points towards the ways in which religious cultures can continue to play a role in the lives of non-believing and non-religious people, but that such connections can take on meaning beyond those traditions.

The loss of a loved one can be a hugely trying period, and the following example from Fiona (66, Liverpool) highlights how the emotionally difficult experience of her mother's death led

to the suspension of her non-belief for a short amount of time. Interestingly, when telling me this story, Fiona prefaced her story by asking me not to judge her:

> When my mum died I was really, really in distress and it went on for a long time and I don't know why I did it, but one night I said 'oh God please take this pain away from me'. And I felt this greater sense of peace and it was as though somebody had pulled the plug and all this stress was just draining away. Now I don't know what happened, I don't try to understand it but I know it was real.

Fiona later went on to explain how, despite this event, her non-belief in God remains strong, but that she is open to other supernatural explanations for things she cannot rationalise or explain. Fiona's example reflects findings from Frost (2019: 830) that 'both certainty and uncertainty can be meaningful and motivating orientations to belief and identity'. Here, Fiona's instability or uncertainty about her non-belief led to development in her non-believing worldview which encompasses the supernatural.

Although these examples around instability and the death of others are small in number, they are important to shed light on and to help understand how non-believing worldviews and identities are not monolithic and static, nor do people simply go from religious to non-religious in a linear fashion, rather there can be change and development over a lifetime. People approach key life events such as death in different ways, and for some it is a time when their non-believing worldviews may be in some way challenged, suspended, or questioned. Much like Coleman *et al's* (2002; 2007) findings, bereavement seems to be a time when people's non-beliefs and worldviews can change, be examined, and there can be an element of uncertainty in one's actions and thoughts.

Whilst death could draw out existing connections with religious cultures, or create new ones for some non-believers, it could also be a crucial event in the formation of non-believing worldviews. A key example of this is how, for some, experiencing the death of another earlier on in their lives was significant in the development of their non-belief. One example of where the circumstances around a bereavement played a significant role in someone questioning their belief came from Julie (68, Liverpool), who recalled the time when her mother was dying when Julie was around 18 years old:

> So […] I run over to get the priest because we really did think it was close, and he said er 'I'm just having my dinner, I'll be there soon'. Well it was forty minutes later. And he literally only had to cross over, our house was like that far from him. So he said 'I'm

> just having my dinner and I'll be there soon' and in that forty minutes me mam died. And that – I was so furious to think me mam had dedicated herself you know and been a good Catholic, what you call a 'good Catholic', whatever that is, you know. But she was a decent woman and I thought 'you couldn't even come over'. So I was angry at him. I was really angry at him. And the family was actually, even me dad, you know. So that was another turning point for me, you know, another disillusion.

For Julie, the lack of compassion from the priest in the midst of the traumatic loss of her mother was one of the handful of situations which led her to question her Catholic faith. The importance of her mother and the lack of respect shown to her in her last moments was significant in Julie starting to question what she considered to be hypocrisy exhibited by religious authorities. Tim (76, Canterbury) also described how the death of his brother at 14 and of his uncle, both of whom he had been praying for, led to him to question the power and reality of prayer and the Christian belief he had grown up with. Likewise, the death of Ellen's (67, Liverpool) father when she was 19 is something she described as a key development in the questioning of her Catholic faith at the time.

Authors such as Coleman and Mills (2019), Zuckerman (2012), and Brown (2017) have also shown how the death of a loved one can act as a catalyst to one questioning their religion or belief. Zuckerman found that a premature death of a loved one could be a trigger to people querying their faith, and his findings show this happening with people, not just in younger life, but in adulthood as well. Brown also finds that the death of a loved one can be a catalyst for turning away from faith, and finds this happening with adults experiencing, for example, the death of a child, but does not delve any deeper into this topic or mention instances where this might happen over different times in people's lives. Coleman and Mills (2019) show how uncertainty about one's faith following the death of a loved one can happen specifically in older age too. Although some of Coleman and Mill's participants completely abandoned their faith, not all 'became' non-believers, but it did lead many to question their religion. These findings show that experiences of death can impact on worldviews or beliefs across a range of ages. In instances with my participants, deaths which played a role in turning away from religion seemed to typically occur when participants were younger (between childhood and young adulthood), rather than in older age. I have also shown how death could be a time when *non*-believing worldviews could also be questioned, adding novel data to what Coleman *et al* (2002; 2007) argue.

What the above examples show is how contexts around end-of-life are times when religious belief, as well as non-believing worldviews, are vulnerable to questioning and uncertainty. These examples show us how people do not have pure states of 'religiousness' or 'non-religiousness', but that these things are malleable and can be combined in different ways depending on context. It seems death is a context where these boundaries can become particularly blurred. These examples continue to highlight the importance of social ties and how these impact on developing and changing non-believing worldviews and identities. The next section considers how these social relations continue to play an important, but altered role, when it comes to participants' own deaths.

Participant Approaches to their Own Deaths

When it comes to participants' own deaths, we see further how expectations of religiosity sometimes can come head-to-head with personal wishes and we see more explicitly what non-believing worldviews might look like. When talking about their own deaths, participants described wishes for their funerals, discussed their approaches to, and understandings of death, and what, if anything, happens after death. In doing so, they often differentiated themselves from expectations of religiosity and made clear their non-believing worldviews.

In light of the expectations they experienced in regards to funerals, a number of participants explained how they made clear what they wanted for their own funerals, emphasising the importance of their own agency and autonomy in the matter. In the following examples, we see the important position participants' own deaths can play, and in many ways, decisions around death for these participants seemed to matter more – or in different ways to – other examples of life-cycle events given in the previous chapters. There could be numerous reasons as to why this was the case; for instance, this may be because non-believing worldviews have become more strongly convicted, or participants may have become more confident in making known their non-believing worldviews. It may be because there are more non-religious alternatives to traditional religious rites than in the past, or perhaps because death existentially matters. Alternatively, it might be because death is a personal thing, or it might also be a way of coping and having control over one's death. These possibilities are left open in this thesis, but they do raise some questions around non-believing worldviews and death that will be kept in mind in the following examples.

For those who discussed arrangements for their own funerals, a non-religious ceremony was what most wanted, and to have a religious element would be considered somewhat hypocritical. As Maryam (70, Liverpool) explains:

> I just want to go straight to the crem [crematorium]. I don't want this going through the church and all that. I just want the coffin to go straight to the crem. And if the family want to go in and just be there for five to ten minutes that's fine and then that's it. I don't want anything, I don't want to go into a so-called 'holy place' […] 'Cause I don't think they are [laughs].

Despite participating in religious traditions in the past (e.g. getting married in a church and having her children christened), when it came to her funeral, a religious service was an idea Maryam would not entertain. As noted above, the apparent significance of death could be for several potential reasons, but for Maryam, it seems her decision was about her personal wishes first and foremost. Whereas in the past she participated in religious practices for various reasons (e.g. to quell rumours of pregnancy or to socially integrate her children), the above example shows us that for Maryam, when it comes to her funeral, these other pressures did not seem to hold as much clout. Maryam refers to her family, stating that if the family want to go into the crematorium to think about her, then that is not something she would mind, but in this case her family do not have a central place in her decision and her funeral plans do not revolve around the wants or needs of others.

Agency and autonomy in end-of-life preparations, then, appear to be important (see MacMurray and Fazzino 2017). These ideas were exemplified by Julie as she expressed uncertainty that her wishes regarding a non-religious funeral would be upheld by family members. She explained:

> Julie: I will bring it up in certain situations where [sighs] this is hard [pause]…I'm dying.
> *Joanna: Oh no, I'm sorry.*
> Julie: I don't know why I'm getting upset 'cause I don't normally.
> *Joanna: Here's a tissue…*
> Julie: Thank you. I have cancer in my breast, in my spine and in my bones, so I've had to bring it up, about my funeral and that. And you know, I know people who want to have the priest there and everything. And I've had to say to them all, please just *respect*, you know, my wishes. I said remember my dad and I had to do it for him, and I wanna be able to have someone I know I can rely on to carry out my wishes.

Soon after, she then reverted to her usual wry manner and stated:

> [A]nd I'm so clear about what I want when I do die. And I said to them 'if there's life after death' – 'cause I don't know, 'I'll come back and haunt you if you don't carry out my wishes' [laughs]. So I think they will, I really do.

This example shows how non-believing older adults may have to explicitly, and sometimes forcefully, express their wishes regarding their own funeral with family members who may want to go down a more religious route. As we saw with previous examples from Julie, her non-religious beliefs had not been easily accepted by many in her social circle. This is also found by MacMurray and Fazzino (2017) who report that, because of the lack of a cultural toolkit in relation to death for the non-religious, their wishes can sometimes be ignored in favour of the religious norm.[58] Julie had to make sure her father's and her own views were clear to other family members to ensure their non-religious wishes are upheld. Julie's narrative around her decision may be understood as allowing her to have a sense of control over her own death. Making clear to family members the wish for a non-religious funeral was found to be the case with other participants too, and the right to have these decisions upheld was significant.

Through these examples, we begin to see how non-believing worldviews can play out practically in everyday life. As discussed elsewhere, there is research which suggests that religious people experience less fear of death (Wink and Scott 2005; Hui and Coleman 2013). However, in the present study, several participants expressed that they were more fearful of the process of dying than death itself. This was also found by MacMurray and Fazzino (2017) who highlight the differences between death and dying and people's subsequent approaches towards these (see also Bengtson *et al* 2019). MacMurry and Fazzino see this distinction between fear of dying, rather than fear of death itself, as 'a coherent non-religious philosophy of death' (2017: 289). However, as we saw with Julie's example above, there is the possibility that anxieties around one's own death lead to a stronger need for worldviews to be honoured in funeral arrangements. Being fearful of the process of dying might also be a reflection of this anxiety and about regaining some sort of control over one's life (and death), and reflects everyday lived realities of dealing with such issues, rather than a 'coherent non-religious philosophy of death' (MacMurray and Fazzino 2017: 289).

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[58] It is, however, important to remember that MacMurray and Fazzino's work is based in the US where religion plays a different role in social and public life, as discussed elsewhere.

Whilst some participants were clear about their lack of fear of death, even if dying itself is feared, some had a more complicated approach when it came to end-of-life, and one that developed in line with life experiences. In these instances, we are given a glimpse into how participants could draw on other parts of their lives to help them approach end-of-life in ways which felt just as meaningful as religious approaches. For instance, Nick (67, Liverpool) explained having a niggling fear of death at the back of his mind, but watching his atheist twin brother deal with his death from terminal cancer helped him significantly:

> But I think, as I say, seeing [my twin] dying, as he died, has impressed me. And it's given me a great deal of personal comfort about dying. I don't have any niggly doubts, I just hope it's not gonna be painful.

In developing his approach to death, Nick refers to his brother and how he dealt with dying. Nick's relationship with his brother was one of significance and one which he referred to multiple times in the interview, and helped Nick develop his ideas around death. This echos Manning's (2019) findings that non-religious people often draw on family to help them find meaning in difficult situations, such as end-of-life. By rooting non-believing worldviews and identities in the social, and recognising their intersubjective nature, Nick's example helps us to see the ways in which worldviews about particular elements of life (in this case death) can arise and develop out of social experiences and relationships with others.

The above examples suggest that it is not only those with religious beliefs who express a lack of fear around death: this can be the case for non-believers too. But, as with most of my findings, although this may have been the case for some, it was not expressed by all, highlighting the diversity and multifaceted nature of non-believing worldviews. For some, death is something which they have come to terms with and developed an approach to, e.g. Nick's example discussed above. But for others, such as Amanda (69, Canterbury), the prospect of death was harder to come to terms with and she explained how she envied the peace and reassurance believers have when it comes to death:

> I find it very difficult – difficult to look at death. […] Erm, it's gonna happen, I mean I'm not silly enough to think it's not gonna happen. It's going to happen but I, but have a certain fear. And I think if you're a believer and have faith that must be a great – sort of – help. Erm, and I envy that, yeah. So I don't – I don't – particularly want to show my sons that I'm frightened of death, but I'm sure they'll find out in due course [laughs], even if I don't tell them.

For Amanda, her lack of belief is an influential factor on her fear of death. Similar to arguments in existing literature (Spreadbury and Coleman 2011; Spreadbury 2013), for Amanda, those with belief have a ready-made explanation and resulting source of comfort in their religious beliefs, something she feels she does not have with her own non-believing worldview.

There are mixed views in existing literature regarding fear of death and religious and non-religious beliefs – with some arguing that those with strong religious faith are less fearful of death (Lowis *et al* 2011), some others suggesting the opposite (Bachner, O'Rourke, and Carmel 2011), and yet others suggest that it is the strength of a belief in general (be it religious or non-religious) which plays a role (Wilkinson and Coleman 2010). Amongst some of my own participants, non-believing worldviews were a source of comfort in regards to death, for instance, by instead taking solace from the life they have now. Some expressed the importance of making the most of it, something also found by Manning (2019). As Diane (74, Liverpool) emotionally explained: 'Erm it's [life] now, you've got one shot at life; it's not a rehearsal, there's nothing afterward, you know'.

These cases also show how ordinary non-believers approach and think about their own deaths in their everyday lives. Rather than turning to those who are members of non-religious organisations to see how they would approach preparations for end-of-life (which might not reflect all non-believers), a lived approach shows how thinking about death seems to have an important place in participants' understandings of their non-believing worldviews. The way participants thought about and approached their own deaths highlights how there are not ready-made non-religious alternatives that they turn to. This also extends to participants' diverse ideas about what happens after death.

Beyond Death

What participants believe happens after death (if anything) reflects a range of non-believing worldviews. As noted, Diane explained her view that there is one shot at life as there was nothing after death. This finality of death was shared by a number of participants and this view is also found within existing literature (Zuckerman 2008; Lee 2015; MacMurray and Fazzino 2017; Manning 2019). Despite seeing death as final, other beliefs about the continuity of the world can shine through, as Fred (86, Liverpool) articulated:

> And I don't fear retribution, I don't think there's anything – when I die I think I will just stop, I will just stop, that's it…that's it. So I don't – I don't fear going to someplace

> either up there or down there because there isn't any such place in my thinking. Just like everything else on the planet, it dies and it dies [pause] I might help a flower come up but [laughs] that's it. Nothing else; I'm quite happy with that.

In Fred's view, he will stop existing when he dies and very much sees himself in unity with everything else on the planet in the inevitability and finality of death. But in dying, Fred finds comfort in explaining how this might allow for new forms of life to arise. Other participants held similar ideas. For instance, Carmel (78, Canterbury) explained:

> I think, well, we're all in this world together and we'll all do what we're meant to do and when we take our last breath we'll just go back to nature. So I just think we just dissolve back and there's no hell, there's no heaven, we just dissolve into eternity.

This idea of going back to nature is also seen with Manning's (2019) findings where she talks about people's reference to the 'circle of life'. Here we can see a sense of continuity and connectedness that some participants feel to the wider world. This is not something that is gained from religion, but had other reference points including a 'scientific' view of the world, of how we come about and what happens to us after we are gone.[59]

For some, there was also the idea that life carries on in some way through those we leave behind, particularly through our genes and what we pass onto our descendants (see also van Mulukom 2020). For instance, Jean (85, Canterbury) used the phrase 'a little bit of you goes forward' to describe the ways she believes parts of people are carried on. In linking to her own parents, and to her grandchildren, Jean expresses a sense of continuity between the generations of her family:

> The only thing I sort of *do* believe which is everyone who has children, a bit of me it's going forward in my children and my grandchildren. That's the only thing that I – life everlasting really, but if you don't have children I don't know. But, you know, that's – I know it's a bit of Greek in me and there's a bit of Greek in my four grandchildren, they've all got dark hair, I mean I was black once [black hair].

Here, Jean talks about the physical characteristics passed on between generations, from her Greek mother, down to her grandchildren and their black hair. But she also talked about this in regards to personality characteristics too, explaining 'yeah a bit of me, my awkwardness and

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[59] Others questioned this 'scientific' approach to understanding life and death, which again shows how approaches to, and meaning-making processes around death are not monolithic. For instance, John (66, Canterbury) questioned how science could explain how a person could go from a living being to a collection of molecules and atoms – where the 'life' of the person goes is not something science can answer for John.

my bolshie-ness and whatever would go through to my grandchildren'. Although using Hervieu-Léger's (2000) language here of continuity between generations, this is not to suggest that Jean, or others, use or understand these connections in a religious sense. Rather, it shows how people understand and explain situations around end-of-life in relation to other worldviews which give them a sense of connection both to the past and to the future. One of the limitations of Hervieu-Léger's work is that it does not tell us a lot about non-religious realities; rather it is much more believer and religion-centric. My work draws on Hervieu-Léger's ideas to help understand non-believing realities and how these can provide a sense of continuity between generations, and in so doing suggests ways in which her theory can be developed beyond its secularisationist (Bruce 2011) assumptions. The examples discussed in this chapter give us a glimpse into how people might understand these continuities and think about their place within the world, where they have come from, and where they end up.

However, the idea of death being final was not always something participants were content with. For instance, Rishan (80, Canterbury), described a long process of coming to terms with the idea of death being final. Likewise, Albert (80, Canterbury) explained how he would very much like there to be a Christian-like afterlife but how in reality he thinks it is 'nonsense', however comforting the idea might be:

> [B]ut the truth is that I'd be faintly surprised and disappointed if when I kick the bucket I don't walk through the pearly gates and my two dogs come bounding up to greet me and all the family's there looking at their reasonable best in my memory. You know, not old and just about to die, whatever they were on at the time, you know. And so and I don't *challenge* that because to me it comes under the heading of 'nonsense' that I won't spend any time wondering about. I will be *terribly* surprised if that happens, but I don't rule it out as a possibility, you know. And when I said goodbye to my big dog with my arms around him when we put the lethal injection into him, I said 'I won't be long' but I knew that he knew, you know, he'd hear what I'm saying. But I knew he knew it didn't mean it would be tomorrow, but whatever the time gap was, we'd just continue from where we were.

For Albert, the idea of being reunited with his dogs was something he wished was the case, and indeed, his example shows how it is not only human relations which seem to have a continuing importance in people's lives; animal relations can too. With Albert's example, we also see the strain between what he would *like* to believe, and what he actually thinks would be the case, further showing how there might not exist 'pure' religious or non-religious states or experiences. Amy (74, Liverpool) expressed a similar view, explaining how she would like

there to be a life-trajectory set out for her, with someone watching over her, but that she struggles to think that way and does not like the idea of not having control over her own life.

Whilst some might like the idea of life after death, others did feel that there is something 'more' after death, but not necessarily in line with the Christian idea of the afterlife that the majority of participants were brought up with (see also Manning 2019). By considering what participants do not believe (e.g. the Christian idea of heaven) we are given more insight into what participants do believe. For instance, for Fiona (66, Liverpool) the 'human spirit' lives on beyond the death of the physical body and reincarnation is a strong possibility. Similar to how Amy drew on Buddhist ideas, Fiona draws on ideas of reincarnation which are strong in other religious cultures, suggesting a bricolage of different ideas to help her explain and find meaning in death.

As we saw earlier, relations with loved ones can carry on in all sorts of ways after death. Kate (67, Canterbury) recalled feeling the presence of her father in the months after he died, a feeling which eventually faded, and Gillian (65, Liverpool) explained how she was able to feel spiritual connections to the dying and the dead. This idea of the 'spirit' (whatever that may be) living on is also discussed by Maryam as she explained having experienced ghosts on numerous occasions. The first time was when she was 14 and had a 'vision' of her sister committing suicide (her sister's suicide was something that actually took place), and she was then visited by her sister's ghost months later:

> And they [ghosts] guide you. And then later, [my sister] – about two or three months afterwards when I was fostered out, she came to me and started speaking to me and I woke up 'cause I thought I'm dreaming and she told me to shut my eyes again. So I shut my eyes and she starts talking to me again but I could see her, so I asked if I could to be where she was, I wanted to be where she was and she said 'no you've got a lot to do you can't come yet but I'll come for you when it's your time'. And I just said 'I don't want you to go, I'm missing you'. And then [it] went on for a bit and then she said she's going now and then she went.

Continued relations with the deceased were not always described quite so explicitly as the examples given above. In fact, when discussing her deceased father, Maryam did not describe seeing his ghost, but explained how she felt close to him whenever she visited a mosque. Additionally, as we saw earlier with Kate (67, Canterbury) and Jane (68, Canterbury), the act of lighting candles was undertaken to experience a sense of closeness and connection with those who had died. Likewise, despite Albert (80, Canterbury) explaining how the idea of an

afterlife was in his mind 'nonsense', later in the interview he mentioned that he still talked to an ex-girlfriend who died many years ago. Continued relationships with deceased loved ones amongst those who are non-religious is something Day (2011; 2012) found in her research. She argues that these relations are not necessarily 'religious', 'spiritual', or 'paranormal' (2012: 173), but rather are examples of 'extraordinary relationality', and these examples show the complex and messy reality of how non-believing older adults view and understand death in varied ways.

Although 'extraordinary relationality' was not experienced by all, the examples discussed do show how relations with others remain of central importance. They also provide more of an idea of what an ordinary older adult non-believer looks like, and how non-belief in God does not close the door to other existential beliefs which encompass beliefs about and beyond death.

Conclusion

This chapter sheds light on the ways that ordinary older adult non-believers think about, understand, and approach contexts around end-of-life, showing how continued connections to religion are not uncommon, but can take on transformed and new non-religious meanings. This chapter builds on existing research by the likes of MacMurray and Fazzino (2017), Engelke (2015b), and Manning (2019) by providing understanding of how ordinary non-believers approach death in their daily lives. Importantly, this chapter has not disconnected death from the life course, but shows the ways in which this is connected to other parts of participants' lives, including their pasts, and the social relationships their lives are embedded within. This has allowed for a more holistic and lived approach to understanding end-of-life for participants, rather than looking exclusively at death with these older adults, which may lead to biased assumptions that death is the only thing that matters for this age group and that they are only useful in telling us something about death. By situating death as an event within the life course, I have discussed the ways in which death seems to matter more than, or in different ways to, other key life events and how there is a sense of importance of and a need for integrity in relation to non-believing worldviews and identities in this context. I proposed a number of potential reasons why this might be the case, including death being existentially important, death being a way of having a sense of control over one's life, or the fact that one's own death is a deeply personal experience.

Whilst much existing research (and common assumptions) suggests that people become more religious as they age and as they get closer to death because religion can have multiple benefits

for people at the end-of-life – such as less fear or belief in the afterlife – I argue that the lived reality of older adults' lives can be far more messy and contradictory. This chapter shows how older adults can draw on non-believing worldviews as well as religious traditions in similar ways when it comes to death. They could be an atheist, yet engage in religious rituals and believe in an afterlife of some sorts. This is a reflection of participants not having structured ways of non-believing, nor existing in purely religious or purely non-religious states. Rather, non-believing realities blur these boundaries and are bound up with relations and situations which can have continued connections to religion; end-of-life is a notable such context. This challenges some secularisation arguments which depict religious attachments as being discarded and disappearing from non-believing lives.

As I have shown throughout the preceding chapters, death, like other life events and situations, is incredibly social and intersubjective, rather than atomistic and socially detached. The strength of relational bonds, both with the living and the deceased, play a central role in participants' understandings and experiences of end-of-life, something also found by Day (2011; 2012). I have shown the various ways in which there are expectations of religiosity for my participants when it comes to end-of-life. These expectations are often in relation to funerals where religion is, arguably, still considered the 'norm' for older generations. Participants' narratives showcase the varied ways in which these norms could be negotiated. Further, through looking at ideas about what happens after death, I showed how some felt the 'presence' or saw a ghost of a lost loved one, others talked to the deceased, and some engaged in the act of lighting a candle to help focus and think about those they had lost. What these examples show is how people can draw on both religious traditions and non-believing worldviews in transformed ways to help them deal with loss. There is no set structure that participants take when dealing with grief; instead they draw on the social world around them to give meaning to their situation. For some this might mean religion, for others it might mean looking to their family or the natural world for answers.

Through the significant and influential relationships and contexts surrounding end-of-life, the worldviews and identities of non-believing older adults can be developed and transformed in exchange with religious and non-religious practices and values. Situations around end-of-life showcase the diversity of non-believing worldviews and how, whilst circumstances around death may have similarities, there are a plethora of ways in which responses to this are negotiated and enacted, emphasising the social and cultural ties which remain strong in the everyday lived realities of older adults.

This chapter backs-up existing findings that suggest contexts around death and dying can be a time when non-belief can become temporarily unstable (Coleman *et al* 2002; 2007). This has contributed empirical evidence to understanding how non-belief can develop over time and change, and how uncertainty can come about through experiences of end-of-life. It is situations around death and dying where we also see some question their belief and/or their non-belief. For other participants, experiences of death affirm or strengthen their non-believing worldviews and identities, showing how lived realities do not reflect fixed ways of 'being' a non-believer. Through these findings, I show how there can be continued connections with religious cultures and that such connections do not vanish from people's lives, but remain, transform, and take on non-religious meanings. Recognising the presence of uncertainty and questioning, as well as both the personal and social nature of end-of-life, emphasises the need to move away from binary thinking about belief and non-belief to instead recognising the complex and multifaceted configuration of lived non-believing.

The previous chapters have guided us through snapshots of participants' lives, from childhoods, to developing worldviews and identities, to bringing up their children, and to end-of-life. This has allowed us to see the ways in which non-believing is lived, developed, passed on, and narrativised by participants in ways which highlight the social and intersubjective nature of non-believing for these people. The next chapter will offer a summary and concluding thoughts, along with highlighting open questions and implications for future research.

Chapter 8
Conclusion

This thesis set out by highlighting the associations of religiosity and old age and how, as a result, non-believing older adults are often overlooked in favour of younger, more non-religious populations. When we try to understand a shift from 'Christian to non-religious Britain', 'the more important story,' argues Linda Woodhead (2016: 249), 'has to do with children'. In contrast, I argue that the non-religious field, and some of the key areas of research within it, could benefit from research with older adults to provide a more holistic picture of non-religious and non-believing realities. After highlighting some of the gaps in existing knowledge about non-believing and non-religious lives, I identified a number of questions which were unanswered and which the study of non-believing older adults could contribute towards answering. These questions will now be summarised.

Through engagement with various theories of secularisation, I asked whether the experiences of older adults could provide insight into some of the theoretical claims surrounding the decline of religion, arguing that focusing on the religious old and the non-religious young, who have a greater presence in existing literature, cannot tell us the whole story around religious decline. Doing so leaves open questions. For instance, does secularisation involve religion effectively vanishing from people's lives, as secularisation theory often implies? Do people understand their non-believing worldviews and identities in relation to wider historical, religious, social, and cultural changes? Continuing this engagement with theories of religious decline, I shed light on scholarly research that turns to the family to explain declining numbers of religious people and rising numbers of those who identify as non-religious. I argued that work with older adults could provide more understanding about the role of socialisation and the transmission of both religious worldviews and identities and non-religious and non-believing worldviews and identities, providing empirical data for seeing how the latter may be passed on between generations. Additionally, whilst noting some of the common themes that research with both religious and non-religious older adults gravitates towards – such as death, coping, and loss – and identifying some of the limitations with these studies, I questioned whether working with ordinary non-believers (i.e. those who do not belong to non-religious organisations) could provide a more holistic approach to understanding decisions and thoughts around end-of-life.

Lastly, I noted how more could be known about whether non-belief remains stable over a lifetime or whether it changes. Taking these gaps into account, and identifying some of the strengths and limitations of existing research, my aim was to explore what non-believing looks like for older adults in daily life and what alternative beliefs, worldviews, or identities might be important for this overlooked group.

The earlier chapters in this thesis have drawn on data from 37 life-history interviews to begin answering these key research questions, and what is clear in the preceding chapters is that answers to these questions are interlinked and cannot be disaggregated from one another. I will now reflect on the key findings and contributions of this thesis and some of the remaining questions and future implications this work has.

Key Findings and Contributions

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the worldviews and identities of the non-believing older adults in this research are intersubjective and are deeply bound up in social relations and accompanying social contexts, both in the present moment and historically. Through this intersubjectivity, the worldviews and identities of non-believers can be developed and transformed in relation to social and cultural practices, values, and positions, which can be religious and non-religious, and which are enacted and negotiated in diverse ways.

In seeing non-believing realities as social, intersubjective, multifaceted, and negotiable, this thesis moves beyond studies in the field of non-religion which are framed by secularisation in ways that have limited their focus and methodologies in some areas. There is a tendency in this work, for example, to try to understand people as 'purely religious' or 'purely non-religious' (or 'believers' or 'secular'), and as shifting more or less wholly from one to the other through processes of secularisation (as typified in Brown's [2017] book entitled *'Becoming Atheist'*). The findings presented in this thesis recognise that some of these secularisation debates do not reflect the complex lived realities and experiences of older adult non-believers and they provide a clearer reflection of lived non-belief in which a multitude of social and cultural influences permeate into non-believing worldviews and identities.

Theories of secularisation have remained central in explaining religious decline in Western society and have been in situ since the beginnings of sociology itself. Existing research often depicts religious attachments as being discarded and disappearing from non-believing lives, either gradually, as argued by Steve Bruce (2002), quite suddenly, as argued by Callum Brown

(2009), or some combination of these, as argued by Hugh McLeod (2007). It also tends to identify the worldviews of non-believers as primarily and intrinsically liberal humanist, and as philosophical, moral, or intellectual rather than social in nature (e.g. Bruce 2002; Zuckerman 2008; 2012; Campbell 2013; Zuckerman 2014). For instance, Phil Zuckerman (2014) sees 'secular humanists' as intrinsically moral and posits disbelief in God as coming from an intellectual, rational, and empirical way of seeing the world. Zuckerman (2012) even argues that morality can improve when people go from religious to 'secular'. This not only brings with it ideas and assumptions about what non-believers are like, but also re-emphasises a binary between religious and non-religious (or in Zuckerman's words 'secular') states. Christel Manning's (2015) research, also based in the US, describes some of her 'secular' (by which she means non-believing) participants as 'philosophical secularists', seeing non-belief as a philosophical and intellectual position. Brown (2017) even coins the phrase the 'humanist condition' to explain the intellectual, philosophical, moral, and ideological ways in which the atheists he conducted research with held intrinsically liberal humanist values. Like Zuckerman (2012), Brown sees these humanist values as simply 'existing' inside of people, as values that can be essential to them, and that they 'discover' themselves as having. However, it is important to recognise that Brown recruited many of his participants after humanist lectures he gave, or from a website clearly stating his research and Brown's own commitment to humanism. This limits what studies such as Brown's can tell us about the lived reality of non-believing people who are not affiliated with organised non-religion. Other work challenges this picture and suggests that secularisation involves more than religion's disappearance, arguing instead for more attention to be paid the great variety of worldviews and identities that exist and to 'substantial' and complex non-religious experiences and expressions (e.g. Day 2011; Lee 2015).

Through my work with older adults, I have shown how non-believing worldviews and identities are much more socially embedded and intersubjective than represented in much past work. This is not to say that none of my participants held intellectual, moral, or philosophical positions related to their non-belief, but that their non-believing worldviews and identities cannot be understood in this way alone. The worldviews and identities of non-believing older adults in this research exist as part of a wider network of social relations and contexts, rendering them deeply intersubjective rather than having a single source or presentation.

Studies framed by secularisation not only present non-believers in certain ways, but also suggest that the place and role of religion in people's lives is discarded and replaced with either new non-religious identities or 'nothing'. For authors such as Brown (2009; 2017), these changes are seen to have happened quite suddenly and violently in the 1960s. This thesis explores these temporal aspects to secularisation debates as well as how to understand the quality of change from religious to non-religious. My research shows how such arguments about the 1960s bringing about a sudden 'deChristianisation' (Brown 2009), or models such as Hervieu-Léger's (2000) that suggest a 'break' in a religious 'chain of memory', do not reflect lived experiences. I have shown how, despite participants experiencing post-war cultural shifts (including those of the 1960s), this did not mean a clean break from religious pasts, but continued and transformed connections to religion. This is particularly visible in how participants approached key life events such as marriage, christenings, and death, and support Hugh McLeod's (2007) argument that the cultural, social, and religious changes of the 1960s did not impact everyone in the same way nor at the same rate. Whilst secularisation arguments, such as those mentioned above, are valuable for showing the ways cultural shifts in society can challenge once dominant, in this case, religious structures, they are inherently limited in seeing secularisation as a linear process. By using life-history narratives, this thesis has brought a new vantage point on how these changes impacted real people and has shown how religion does not disappear in a linear manner, or at all, but can be drawn on in the reforming of religious traditions into new, non-believing worldviews and identities.

Because of factors such as participants' age, their historical backgrounds, and their relationships with peers or different generations, older adult non-believers experience a world of complex religious and non-religious realities and influences. Both between and within participants, I have shown how inconsistency and diversity in people's lived non-belief poses limitations to assigning non-believing or non-religious typologies to participants as previous work has done (e.g. Eccles 2012; Sheard 2014; Silver *et al* 2014; Lee 2015; Manning 2015). This is not to say my participants felt at a loss or a need to belong and situate themselves coherently into specific identities or groups. Rather, this complexity and incongruity did not seem to present too much of an issue, and the non-believing worldviews which now play a role in participants' lives provide a sense of meaning and understanding in the plethora of influences they experience.

As well as contributing to the literature which concerns secularisation, and with it certain types of non-religious experiences and identities, the current thesis has made several wider contributions to the field of the sociology of religion and non-religion. This thesis has contributed to the nascent area of lived non-religion approaches to research. Where existing research has looked at the lived realities of non-religious and non-believing people through the lens of a non-religious organisation (Mumford 2015; Bullock 2017), or through particular topics (Beaman 2017; Salonen 2018), this thesis looks at the 'ordinary' non-believer, by which I mean those who do not belong to a non-religious organisation, and focuses on these people in their everyday lives. Also, by taking a life-history approach, this research has allowed us to see how lived non-belief operates over a lifetime, and how the impact of historical contexts and the relationships bound up in the stories that people tell, provide us with insight into complex and multifaceted non-believing realities. This leads to understanding non-religious and non-believing realities as neither perfectly ordered nor coherent, but as having inconsistencies, contradictions, and variation.

In this thesis, I have shown how lived non-belief for participants is not, for the most part, primarily about belief itself (or lack thereof). In day-to-day life, whether or not one believes in God is of no great consequence for these older adults. My participants do not have a fixed set of coherent non-beliefs by which they live their life, similar to, for example, Brown's (2017) 'humanist condition'. Rather, we see a messy bricolage of liberal values, and often illiberal values too, continued connections to religious cultures, and newer non-religious cultures, all of which configure in different ways for non-believing older adults according to the situations they find themselves in. Through participants narrating their lives, experiences, and relationships, we are able to see lived non-belief for the complex configuration it is, not an absolute position. I am reminded of a quote from Pam (68, Liverpool) who stated about her non-belief: 'Erm I don't think it makes any difference. Not that I'm aware of anyway. So er…it's not something that I get out of bed thinking "today is a non-believing day!"'. Participants' non-believing worldviews and identities, which are associated with a set of liberal ideals, appear to have a more pervasive impact on daily living than their non-believing itself. Whilst authors have noted the presence of such liberal ideals in British society more generally (e.g. Bagg and Voas 2009; Woodhead 2016), for these older adult non-believers, it is something they feel sets them apart from others. This resonates with thinking from within critical secular studies which sees the non-religious (or 'secularists') as assuming the illiberal nature of religion

(e.g. Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 2007; Lee 2015; 2016). For my participants, this liberal outlook made up an element of their life which linked uniquely to being non-believers.

In chapter 5, I highlighted how indifference could be real for many participants, with non-belief playing a very minor role in day-to-day life. But the methods I chose allowed another level of daily life to come to the surface, for example, indifference as an ideological position linked to a liberal humanist identity. In practice, upholding this ideological identity was not always possible and participants described frequent examples of the role social relationships and contexts had in stifling indifference and transforming non-belief into to a significant identity which required defending and asserting.

These findings contribute to existing research on religious and non-religious indifference (see edited collection by Quack and Schuh 2017; and Lee 2014; 2015). Through a lived approach that pays attention to wider societal changes and discourses, I show how increased individualism and autonomy can be expressed through non-believing worldviews and identities such as that of indifference, whether ideological or real. The idea of not caring and being indifferent reflects the move towards ideas of the individual as important and people as autonomous beings. By arguing that indifference may be better understood as a narrative and an ideological identity linked to liberal values, I again show how lived realities do not map onto neat states of actually being indifferent. This argument is much closer to Lee's (2015) idea of 'indifferentism' which holds that people may understand themselves as indifferent as a social or cultural practice or for ideological reasons. Where Lee sees indifference as a 'power move' (that people claim to be non-partisan and therefore more rational, and therefore more credible than religious others, for example), I posit this identity of indifference as emerging out of a liberal humanist ideology.

Because of the social and situational nature of participants' non-believing worldviews and identities, we saw how indifferent identities did not always work in practice. When participants were confronted with religion in some way, or had unwanted or strained contact with a religious individual, for example, indifference could be set aside. When this happens, participants' non-believing identities go from being tacit to becoming more overt and significant. It is through these contexts and relationships that we are given insight into the performative element of non-believing worldviews and identities. Participants' lives, then, are structured around social relations and the contexts that come with them, rather than around coherent, epistemic belief and non-belief statements, or proscribed ways of thinking or acting.

This importance of sociality is also argued by Abby Day (2011) whose work was influential in making clearer the social nature of my own participants' non-believing worldviews. Day emphasises that her participants' sense of belief is created, co-produced, and bound up in believing what others in their community believe or different groups of belonging. For instance, she explains how young people believe in family relationships. My own findings build on Day's and show that my participants do not just believe what everyone around them believes: they can, and do, have different viewpoints, worldviews, beliefs, and identities from others in their social circles. But we see the lived reality of participants' non-believing worldviews and identities in how these differences or similarities in relationships are still profoundly social, in the way Day's work emphasises, including how they are negotiated. There are points of connection and disconnection, and for my participants it is through mediating these points of difference or commonality in their relationships that non-believing worldviews and identities are developed, transformed, and lived.

Crucially, as a study in lived non-religion, this thesis has deepened knowledge and understanding of what non-belief looks like for the ordinary person (that is, those recruited from the community, rather than turning to non-religious organisations). I have been able to show the complex and seemingly contradictory elements of lived non-belief at different times in peoples' lives, e.g. expressing tolerance and then sharing intolerant views. Others have noted this contradictory nature of non-religious worldviews and identities (e.g. Zuckerman 2008; Day 2011; Zuckerman 2012; Bădică 2013; Karamelska 2013; and Koleva 2013; Young 2013; Lee 2015; Manning 2015) and show how such examples of cultural performance (e.g. religious practice) do not always consistently reflect religious and non-religious beliefs or views. My own work expands on their findings to highlight the intersubjective ways in which such contradictions can occur. Importantly, however, the contradictions that us scholars identify are not always understood as such by the people we conduct research with. Although some might acknowledge certain parts of their lived experiences that are at odds (as in, for example, Jane's [68, Canterbury] understanding of lighting a candle in a cathedral, to remember her mother and sister, as incongruous with her non-belief), many did not. What researchers see as contradictory can often be knitted together coherently in a participant's subjective experience, challenging the idea that they are contradictory at all. Many have both religious and non-religious commitments which sit comfortably together in their life. Thus, where I identify points of 'contradiction', this is not to make these experiences less worthy or valid, but perhaps more of

a reflection of the continued need for both more understanding of these complementary religious and non-religious experiences, and a better language to describe them.

By taking a lived non-religion approach, this work not only tells us about the lived non-believing generally, it also highlights specificities of non-belief in older-adulthood. What I have argued through this thesis is that, due to the historical contexts in which participants grew up, there are pervading ideas around religiosity and old age from different generations and from peers, as well as from scholarly work. As older adults, participants are often expected to be religious or to participate in religious practices throughout different times in their lives. There are all sorts of assumptions and expectations placed on participants, and these are most overt in relation to life-cycle events. Participants have learned to negotiate these expectations in different ways over their lifetimes. The ways in which participants acted in or negotiated these situations seemed to have developed over time and in relation to life changes. Elizabeth's (79, Canterbury) interview provides a clear example.

Elizabeth got married in a church because she felt pressure to do so, even though she had some uncertainties. When her first child was born, these pressures were still present, but she resisted these and opted for a non-religious alternative christening with 'lay godparents'. When it came to organising a funeral for her late husband, she defied expectations of religiosity, opting instead for a non-religious funeral, despite the 'raised eyebrows', and even despite her husband's own wishes. The funeral did include a psalm as a 'token gesture' for religious family members, but instead of Elizabeth's decisions trying to fit into the religious norm, in this case it was reversed: the token gesture allowed religion to find a place in a non-religious setting instead. Consequently, rather than older-adulthood being a time defined by ongoing loss, in Elizabeth's case we saw her gaining more traction and confidence in her non-belief as she aged.

Whilst Elizabeth's example fits well with a secularisation narrative on the surface, i.e. becoming less religious over time, religion and religious contexts have still remained important to her throughout, and she still identifies as 'Church of England'. Secularisation theories, as they stand, do not necessarily capture this complexity. Whilst I am not arguing that secularisation processes, as described in those theories, have not taken place, nor that people are in fact religious deep down, I argue that their general descriptions of how change takes place – and the nature of that change – are not sufficient. Whilst transformations have clearly taken place, as with Elizabeth's example, the idea of moving from religion to non-religion in all the elements of a person's life does not accurately describe those changes. The

transformations I show are more complicated and are about the reconfigurations of social and cultural forms rather than the disappearance of one cultural form (religion) into nothing.

One benefit of the life-history approach taken in this study is using participants' memories to think about change over time, and to explore the development of non-believing worldviews and identities at different moments in life. This methodological vantage-point was considered beneficial to see how non-believing worldviews and cultures may be shared between generations. As such, the current study has also contributed to existing research which explores non-religious socialisation and transmission. Rather than a 'subtraction model' (Taylor 2007; Lee 2015) which focuses on religion-centred theories, such as the idea that the growing number of non-religious people in society is due to a failure of parents to religiously socialise their children (Voas and Crockett 2005; Crockett and Voas 2006; Lanman and Buhrmester 2017), I have shown how non-believing and non-religious worldviews can be passed on and transmitted, both implicitly and explicitly. This contributes to an emerging body of research that shows the transmissibility of non-religious belief and identity (e.g. Bengtson *et al* 2018; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019).

In chapter 6, I showed how parenting decisions do not follow a set path. The ways in which participants approached socialising their children took various forms – exemplified by the importance given to providing children choice. I showed not only how ideas of how this choice can be facilitated varied between participants, but also the ways in which approaches to choice-giving can be shaped by wider social structures, namely gender. Even though similar ideals of choice-giving operate in female participants' narratives, practice related to this can differ. I shed light on the different ways in which some women might keep their views hidden and perform neutrality when it comes to bringing up their children in relation to religion, in order to facilitate their children's 'choice'. I also highlighted the ways in which men could be much more explicit about their non-belief. I argue that both mothers and fathers can impact on, and limit, their children's 'choice' in several ways, but these can differ along gender lines. These findings show us how liberal humanist worldviews and values, such as freedom of choice, can manifest in ways which are culturally contingent and reflect social structures.

My findings have also contributed to understandings of how non-believers approach end-of-life, from an ordinary perspective, building on existing research by the likes of Engelke (2015b), MacMurray and Fazzino (2017), and Manning (2019), but moving away from a focus on organised non-religion, or those facing end-of-life in care facilities. Even though my

participants were non-believers and non-religious, I found my participants to have notable continued connections to religion during end-of-life contexts, be it through expectations of religiosity from others or turning to religious practices due to familiarity or a lack of known alternatives, rather than moving completely away from religion. This study seeks to think beyond the debates about how religion or non-religion at end-of-life might impact upon coping, fear, or acceptance of death and shows a more holistic picture of the ways in which people actually experience and understand end-of-life as part of the life course, and in relation to their non-believing worldviews, including these ongoing connections to religion.

Although some research argues that having a strong faith or a belief system can help people prepare for death (Wilkinson and Coleman 2010), others have argued that death can be a time of uncertain and conflicting beliefs (Coleman *et al* 2002; 2007). I found that both could be the case. Some participants drew on their non-believing worldviews to explain and come to terms with death, and death could be a context where their non-belief became explicitly important. For others, contexts around end-of-life could be a time of questioning and instability. This further highlights the importance of moving away from binary understandings of belief and non-belief, and religion and non-religion, to consider, in more detail, the interconnected nature of these influences in people's lives.

The current thesis, then, has contributed to several areas of research within the field of non-religious studies and the sociology of religion more widely. The above discussion has showcased the varied ways in which the research questions of this thesis have been approached and addressed. But there are several remaining and new questions which arise from this research, as well as a number of implications.

Remaining Questions & Future Implications

Having shown how the worldviews and identities of non-believing older adults are deeply relational, contextual, and intersubjective, I have argued that this challenges existing research which renders religious attachments as vanishing from non-believing lives and which depicts non-believing worldviews and identities as primarily and inherently liberal humanist, and philosophical, moral, or intellectual rather than social in nature. By instead seeing the intersubjective, multifaceted, and negotiable nature of non-believing realities, this thesis argues for a move away from binary thinking and from a linear process of religious to non-religious, as is suggested through secularisation theories. This is not to say secularisation has not 'happened' *per se*, but rather that the transformations it entails have been simplified in

secularisation theories and do not reflect lived reality. The discussion chapters have taken us through snapshots of participants' lives, showing the various ways in which these findings play out in everyday life through the narratives of participants. These findings raise several more points to be considered.

In chapter 7, I showed how contexts around end-of-life could be a time of questioning, uncertainty, and instability, but more could be known about the stability or instability of non-believing worldviews, for example by asking non-believers about changes over their life in a more directed way. I discussed the examples of Fiona (66, Liverpool) and Kate (67, Canterbury) and moments in which their non-belief was momentarily set aside in times of loss and distress, before they returned to non-belief. There may be older adults who experienced similar situations but did not revert to non-belief, who would not have been recruited for this research; future research could explore these narratives more deeply to understand how the relationship between belief and non-belief may play out in alternative trajectories. Other approaches could include specifically recruiting people who have experienced instability, uncertainty, and/or questioning of their non-religious beliefs and worldviews. Asking more specific questions around these contexts – such as, when did the questioning or feelings of instability start? What was the trigger? Does death play a significant role for other non-religious people? What caused the questioning or unstable nature to end? – could further show how conceptualising non-belief as arising from a linear shift from 'religious' or 'believer' to 'non-religious' or 'non-believer' might not be an accurate reflection of people's experiences.

This would further enrich and challenge secularisation arguments that depict religious belief and non-belief as zero-sum states, by shedding more light on the non-binary nature of non-believing worldviews and identities, seeing them instead as changeable, negotiable, and connected, intersubjectively, to people's histories, their social relationships, and the various contexts they have lived through and experienced. Further, this line of research could provide a step away from the more superficial explorations of changes in identity over time (e.g. Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam's [2010] work on liminality, and Voas' [2009] work on 'fuzzy' religious and non-religious identities) which suggest that people jump between religious and non-religious affiliations and that they are somehow stuck in an 'in-between' state. There is room to explore the intertwined and connected nature of religion and non-religion and how this can sit comfortably in someone's life, rather than them being stuck in a transition from one state to another. There is also scope to look more in-depth at changes in belief over time and

how such beliefs can be socially embedded and bound up with both religious and non-religious cultures. Whilst existing findings highlight interesting trends, more in-depth qualitative studies may be able to provide deeper understanding about what happens in these unstable situations.

Whilst a number of participants communicated the importance of their non-religious choices being respected in death, I argue that within my sample it was often the case that religion was still considered the norm for older adults – even in the context of secularised society – and is often automatically turned to. This could have several implications for policy, wellbeing, and care. This might include having non-religious support readily available for older adults, but also recognising that people may not be 'religious' or 'non-religious' in a single or bounded sense and may draw on multiple sources when experiencing loss or death. In life, these older adults do not fit into neat boxes; this is also the case with death, which, if considered, could provide older adults with more suitable means of support in difficult times, such as those around end-of-life. Chaplaincy, for example, tends to be organised by religious representatives, and more recently, non-religious pastoral support has developed in line with a Humanists UK campaign (Humanists UK 2020). My work suggests that these types of support may be valuable but perhaps that strict adherence to the idea of 'religious' and 'non-religious' support might be unhelpful in relation to how people actually relate and engage with these issues in real life.

To understand matters around socialisation and transmission further, future research could build on the data presented here by interviewing different generational members of families together. In chapter 6, I showed how participants themselves did not always notice the implicit impacts they had on their children. There were examples of participants performing neutrality in order not to influence their children, seen as a method of facilitating 'choice'. Interviewing parents and children together might shed light on how these issues around socialisation might be remembered differently. This could build on existing work within the field, for instance Bengtson *et al* (2018) who undertook intergenerational interviews based in the US, not least since wider cross-cultural comparison is necessary to advance research on this topic, especially as we have seen how religion and non-religion are both culturally contingent. One example of this regional variation may be indicated by the contrast between Bengtson *et al's* finding that parents deliberately socialise their children to be non-religious, and the alternative approaches found in my research; this difference might also reflect my recruiting outside of non-religious organisations. In this way, research with larger populations, from more diverse backgrounds,

and varied geographical locations, may be able to show more clearly different socialisation patterns.

I also highlighted the presence of gendered differences when it came to socialisation and transmission. Future research could explore this potential gendered element in more detail and systematically, with different societal groups from different parts of the world. Do we, for example, see this repeated in countries where religious identification and belief are less private, such as the US? Might we also find that, with younger generations, or in different cultural contexts, this gendered split is less pronounced in line with moves toward more gender equality? Knowledge around the micro-processes of non-religious socialisation is beginning to be addressed by scholars (e.g. Bengtson *et al* 2018; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019) and my own study also contributes to understanding this, but these are nascent areas of research and there is much more to be known.

Ultimately, despite older adults being overlooked within the field, and despite the fact that they make up a smaller number of non-religious and non-believers than other age groups, their experiences, understandings, and narratives offer a unique and valuable vantage-point from which to understand the lived reality of non-belief. To ignore their voices means running the risk of only partially understanding the ways in which cultural changes and transformations over time can impact upon, not only older adults' non-believing worldviews and identities, but those of younger generations too. Whilst Linda Woodhead argues that in trying to understand a shift from 'Christian to non-religious Britain' that 'the more important story has to do with children' (Woodhead 2016: 249), in fact, this story cannot be fully appreciated without attending to the generations before them who helped pave the path towards some of the non-religious and non-believing realities we know today.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Intro – overview of study, consent form, don't to answer any questions you don't want to, if you want to take a break that is fine, I will be writing notes, any questions before we start.

Do you have a chosen term or label you would like to use throughout the interview to describe your chosen position?

Prompt – list of terms if needed (e.g. non-believer, atheist, agnostic, indifferent, unbeliever) (adapted from Lee 2015)

Questions

- Could you take me back to when you first started to thinking about non-belief, or when you first realised? When did your understanding of being a non-believer begin?

1. Could you talk me through the influence and role of religion and [chosen term] in relation to your life?

So if we start with your childhood…. Teenage years/working life/adulthood/today?

  a. Can you take me back to when you first started to notice or think about it? What you think is important or meaningful in terms the people, places, events involved?
  b. Prompt on key life events e.g. marriage, children, education, loss of loved ones, illness…?
  c. Was there anything you did – like a ritual or tradition – which was distinguished from religion? Can you give an example?

Draw on what they have discussed in relation to the last question or ask specifically question 2.

2. Where there any wider influences on your [chosen term] beyond your personal experiences? Again, like the previous question, if you could try and think back through moments throughout your life, e.g. childhood, youth, adulthood and working life up until today… (prompts: moments in time, eras, decades, or any wider societal or political situation, books, celebs, films, key figures, politicians)
    a. Did you ever feel part of any wider movements or ways of thinking? How?
    b. Did it ever help you distinguish yourself from others in society? How?

3. Can you tell me a bit about if and how your [chosen term] has impacted on / or played a role in your relationships with other people throughout your life? (Childhood, youth, adulthood and working life up until today - link back to people they have already mentioned).

e.g. has your [chosen term] ever caused any conflicts or tensions with anyone? Or has it ever been a source of interest or discussion? E.g. with friends, family, neighbours or colleagues? (adapted from Lee 2015)

a. Ask to expand, what was the conflict/tension?
b. What was the situation like?
c. How do you think that these different relationships/experiences with other people have impacted upon your [chosen term] in any way?
d. Do most people know about your [chosen term]? Is there anyone who doesn't know about your [chosen term]? Who, why?

4. Do you think your [chosen term] was influenced by anyone in particular? [e.g. a parent, grandparents, children other family member or friend?] Can you give me some examples throughout your life, i.e. as a child and as you got older?
   a. If not – was there something or someone else that strongly influenced it?
   b. Do you think you've ever influenced someone else's beliefs with your [chosen term]?

5. [if they have children] Can you tell me a little bit about if and how you decided to bring your children up in relation to religion or not? Do your children have similar beliefs to you now?
   a. If yes – do you think your own [chosen term] was influential in this? How so?(were there any little traditions or rituals you had? Was it overt? Or was it more of a subtle influence?)
   b. If no – what are their beliefs? why do you think that is?

6. Overall, would you say your [chosen term] has been constant throughout your life, or has it changed at any time? If so, can you give me some examples?
   a. We talked earlier about some of the things you *do* believe in and that are important to you and which you live your life by. Have these changed over time or throughout your life?

      make it specific to each person in relation to when they talk about their non-belief e.g. keep in mind what they've already mentioned.

7. Apart from the things we talked about at the beginning of the interview. Could you tell me a bit about what role your [chosen term] plays in your day to day life now, how important is it on a day to day basis?
   - What difference does being a non-believer make to your life?

8. Is there anything else important or that you would like to share that we haven't discussed in relation to what we've been talking about?

9. If you were looking back on your life, can you tell me what sorts of things might make you personally feel that you had lived a meaningful life?[60]
    - Has it changed?

Descriptive exercise – although this interview is about your lack of traditional religious beliefs [or whatever chosen term] could you tell me about some of the mains points of what you *don't* believe in but also some of the main points of what you *do* believe in? [61]

Prompts: What (if any) beliefs or viewpoints help influence the way you live? What are the main tenets you govern your life by? What is sacred to you? Or is there anything you're morally committed to?

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[60] Question 9 was added after first three interviews to try and dig deeper into what people found meaningful.

[61] The descriptive exercise was originally at the beginning of the interview; this was moved to the end of the interview because it was quite a difficult question for participants to answer. See methodology chapter for more discussion.

Appendix 2: Participant Information

Name	Age	Gender	Location	Statement Chosen	Interview length
Albert	80	Male	Canterbury	A	1:08:08
Amanda	69	Female	Canterbury	A	0:27:35
Amy	74	Female	Liverpool	A	1:21:45
Anna	80	Female	Canterbury	A	1:01:29
Ben	66	Male	Canterbury	B	1:14:04
Carl	80	Male	Liverpool	B	1:56:16
Carmel	78	Female	Canterbury	A	0:53:47
David	75	Male	Liverpool	A	1:33:29
Diane	74	Female	Liverpool	A	1:27:17
Ellen	67	Female	Liverpool	A	1:20:32
Elizabeth	79	Female	Canterbury	B	0:55:52
Fiona	66	Female	Liverpool	A	0:45:53
Frances	75	Female	Canterbury	B	0:59:23
Fred	86	Male	Liverpool	A	0:55:41
Gillian	65	Female	Liverpool	A	1:11:32
Harry	70	Male	Canterbury	A	1:17:41
Jane	68	Female	Canterbury	A	1:11:16
Jean	85	Female	Canterbury	A	2:35:05
John	66	Male	Canterbury	B & F	0:43:15
Joseph	67	Male	Liverpool	A	1:04:12
Judith	73	Female	Liverpool	A	0:51:17
Julie	68	Female	Liverpool	A	0:52:42
Kate	67	Female	Canterbury	B	1:38:54
Laura	77	Female	Liverpool	B	1:51:57
Liam	69	Male	Canterbury	A	1:07:37
Maryam	70	Female	Liverpool	A	1:35:04
Michael	66	Male	Canterbury	B	1:41:56
Nick	67	Male	Liverpool	A	0:49:26
Pam	68	Female	Liverpool	A	0:57:17
Paul	85	Male	Canterbury	A	1:10:03
Peter	71	Male	Liverpool	A	0:32:53
Rebecca	70	Female	Canterbury	A	0:18:55
Richard	74	Male	Canterbury	A	1:09:44
Rishan	80	Male	Canterbury	B	1:18:40
Robert	69	Male	Liverpool	A	0:22:53
Ruth	72	Female	Canterbury	A	0:49:53
Tim	76	Male	Canterbury	A	0:57:52

Appendix 3: Eligibility Questions

1 –D.O.B

2 – Which of the following statements would you say comes closest to what you believe?

a) I don't believe in God
b) I don't know whether there is a God, and I don't believe there is any way to find out.
c) I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind
d) I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others
e) While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God
f) While I have doubts, I feel that I don't believe in God
g) I know God really exists and I have no doubt about it
h) Don't know

3 - Do you or have you ever participated in an atheist, secularist, humanist, or similar organizations at a national or local level, or online?

- Yes
- No

3.1 - If you so, how frequently do you attend meetings?

- NA
- Rarely
- Once every few months
- Once a month
- A few times a month
- Once a week
- More than once a week.

Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet

Research Project Title: *Insights into the Experiences, Stability and Nature of Non-Belief for Older Adults in the UK*

My name is Joanna Malone, I am a PhD student at the University of Kent and I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. You have been asked to participate because you have identified as an older adult who does not have traditional religious beliefs (e.g. a belief in God) and I would like to hear more about your experiences and thoughts.

Please read this participant information sheet carefully and feel free to discuss it with friends and family and/or myself before deciding whether to take part.

What is the research about?

This research aims to better understand the experiences of older adults who do not hold traditional religious beliefs (e.g. a belief in God), however they may choose to label or describe this outlook. It aims to explore what may have influenced a person's outlook, values and beliefs over their lifetime and whether their views about religious matters have changed over their lifetime or not.

What do I have to do if I agree to participate?

Participation involves taking part in an interview (which should last no longer than 2 hours). In this interview, you will be asked questions about your religious non-belief over your lifetime, and will often be asked to think about situations in which religious belief or non-belief may have played a significant role. I will ask you a number of questions which will start off quite broad (asking about your life-history) and then get more specific throughout the interview (e.g. asking about certain situations).

You are not obliged to answer any questions if you do not wish to and if you do not want to continue, you are free to leave the interview at any time and without giving a reason.

How will you use the data that I provide?

The interview will be audio recorded; these recordings will then be uploaded onto a password protected computer, only accessible to myself. They will then be transcribed. Any personal information, such as names or places, will be changed so that the transcripts are anonymous. I will then analyse the data which will become a key element of my PhD Thesis, which may be published in the future. A summary of the findings can be shared with you at the end if you wish. I will also ask for your voluntary consent to allow the data to be archived for re-use in future projects.

Benefits of participating

Your responses will provide data that help us understand the perspectives of older adults who lack traditional religious beliefs, about whom relatively little research has been done. Your participation will therefore provide important insights for understanding experiences, attitudes, and values in the UK today.

What happens if I want to withdraw?

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time throughout the interview process. Please contact me and your interview and transcripts will be deleted. You do not have to give a reason for your withdrawal. If the data has already been published, it will be impossible to exclude your anonymised data from the published analysis at that stage. However, your responses can be excluded from other future publications and presentations.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am the principal organiser of the research and it is a fully funded Collaborative Doctoral Award PhD studentship between the University of Kent (Department of Religious Studies) and the John Templeton Foundation.

Please feel free to contact me via email or telephone on the details provided below.

Joanna Malone
University of Kent
Department of Religious Studies
School of European Languages and Culture
Email: jlm66@kent.ac.uk
Tel: 07871343650

Who can I talk to if I have concerns about this research?

You can talk to me or, Shane Weller, Chair of the School Research Ethics Advisory Group (contact details below).

What if you want to make a complaint?

If you are unhappy with any aspect of the study and wish to speak with someone other than me you can contact Shane Weller, Chair of the School Research Ethics Advisory Group at the address/telephone number below.

Professor Shane Weller
School of European Culture and Languages
University of Kent
Cornwallis North-West
Canterbury CT2 7NF
S.J.Weller@kent.ac.uk
+44(0)1227 824716

Thank you for taking the time to read this information leaflet. I look forward to talking with you should you choose to take part in this study. If you wish to ask any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Appendix 5: Consent Form

Title of project: Insights into the Experiences, Stability and Nature of Non-Belief for Older Adults in the UK

Name of investigator: Joanna Malone

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm I have read and understand the information sheet for the study (Version 1 – 11/09/2018). I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. *(If you would like to withdraw please contact Joanna Malone. Telephone number:* ***07871343650*** Email address: ***jlm66@kent.ac.uk****).*

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis.

4. I understand what will happen to the data collected from me for the research.

5. I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded

6. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give my permission for a transcript of the interview to be published in a data repository, and for parts of the interview

transcript to be quoted in publications, teaching materials or other outlets under the condition that they are made anonymous.

7. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

______________________ ______________________ ______________________

Name of participant	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant