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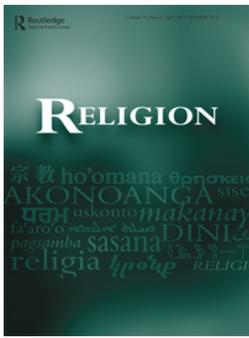
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# The importance and limitations of 'Choice' in child-rearing practices for non-believing older adults

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## The importance and limitations of ‘Choice’ in child-rearing practices for non-believing older adults

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### ABSTRACT

Rising numbers of ‘religious nones’ across many former Christian liberal democracies have brought about increasing academic research to understand this growing population. Questions remain, however, about the mechanisms involved in processes of secularisation and the growth of non-religion. This article draws on a qualitative study of non-believing older adults in England, reflecting on their practices of child-rearing and socialisation in the second half of the twentieth century, a period identified as crucial to secularisation processes in the UK and elsewhere. Discussions around the importance of ‘choice’ for children in relation to religion are central to participants’ narratives, yet it is shown how freedom of choice is more complex in reality. It also reveals how notions of ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’ in relation to religion can reflect certain social structures, such as gender, and could sit in tension with respondents’ own wishes and desires.

### KEYWORDS

Non-belief; non-religion; religion; gender; secularisation; socialisation; transmission; parenting practices

## Introduction

This article explores the retrospective experiences of how older non-believing adults negotiated the child-rearing practices of their own children in relation to religion and provides original insight into the particular constraints they experienced as non-believers, a minority in relation to the broader religious landscape in Britain at this time. Although we know that the growth of non-religion is linked to changing processes of socialisation into religion (e.g., Bengtson et al. 2018), there is still comparatively little qualitative research exploring the everyday ‘micro-practices’ (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019) of child-rearing practices that feed into this changing religious landscape. This article therefore seeks to address this under-explored issue through examining how older non-religious adults remember socialising their children during the 1950s–1980s. In doing so, my aim is to provide deeper understanding of how processes of secularisation or ‘atheisation’ (Sheard 2014), the shift from religious belief to non-belief, may take place across generations, which may help provide more understanding as to where we are today in relation to non-religion in the UK.

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This article highlights how tropes around choice and autonomy are common in the child-rearing practices of non-believing parents. These narratives have been situated within the decline of religion more generally in the twentieth century and sought to show how parenting decisions, especially the role of mothers, have often been portrayed in sociological literature as responsible for ‘failed’ religious transmissions (McLeod 2007; Brown 2009). This article challenges assumptions that are often made that non-religious transmission takes place across generations through *either* a lack or ‘failure’ of religious socialisation *or* through parents seeking to impart a non-religious worldview to their children. Instead, this research reveals a more nuanced portrait of how non-believing adults sought to embody a stance of ‘neutrality’ in relation to religion to give their children a sense of ‘choice’ in relation to religion and belief, while at the same time often implicitly performing their non-religious or anti-religious sensibilities.

Further, this article argues that not only is children’s freedom of choice limited by parents in various ways, but gendered roles and expectations can shape child-rearing practices in relation to religion, challenging claims that the decline of religion is – at least in part – due to mothers’ failure to transmit religion (McLeod 2007; Brown 2009). Rather, I argue that mothers, even when they did not hold religious beliefs themselves, sought to perform a stance of religious neutrality and support their children’s religious engagement, whilst fathers were much more explicit about their non-belief, potentially transmitting more explicit non-religious – and sometimes anti-religious – norms and beliefs this way. This article highlights the complexities of socialisation processes and sheds light on some of the practical limitations on freedom of religious choice both for participants themselves and of their children.

The research discussed in this article contributes to the burgeoning literature on non-belief and non-religion and is drawn from a study conducted with 37 non-believing older adults in England, exploring their lived experiences of their non-belief over their lifetimes. By non-believing, I draw on the *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism* (Lee and Bullivant 2016) definition to capture my respondents’ state of not having (especially religious) faith or belief. Whilst recognising the drawbacks of such terminology, namely the suggestion that there is a *lack* of something, non-belief was chosen as this term includes atheist and agnostic outlooks, allowing for a broad spectrum of non-believing outlooks to be considered. In this article I am treating non-belief as an aspect of non-religion. Whilst it is recognised that non-believing populations may still identify as religious, this was not the case with the participants in this study, although as will become apparent, they could still have ongoing connections and sentiment to religion in various ways. For a more thorough debate around such terminology see Lee (2012).

## Background

### *Non-religion, generations, and transmission*

Older adult non-believers provide an under-used opportunity to understand the rise of non-religious populations and secularisation processes, in general and in relation to changes between generations. In Britain, as in many other Western societies, the growing numbers of those who identify as not religious, sometimes referred to as ‘religious nones’, are well documented within sociological research (British Social Attitudes Survey 2017; Day and Lee 2014; Lee 2015; Woodhead 2016). Research has shown how

‘non-religion’ has become the norm for younger age groups (Lee 2015; Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2014; Woodhead 2016) but that it remains the exception for older age groups (Woodhead 2016; Crockett and Voas 2006). Because of this, non-religious older adults have been overlooked and are typically considered to be less theoretically and empirically significant due to their minority status. As Woodhead (2016, 249) asserts, ‘the more important story has to do with children’ when trying to understand a shift from ‘Christian to non-religious Britain’ (Woodhead 2016, 249). Despite older adults being a minority when it comes to the non-religious, in Britain they still make up a significant proportion of the non-religious population – with 40.9% of those aged 65–74, and 31.1% of those aged 75 and over, ticking the ‘no religion’ box (British Social Attitudes Survey 2018). In relation to non-believers more specifically, data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (2018) show that of respondents aged 65 and over, 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.<sup>1</sup> Despite older adults making up smaller numbers of the non-religious, they nevertheless represent a large number of individuals in the UK who we know relatively little about.

Significantly for this article, older adults also represent a population whose experiences and actions are key to understanding a crucial but contested moment of religious decline, namely the 1960s. Authors such as Brown (2009) argue that secularisation quite suddenly ‘happened’ in the 1960s, leading to ‘deChristianisation’. McLeod (2007) also argues for the significance of the 1960s leading to the decline of Christianity. This article seeks to address this gap and specifically contribute to understanding how older adults raised their children in relation to religion, and whose children and grandchildren now make up large numbers of the non-religious in society. I argue that experiences of older adults sheds light on the nuance of changes in child-rearing processes and intergenerational religious and non-religious transmission in Britain, and furthermore their narratives are revealing of a shift from a time when Christianity played a more dominant role in society to today where religion is less explicit in social life.

The transmission of religion is well accounted for in scholarly literature, but it is worth noting that much of the literature of religious transmission is based on large-scale surveys and are quantitative studies (e.g., Bader and Desmond 2006; Boyatzis, Dollahite, and Marks 2006; Bengtson et al. 2009). There have been fewer sociological studies of everyday micro-practices of socialisation in relation to religion, and even fewer on the socialisation practices of the non-religious and non-believing. Like the research which explores religious socialisation and the transmission of religion between generations (e.g., Bengtson, Norella, and Harris 2013; Hervieu Léger 1998), or the notion of ‘religious nurture’ (Scourfield et al. 2013) which adds more nuance and depth to the idea of the transmission of religion within families, some research has sought to argue that the rise in non-religion is a reflection of a lack or failure of religious transmission across generations (e.g., Crockett and Voas 2006; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Lanman and Buhrmester 2017; Voas and Crockett 2005; Voas 2010). Voas (2010, 29) suggests that one factor contributing to this decline of religiosity from one generation to the next is what he describes as ‘value changes

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<sup>1</sup>This second statement signifies an agnostic outlook, which, according to Lee and Bullivant (2016) ‘is a theory, belief, or ideology entailing the belief that nothing is known or can be known of immaterial things, with particular reference to the existence or nature of God’.

among parents', in which they reduce 'the priority they give to transmission of religion'. A potential reason for this decline, Voas argues, is that being religiously affiliated is less practically useful than it used to be and therefore the religious socialisation of children has become less important. Whilst existing studies drawing on large-scale quantitative data have argued that failed religious transmission helps to explain patterns of religious decline across generations, these studies do not provide insight into the substantive or implicit forms of non-religious socialisation which may be happening instead through everyday practices between different generations. Indeed, a small but growing body of research over the past decade has challenged this framing of a 'failure' to transmit religion through socialisation and has instead argued that parents and carers do pass down substantial non-believing and non-religious cultures to their children (Bengtson et al. 2018; Koleva 2013; Manning 2015; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019; Zuckerman 2012). In a study based in the US, Bengtson et al. (2018) highlight the ways in which non-religious worldviews can be actively transmitted intergenerationally, 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, whether deliberately, or implicitly through 'banal expressions of non-religion' (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019, 3), but that such transmission can also take place in schools and between peers. These findings suggest that non-believing and non-religious cultures or worldviews can indeed be passed on in similar ways to religious belief, culture, and worldviews. Thus, to fully understand how religious decline is shaped across generations, it is important to examine the past experiences and practices of the older population of non-believers and the impact they have had on the younger generations, namely their children and grandchildren.

Within secularisation approaches which emphasise the importance of the 1960s for explaining religious change and decline,<sup>2</sup> the socialisation of children within the family unit is considered centrally important for understanding this. The role of mothers in particular is regarded as influential. Brown (2009) suggests the failed transmission of religion as down to the changing role of women within the private and public sphere, highlighting how women were once the key providers of religious education, including passing on certain beliefs, practices, and rituals; the provision of which, he argues, declined in the 1960s. McLeod (2007) also highlights the role women played in the decline of 'Christendom', especially in relation to the socialisation of children, arguing that '[t]he 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' (McLeod 2007, 186). Whilst this article does not subscribe to the simple argument of failed transmission, it also highlights the role of parents, and mothers specifically, in the complexities of socialisation practices related to religion.

In this article, the term 'socialisation' refers to the processes participants engaged with, as parents, when bringing up their children in relation to issues around religion, non-religion, and belief. It is recognised that socialisation within the family, e.g., between parents and children, is only one type of socialisation, and that socialisation can also occur

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<sup>2</sup>There are several secularisation arguments that aim to explain or offer insights into religious decline in different forms. For a range of these different arguments, see Berger (1967); Bruce (2002, 2011); Chaves (1994); Norris and Inglehart (2011); Stark and Bainbridge (1996); Wilson (1969).

through several other means simultaneously (Klingenberg and Sjö 2019), e.g., in the school and with peers (see Strhan and Shillitoe 2019 and Dahl et al. 2019) or through the media (Moberg et al. 2019). ‘Transmission’ is understood as what participants, as parents, pass onto their children (whether consciously or unconsciously) in relation to ideas and understandings around religion, non-religion, belief, and associated identities or practices. Whilst these two terms complement each other and understandings, practices, and identities can be transmitted through socialisation practices within the family, drawing on Scourfield et al. (2012, 92; 2013, 20) and work by authors such as Klingenberg and Sjö (2019), it is also recognised that there is often a simplistic notion of beliefs (religious or not) being passed down in a linear direction (from parent to child). Scourfield et al. 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. So, whilst I am drawing on parents’ memories in this article, it is important to consider that these memories are not necessarily factual and only represent one part of the story and socialisation practices may be remembered and understood very differently by children themselves.

### *The rise and centrality of individual choice and autonomy*

The impact the cultural changes of the twentieth century had on wider religious norms and socialisation is highlighted by several authors, leading to an expanding gap between religious traditions and new ways of expression and identification, and a sense of differentiation between generations (Furseth and Repstad 2006). Writing about a US context in particular, Roof (2001) and Wuthnow (1998) discuss 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’ (Lynch 2007). As noted, the 1960s has been cited as a catalyst for religious decline, with authors such as Brown (2009), whose work focuses on Britain, and McLeod (2007), whose work focuses on Northern and Western Europe, North America, and Australasia, arguing that the changes of the ‘long sixties’<sup>3</sup> led to a breakdown of traditional religious communities and a turn towards the importance of individual choice. 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 Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck 2010; Heelas et al. 2005). The twentieth century saw the growth of an ideology of a child-centred society, leading to developments in education, welfare, legal, and medical institutions (Prout and James 2015). Indeed, Matheson (2014) discusses how the 1960s, in particular, saw wider shifts in educational ideology towards child-centred education and focusing on the individual child.

Choice, then, has not only become a central narrative in relation to decisions about religion, but sociological arguments have also debated the growing importance of

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<sup>3</sup>The ‘long sixties’ is a phrase used by both Brown and McLeod to capture a period of time they deem significant for understanding the decline of religion in Western society. For McLeod (2007) the period termed the ‘long sixties’ spans from 1958–1974 and for Brown (2009) the ‘long sixties’ spans from 1956–1973.

choice in society more broadly. For instance, Giddens (1991) and Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) argue that cultural traditions are replaced by ‘choice’ and that there is a growing importance for individuals in creating their own biographies, meaning that choice subsequently becomes necessary in society. Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) argue that 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 and biography: the focus is now on ‘living a life of one’s own’ (Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, 27). Where categories such as social class, gender, and religion would have been a ‘ready-made’ part of someone’s identity in the past, Beck, Bauman, and Beck-Gernsheim argue that through processes of individualisation this is no longer the case in Western societies. This is, they argue, a central component in modern society.

According to McLeod (2007), by the 1960s and 1970s, the number of children who received very little or no religious upbringing was increasing. Changes in society, such as increased affluence and leisure time led to changes in parental practices, and Sundays increasingly meant taking part in activities away from church. Concurrently ideas around childhood and children’s rights were also changing, with increased emphasis on children’s choice rather than parental enforcement (McLeod 2007). Moves toward respecting a child’s wishes increased, especially in relation to religion, 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”’ (McLeod 2007, 206).

In more contemporary work, the impact of these changes can also be seen in Manning’s (2015) study on child-rearing practices of non-religious parents in the US, where she highlights the importance parents placed on giving their children choice when it came to religious and non-religious worldviews. In their work exploring youth and religion, Madge, Hemming, and Stenson (2014) emphasise similar points around inheritance and choice, they highlight how young people talk about the importance of individual choice in relation to religion, as do Strhan and Shillitoe’s (2019) in their research amongst non-religious and non-believing children. Whilst ideals around autonomy and freedom of choice are pervasive across and beyond Western societies, we know little about how these values were expressed in particular ways in parenting practices in relation to religion across generations.

This article shows how discussions around the importance of choice for children are central to participants’ narratives of how they sought to raise their children, yet at the same time shows how freedom of choice is complex in lived reality. The approaches parent took in relation to giving their children choices could, in fact, lead to limiting or removing certain choices for their children. It also considers how such notions of freedom of choice can differ and reflect certain social structures, such as gender, and could sit in tension with respondents’ own wishes and desires.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on qualitative semi-structured life-history interviews with 37 older adults in North West and South East England. The focus is primarily on narratives surrounding their child-rearing and socialisation practices in relation to religion when

participants brought up their own children. The overarching research question was ‘how can we understand the experiences, stability, and nature of non-belief for older adults?’ There were a number of sub-questions related to: the role of non-belief in everyday life; the influence of key life events on non-belief; the formation of non-belief (e.g., if non-belief about the absence of religious belief, the presence of non-believing cultures, or a combination of both); the extent to which non-belief may be bound up with religious sentiment, practice, or identification and; the stability of non-belief over the life-course. The data discussed in this article today is related primarily to the sub-question about the formation of belief through a focus on child-rearing practices, although it does touch upon other research questions too.

### *Participants*

When recruiting, participants had to be aged 65 and over. Ages of participants ranged from 65 to 86 years old and made up of 20 women and 17 men.<sup>4</sup> The oldest participant was born in 1933 and the youngest in 1953. As such, they all experienced the societal and cultural changes of post-war Britain, as outlined above, at different times in their lives. The sample was fairly homogenous in terms of ethnicity, with all but two of my participants being white. The lack of diversity in the sample was not intentional but was a consequence of who responded to the call for participants. Participants’ ethnic identity, education level, or class identity were not asked prior to the interview, as such this was not controlled for. Of the 37 older adults in the study, 34 had children. Because of the time in which participants grew up, most of the participants grew up with some sort of religion in their childhood, but the extent and salience of this varied. Thirty-two of the participants, were brought up with some sort of Christian background (Protestant, Catholic, Methodist, and Evangelical), one participant was brought up in a Jewish household, one in a Hindu household, and one participant was brought up in a Muslim household but attended a Jewish school, and was also engaged with Christianity at other times in her life. Only two participants described their own childhoods as being non-religious.

Participants were recruited via several methods including magazine adverts, displaying flyers in local community spaces (library, supermarket, and post-offices), and contacting groups which had a focus on older adults (charities, education organisations, social groups, residents’ groups, and pensioners’ groups). I did not recruit from non-religious organisations (e.g., Humanists UK) because members of these groups may not necessarily reflect the experience of the majority of non-believers (Bullivant 2008) and within the field there is over-recruitment from these groups (Lee et al. 2017). I wanted to capture the more ‘everyday’ experiences of non-belief, following the ‘everyday-religion’ and ‘lived-religion’ approaches adopted by Ammerman (2007), McGuire (2008), and Orsi (2003). Alongside the age criteria, participants had to meet the below eligibility criteria in relation to non-belief. I adapted a question from the 2008 International Social Survey Programme Survey (ISSP 2012), which presented participants with a number of statements regarding their belief in God. Those who selected ‘I don’t believe in God’, ‘I don’t know whether there is a God, and I don’t believe there is any way to find out’, ‘I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others’, or ‘While I have doubts, I feel

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<sup>4</sup>The mean age of participants was 73 years old.

that I don't believe in God', were eligible. This allowed for a broad spectrum of non-belief to be considered.

### *Data collection*

Life history interviews were chosen to help understand the development of participants' non-belief over their lifetimes and their lived experiences at different stages of their lives. Interviews took place between October 2018 and April 2019.

All interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in a place convenient for participants, including participants' homes and public places (e.g., cafés). Interviews lasted between just under 20 minutes to just under two hours with the average length of interview being just over 90 minutes long. The interview questions probed participants to think about different times during their lives (childhood to present day), asked them to think about specific situations (e.g., bringing up children), and also asked questions about relationships, the salience of their non-belief, and potential influences on their non-belief. An interview schedule was used with participants, although some of the data discussed in this article came up naturally in the conversation, there was a specific question in relation to how participants brought up their children, if they had them, in relation to religion and non-religion (see appendix 1 for question). As well as the more structured question, based on what participants told me, I asked to follow up questions specific to them, and also asked them to think about certain situations when bringing up children and how they may have approached that (e.g., what they might have done if their child asked them questions about religion or belief). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a multi-level analysis was undertaken in which the author employed thematic analysis but also looked beyond themes and cross-referenced the social, historical, and cultural contexts which happened in participants' lifetimes.<sup>5</sup> Analysis was undertaken manually and using NVivo software. Emerging themes and examples of coding were discussed with two supervisory members of the research team. An interpretivist view was employed through analysis which recognises that people's life-history narratives are not necessarily 'factual' but are constructions which will be unique to each respondent and the specific interview (Abrams 2010; Portelli 1991). Abrams (2010) explains how the memories people draw upon are as much about the situation in the present as they are about the past, as such the narratives discussed in this article may be reflective of how participants want to understand themselves as parents, both in the past and the present. Neither are the findings discussed in this article generalisable to all non-believing older adults. All names are pseudonyms.

Institutional ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's university, and ethical issues were taken seriously throughout. All participants provided informed consent for their participation. A reflexive diary was kept throughout the duration of the fieldwork to note key information about the interview environment and dynamic. I did not find that my age (26/27 during the research) was a barrier to the rapport built between myself and participants in the interview. I found that 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

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<sup>5</sup>For instance, key events of the decades they lived through, e.g. World War II, post-war changes, or the 1960s.

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 these questions honestly, telling participants that I was brought up Catholic, was not particularly religious, and that I would define myself as agnostic. Although some participants asked 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. Some participants were unsure how to engage with me at the beginning of the interview, with one participant even admitting she was worried I would try and convert her to religion – something that was resolved after I explained that the research was exploratory and that I was interested in learning about their lived experiences.

### *Participants childhoods*

Whilst the main focus of this article relates to how participants brought up their own children, I will briefly discuss the upbringings participants themselves had. The ways in which my participants were brought up in relation to religion was varied. Some were brought up in non-believing households, whilst others were brought up in fervently religious ones, but most participants' upbringings were somewhere in the middle. All participants had contact or engagement with religion, most often Christianity, in some way during their childhoods. This contact or engagement with religion mostly came from external factors such as school and Sunday school, and sometimes religion in the home was practically absent. Some participants described how they may have still undertaken certain religious rites of passage, such as confirmation, but deeper levels of religious engagement were not expressed by most. What most participants described were 'nominal' (Day 2011) or cultural religious upbringings. 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.

Even for those brought up outside of Christianity (one participant was brought up in a Hindu household, another in a Jewish household, and another in a Muslim household), this sense of 'nominal' or cultural religious upbringing was apparent in their narratives too. So, although different religious 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., attending synagogue not a church) but on the whole, these religious upbringings were very similar to the childhoods 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.

When describing the presence and role of religion in their childhoods, participants spoke of the expectations of religiosity that permeated their lives in various ways. These expectations often came from their own parents who saw engagement as religion as the 'done thing' and reflected societal norms, something summed up by Carmel (aged 78) who grew up in the 1940s:

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?

This was something also expressed by those born in later decades too, for instance, Nick (aged 67) who grew up in the 1950s, in talking about his family’s engagement with religion 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.

The way participants talked about their own upbringings contrasted significantly from how participants discussed the way they brought up their own children. The idea of freedom of choice was central when talking about their children, albeit expressed and enacted in different ways, whilst the ways in which participants narrated their own childhoods focused on the social expectations, forced religious involvement, and a perceived lack of choice.

## Findings

This section will discuss the findings relating to different approaches to socialisation practices around religion and non-religion by participants as parents. As noted, 34 out of the 37 older adults in the study had children, and of these, 26 expressed the idea of their children having choice as important, both in terms of religion and sometimes non-religion. This was often perceived to be in contrast with their own childhood where many talked about their memories of enforced religious participation. The socialisation approaches discussed will be ‘avoidance of indoctrination’, ‘religious incorporation’, ‘socially supportive’, and ‘overt non-religion’. The four socialisation approaches were selected by looking at the key emphases and themes in relation to what participants talked about when discussing how they brought up their children. What becomes apparent is how this notion of choice for children can be seen operating in different ways through these various practices of bringing up children in relation to religion. As with much of social life, people cannot be neatly categorised, and as with these approaches to socialisation practices, participants could bridge these different approaches or could be recognised in multiple or different socialisation paths at different times.

### Avoidance of Indoctrination

As discussed, McLeod (2007) emphasised the importance of increased choice and a move away from the negative associations of indoctrination or ‘brainwashing’ when it came to religion during the ‘long sixties’. This idea was also expressed by several participants in this study, conveying their desire not to influence their children when it came to religion or non-religion. For instance, Diane (aged 74), who was brought up in a Catholic household and attended a convent school, became a non-believer at the age of 12. In our

conversation, she said about bringing up her two children in the mid-1960s: ‘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’. Likewise, David (aged 75), who brought up in a Protestant household, attended a religious school and Sunday school, and became a non-believer when he was a teenager, explained that, when bringing up his two children in the 1970s, ‘neither [my wife] or I put in, if you like, any force on [our children’s] attendance at church’.

Another example comes from John (aged 66), who grew up in a religious household, where his father was a Church of England Vicar, and who started to question his faith in his teenage years. He explained how he felt he had not influenced his two children in any way, including religion, non-religion, and his children’s ‘ethical or moral lives’. When 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[...]

Similar narratives were repeated by others, emphasising the right of their child to choose their own religious or non-religious paths and the importance of parents not to influence these choices. 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 have agency, even when they are assumed not to (Oswell 2013; Strhan 2019), and especially when it comes to issues related to religion (Hemming and Madge 2012). 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 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.

Whilst this type of perceived non-invasive approach to parenting, which involved neither forcing, nor even seeking to influence their children, was grounded in this notion of choice, participants’ narratives demonstrated that this approach nevertheless often involves removing options or not meaningfully providing options to choose from. Whether or not choice was actively 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 to them. Several participants also expressed how this extended to their children’s freedom in relation to non-religion and non-belief too.

### *Religious incorporation*

However, not all participants approached ‘choice’ in this sense of not involving their children in religion at all. Some participants actively incorporated religion (Christianity in

particular) into their child-rearing decisions to give their children knowledge about religion and thereby provide them with different options to make a choice about. For instance, Kate (aged 67), who had a strong Catholic upbringing, and attended Catholic schools, but started to question this since she was a teenager, said in relation to bringing up her children:

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.

As such, Kate incorporated religion through christening her three children and taking them to church at celebrations (e.g., Christmas) during the 1970s and 1980s. Kate also discussed how her grandson, whose mother is Muslim and the partner of her son, had been taken to the mosque by his grandfather, and thus Kate found it important to take her grandson to Church, stating: 'Well the [grandfather] would like him to go to the mosque and know what it's about. Fair enough. And I'll take him in a church somewhere along the line and tell him what it's about'. Here we can see how for Kate, this importance of incorporating religion also extended to her grandchild too.

In a similar vein to Kate, Fiona (aged 66), who was brought up in Catholic household but questioned her faith for many years from a young age, also emphasised her children's free choice. However, she also considered it important that her three 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'. Personal religiosity was not Fiona's consideration here, but rather the importance was placed on her children being exposed to Christianity to help them understand religion's place in society, which Fiona regarded as historical, traditional, and as cultural heritage. Despite being a non-believer when bringing up her children, Carmel (aged 78) also thought it was important to send her two daughters to Sunday School to learn about religion as she did when she was a child, even though she did not have them christened. In discussing her grandchildren, Carmel expressed surprise that her daughter did not send them to Sunday School like she had. Whilst these women non-believers when bringing up their children, they considered it important to include religious options – which, in practice, meant Christianity – in their children's lives.

### *Socially supportive*

Whilst Kate, Carmel, and Fiona above involved their children in religion when they were younger to give them some sort of religious knowledge and choice, some participants included the presence of religion in their child-rearing practices for very different reasons. Examples from the following four participants highlight their memories of participating in religious-related activities when bringing up their children, despite these being activities they would rather not have been involved with. Pam (aged 68), Maryam (aged 70), Jean (aged 85), and Laura (aged 77), who were all non-believers at the time, 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. Although clubs such as the Scouts today take into account religious

diversity (Mills 2012), at the time that my participants' children were attending, the link to Christianity was much more overt.

The first example of attending religious-related children's clubs comes from Jean who had two children in the early 1960s. Jean was brought up going to a Methodist Church with her parents and had been 'nominally' (Day 2011) involved with religion throughout much of her adult life, she talked about the importance of going along and supporting her daughter in religious-related activities linked with the Guides:

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 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".

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 familial relationship.

Maryam and Pam<sup>6</sup> also gave examples of participating in religious-related activities, whilst both strongly emphasising that it was not something they wanted to do. Maryam, for instance, discussed taking her two children to Brownies and Cubs as she thought it was important for them to fit in, socially. Maryam described how she felt 'sucked' into religious practice (a phrase she used in the interview) but overriding this 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. She stated:

[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.

In a similar vein, Pam gave the example of her son joining the church choir in the 1980s, explaining:

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 acknowledging that she tried her best to talk her son out of joining the choir, Pam later went on to 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

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<sup>6</sup>Maryam was brought up with exposure to Islam (through her father) as well as Judaism and Christianity (through school) and her religious identification shifted between Muslim and Christianity early in her life. Maryam started to question organised religion at around 12 years old. Pam was brought up Protestant, her mother was Catholic, and her father was an atheist. Pam started to think of herself as a non-believer when she was in her early 30s but had questioned her belief throughout her life and was a non-believer when bringing up her children.

would answer her two children's questions in a certain way so as not to expose her non-religious viewpoints, although she recognised that she did sometimes 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 the importance of letting her children make choices can go hand-in-hand with behaviours and practices that strongly encourage her non-religious norms rather than choice. 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.

Lastly, Laura was brought up attending a Methodist church and attended a religious school and began to question religion and her belief as a young teenager. In our interview, she narrated experiences of involvement in religion due to her daughter who she was bringing up in the late 1960s – early 1970s and, like Maryam, she explained that she did this because she thought it was important for her daughter to be integrated into social networks. Laura explained how attending a religious-related event was 'awful', but kept this to herself:

My daughter was in the Brownies because, again, I thought it was integrating her into local society [...] that meant you went to church parades once a month, I think ... 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 they talked about their outlooks with each other and highlight the 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 saw 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, in her view, from outside influences. This also 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 daughter's views, outlooks, or worldviews, maintaining this narrative of avoidance of indoctrination.

An example from Julie (aged 68) highlights how this socially supportive role can also extend to situations with grandchildren too. When talking about her grandchildren, Julie explained:

I've got 11 grandchildren and they go to Catholic schools [laughs] and *of course* they don't know about my religion – that I've got none religion and so they will talk about Holy things in school, I go to the nativity play to see them and all that, but they don't know that I don't believe in it. I can't say "listen, I don't believe in God", you know, 'cause what's the message to them? They've got to make up their own minds, like it took me all these years, they've got to make their own minds up.

### Overt non-religion

Some parents were much more overt about their non-belief with their children, whilst still emphasising the importance of choice. When talking about his son, Peter (aged 71), who was brought up nominally Protestant, had religious schooling and never considered himself ever believing, stated:

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.

Again, the emphasis on the choice of Peter's son is present, stating that his son 'made up his own mind' and that he never forced his own non-religious views on him. Although whether this actually happened in reality, or whether this is a reflection of the type of parent Peter sees himself as is undetermined. But Peter states how his son knew he was non-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 in practice available for his son to draw on in making 'his own mind up'.

Nick (aged 67), who was brought up Protestant, attended a religious school, regularly attended Church when younger, and who was a strong believer until his twenties, 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]'. This was also seen with Liam (aged 69), who was brought up in a nominally Protestant household, went to a religious school and Sunday school but who questioned religion between the ages of five and 10. Liam strongly emphasised letting his children make their own decisions when it came to religion. I 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. These examples demonstrate how parents often hold onto ideas of free choice and self-determination for their children in relation to religion at the same time as they expressed non-religious or anti-religious sentiments to their children. This was not something they necessarily experienced as a contradiction in practice. Liam himself recognises that perhaps passing on his views was an 'osmotic

process' but it was not something that he realised he was doing until later on in his life when he could stand back and reflect.

### Discussion

By drawing on participants' retrospective memories of bringing up their children, the findings discussed offer a unique perspective of micro-scale processes that happened at a time when religiosity was declining in many Christian liberal democracies, including the UK, helping us to see how this decline might have happened and be visible between generations within the same family. Reflecting on the experiences of older adults' child-rearing practices shows that the importance of increased freedom of choice, as well as a decline in religious transmission, can happen, as argued by the likes of Brown (2009) and McLeod (2007). What the findings also show is that the ability to choose is cultivated by parents and considered important, but that choice can be restricted, even through processes directly linked to valuing it.

The findings from this study in the UK highlight the importance of 'choice', much like Manning's (2015) work amongst non-religious parents in the US. Whilst Manning's study was conducted with a younger generation of parents, the current study also shows the importance of this narrative for an older generation of non-believing parents when they were bringing up their children during the 1950s-1980s. These findings may also be reflective of the wider societal changes in the twentieth century in relation to ideological changes around educating children, in particular the importance of child-centred practices. The variety of child-rearing practices evident shows that there is not a 'one size fits all' approach to how the non-believing participants in this study approached their parenting practices when it came to religion.

In their exploration of the 'micro-processes' of child-rearing practices of non-religious and non-believing parents, Strhan and Shillitoe (2019) highlight 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. The data in this article shows the role of the family in these processes and how narratives around choice play an important but complex role in socialisation practices when it comes to religion. The four approaches described above 'avoidance of indoctrination', 'religious incorporation', 'socially supportive', and 'overt non-religion', are not intended to be an exclusive categorisation of child-rearing practices, but highlight some of the existing complexity, showing how 'giving choice' varies significantly from parent to parent. In some cases, such as the examples described in the 'avoidance of indoctrination' approach, certain choices are actually removed by the parent so that only a single option remains. Contrastingly, some parents actively engaged in religion, although as we saw, the reasons for this could also vary; from seeing it as beneficial socially for children, to giving children the opportunity to understand the religious underpinnings of the society they live in. This is in contrast to Day's (2022) work with Baby Boomers, who found that when bringing up their children, these Baby Boomers did not incorporate any element of religion into their child rearing practices, resulting in their children being born into a 'religious vacuum' (Day 2022, 186). The continuation of religious practices or traditions discussed in this article has similarities to Beider's (2023) notion of 'religious residue', i.e., the

continuation amongst religious nones of certain religious practices or attitudes that may reflect past upbringings when Christianity was more prevalent in society. Indeed, the data presented in this article provides qualitative insight into what forms this ‘religious residue’ may take, and some of the potential reasoning behind religious continuities. For instance, it may not be the case that these people are ‘more religious’ as Beider suggests, but rather that they may incorporate particular aspects of religion into their lives for perceived social benefits for their children. Further, even though the ideal of giving children choice remained central, with the ‘overt non-religion’ approach, we also saw how explicit comments regarding non-belief and anti-religious sentiments could be aired, with the potential of limiting choice through the explicit views of parents being known. One of the interesting, and unexpected, findings of these socialisation practices was the role gender played.<sup>7</sup> The following discussion considers the role of gender in these child-rearing processes.

### *Gendered child-rearing practices*

An earlier section discussed four women, Maryam, Jean, Laura, and Pam whose stories of bringing up their children were seen as socially supportive. These 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 their perception of the importance of the social relations in these situations. There was an expectation from these women 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 the women’s own non-belief. The balance between wanting their children to have choice, being integrated in society, and participants’ own views on the matter were sometimes at odds. These findings provide nuance to existing literature which argues that women are more involved in religion than men because of ideas around the benefits of religious participation 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 finding could also result from the fact that in many heterosexual households (both religious and non-religious), childcare, as well as other domestic labour, falls to the women (Pilcher 2000), and as a result they typically end up taking their children to extra-curricular clubs, including those which are religious.

What we also see in these examples is the performance of neutrality on behalf of the women, they consciously kept quiet on matters of religion and belief to avoid their true views becoming explicit to their children. This is in stark contrast to the example given by men who unconsciously voiced their, often anti-religious, opinions and their own non-believing stances. These examples also share commonalities with Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach. Goffman argues that people’s actions are defined by particular situations and that there is a ‘frontstage’ and a ‘backstage’ to every performance. ‘Frontstage’, argues Goffman, is the presentation of the self to others: in the cases above, the four women perform in a certain way to their children – religiously or neutrally. The ‘backstage’ is where these performances lapse, for example, in their conversations with their partners. In the cases of these Maryam, Pam, Jean, and Laura, this would also refer to

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<sup>7</sup>There were no specific questions about gender differences in socialisation practices.

how they perceived their ‘true’ feelings about the situation – that which they were ‘admitting’ to during our interview. What we saw in Pam’s case is how it can be hard to maintain a performance of religious neutrality and parents can want things to cohere with their own non-religious beliefs. Where they might claim tolerance towards the religion of others (a common trope of the participants in this study) and the importance of personal choice, 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’.

It was not just with these four women that there are clear examples of women holding back opinions when it came to their non-belief. For instance, Julie and Anna (aged 80) explained how they would not make their current non-belief known to their grandchildren, believing it was ‘not their place’ to do something that could go against the wishes of their own children. Amy (aged 74) 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, despite incorporating religion in her children’s upbringing. Carmel 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 avoidance of indoctrination, then, can take several forms when bringing up children, but with women avoiding influencing or indoctrinating children appears to be manifesting itself as silence.

Whilst none of the men in the study expressed a sense of repressing their voice in this way, this does not mean it did not happen. It is important to consider how child-rearing practices are remembered and narrated (or not) by participants – hinting at different approaches to understanding ideas around influencing children and limiting their choice. Likewise, it must be recognised that 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 seemed to be more explicit than women about their non-religious or non-believing identities and worldviews when bringing up their children. As we saw with the case of Peter and Liam earlier, generally, this involved overtly expressing their non-belief or conveying disparaging comments about religion in the home. Examples such as this contrast with the approach described by a number of female participants of keeping their views and beliefs hidden and appearing neutral.

## Conclusion

By drawing on the past experiences and parental practices of non-believing older adults, this article has considered the intricacies of how change across generations may happen in everyday lived experience, adding towards an understanding of the growing numbers of ‘religious nones’ in the UK today. This article has highlighted the ways in which tropes around choice and autonomy are common in the child-rearing practices of non-believing parents. Previous research has situated these narratives within the decline of religion more generally in the twentieth century and sought to show how parenting decisions, especially the role of mothers, have often been portrayed in sociological literature as responsible for ‘failed’ religious transmissions. Yet, this article has highlighted how non-believing parents can and do play an active role in the religious socialisation of their children – the lack of religious transmission is not the only thing going on.

Indeed, not only is children's freedom of choice limited by parents in various ways, but child-rearing practices in relation to religion are being shaped by gendered roles and expectations. It was noted that mothers would often, although not exclusively, repress their voice and opinions regarding religion, perform neutrality in certain situations, and even go along with religious-based activities. These examples highlighted the importance of social relations and the impact this can have on issues around socialisation and transmission. In contrast, fathers were more likely to be open about their non-belief and not seek to perform neutrality to the same extent as mothers.

These two findings challenge claims, by those such as Brown (2009) and McLeod (2007), that the decline of religion is – at least in part – due to mothers' failure to transmit religion. Rather we see how mothers, even when they did not hold religious beliefs themselves, sought to perform a stance of religious neutrality and support their children's religious engagement, while fathers were much more explicit in their non-belief, potentially transmitting more explicit non-religious – and sometimes anti-religious – norms and beliefs this way. These findings show the complexities behind issues of socialisation in lived experiences and shed light on some of the practical limitations on ideas such as freedom of religious choice both of participants themselves and of their children. The findings discussed in this article build upon Bengtson et al. (2018), Manning (2015), and Strhan and Shillitoe (2019) to demonstrate that there is no predetermined stance on issues of socialisation, or a single set of practices for non-religious and non-believing parents. Rather, it is one of performance, negotiation, and weighing up the best available options in any given situation. Whilst not generalisable, given the small sample sizes, these observations regarding gendered differences may benefit from further research with larger numbers of participants and in different social and cultural contexts.

Future research could build on this by further examining the micro-processes of religious and non-religious socialisation practices within the family and the practices and dynamics pertaining to non-religion in contemporary contexts. Ethnographic methods could help capture such rich practices and allow for a more intimate view of such dynamics in multigenerational settings. Scholars such as Morgan (2011; 2020) emphasise the importance of exploring 'family practices' in their fluid and everyday nature, which could allow subtleties such as gender differences to be seen. This approach could also be drawn on to explore how such practices might intersect with other parts of family life and play out in daily life. Approaches such as these would provide further opportunities to further explore the complexities of child-rearing practices related to non-religion across generations from an everyday perspective.

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## Appendix 1

Interview question about bringing up 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 practices you undertook? Was it overt? Or was it more of a subtle influence?)
- b. If no – what are their beliefs? why do you think that is?