Ticking "no religion": A case study amongst "young nones"

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ABSTRACT
In the 2011 Census in England and Wales, 14.1 million people, about a quarter of the population, reported that they have "no religion". At the time, campaign groups such as the British Humanist Association claimed that this meant these people were "non-religious". But is this necessarily the case? Might those who ticked "no religion" be closer to the 46 million adult "nones" in America, who the Pew Research Center described as "religious without religious affiliation"? Or might it be better to characterise these respondents as "a-religious"? This article discusses findings from qualitative research with 14- and 15-year-olds in England who similarly identify as having "no religion". It describes these young people's understandings and constructions of "religion", made during photo-elicitation interviews, as well as their reasons for choosing to tick the "no religion" box in response to the religion question taken from the 2011 Census. Implications are drawn about concepts employed by researchers in the burgeoning field of nonreligion and secularity studies, as well as the methods used by researchers of youth and religion in the social sciences. In particular, questions are raised about value of survey and interview research that asks young people to choose particular self-identities or respond to statements of religious belief and value that may have little relevance to their lives.

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Introduction: The 2011 Census in England and Wales
In 2011, 14.1 million people, approximately 25 per cent of the population of England and Wales, chose to identify as having "no religion". In the 2001 Census, only 15 per cent of the population had chosen to tick the "none" box in response to question "what is your religion?" This increase in the number of people choosing to identify in this way was mirrored by a reduction in the number of people choosing to identify as Christian, from 72 per cent in 2001 to 59 per cent in 2011. When the data from the 2011 Census was published, the initial reactions of representatives from both religious and non-religious institutions implied that the intention of census respondents was self-evident.

For the Rev. Arun Arora, Director of Communications for the Church of England, despite the reduction in the number of people who identified as Christian, the data indicated that "the majority of the nation actively identifies the role that faith plays in their life".[1] For Andrew Copson, the Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association (BHA), the data meant that the 14.1 million who identified as having no religion were "non-religious".[2] It is perhaps necessary for their arguments that the Church of England and the BHA assume that when people choose to tick "Christian" or "no religion" on a census it is clear what they mean. But it must also be recognised that responses to census questions alone do not reveal the beliefs, belongings and behaviours that lie behind these choices.[3]

This article contributes to debates about the study of religion's approach to numbers and statistics by raising important methodological and conceptual questions about what lies behind survey data in the context of a research project with young people who tick the "no religion" box. Census and survey data on religion is valuable for discussions of general trends within society, but it does not help us understand what respondents actually mean when they choose to identify in a particular way. In the study of religion, quantitative methods are of great value in analysing different responses people give to questions of identity, belief and value, but as the researchers themselves acknowledge, a possible "weakness" of these types of study is that it may be "difficult to penetrate behind the well-framed questions to establish the deeper underlying meaning" (Francis and Robbins, 2005, p. 3). When census and survey respondents are asked whether they have a religion, their answer is based on what they understand "religion" to be at that moment in time. But responses to the census or survey question alone do not enable researchers to penetrate this particular understanding or construction of "religion", which cannot be retrospectively determined from the respondent's answer.[4] This is where in-depth qualitative research complements census and survey data.

Secularisation and Nonreligion

Since the 1960s, sociologists studying contemporary western society have observed the decline, revival and transformation of religion (Berger 1969; Wilson 1985; Davie 1994; Bruce 2002; Martin 2005). Some theorists have argued that religion is likely to disappear, as it ceases to be of significance in the lives of individuals (Berger 1969), whilst others have argued that, although the influence of religion on certain societies may well have diminished, the extent to which this has also affected individuals is questionable (Wilson

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[1] http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2012/12/census-2011.aspx (Accessed 28/04/14).
[2] https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/religion-and-belief-some-surveys-and-statistics/census-2011-results/ (Accessed 28/04/14).
[3] Abby Day's (2011) study into what "ordinary" people believe is a good example of how qualitative research can illuminate census data.
[4] As Linda Woodhead has argued, neither "religion" nor "the secular" are "neutral concepts which can serve as unproblematic building blocks of data collection and analysis". She notes that in Britain their meaning has been "constantly constructed, reconstructed and disputed throughout the post-war period" and "bound up with particular political struggles, interests and social shifts" (2012, p. 24). This article will focus on how a group of young people have constructed "religion" and their reasons for choosing not to identify with this particular construct.

1985)[5] and indeed a number of theorists have argued that there is evidence to suggest that religious belief and practice has flourished in recent years (Davie 1999; Martin 2005). Debates over "secularisation" and "desecularisation" have raged for decades.[6] But these have, for the most part, focused on the decline or absence of religion in society and its influence on the lives of individuals.[7] However, in the last decade a new field of multidisciplinary research has emerged that has attended to the phenomenon of "nonreligion". For Lois Lee, the founder of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN), this is "the study of all the phenomena which are defined by how they differ from religion" (Lee 2013, p. xxvi). As an umbrella term for anything that is not, on the one hand, "religion" or, on the other, "a-religious" (having *no relationship to* religion), it might include any stance taken towards religion, including atheism, agnosticism, anti-religious beliefs and activities, as well as indifference – a stance that Lee suggests "requires at least some awareness of religion and therefore taking some position" (2012, p. 131). Nonreligion also names other less clearly defined stances towards religion, such as that of one of Lee's participants, who said, "I've tried to believe in God but just can't" (p. 132). As nonreligion is a relational term, dependent on the task of defining religion, it is important for researchers to be reflexive not only about the precise nature of the relationship of *difference* that nonreligion has with religion, but also about what they and their participants mean by "religion". This is why qualitative "bottom-up" research becomes particularly helpful for the study of this and other related phenomena.[8]

Despite the increasing amounts of academic research on nonreligion (Lee and Bullivant 2010), much empirical research has focused on adults. Christopher Cotter's (2011) qualitative research focused on "nonreligious" Scottish university students, and Rebecca Catto and Janet Eccles' (2013) "Young Atheist Project" was concerned with the narratives of older teenagers and young adults who identified as atheist. But there has been relatively little qualitative research specifically on younger adolescents of "no religion".[9] My

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[5] Wilson, B. (1985) "Secularization: The Inherited Model". In Philip Hammond (ed.) *The Sacred in a Secular Age: Toward Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion*. Cited in Woodhead and Heelas (eds.) (2000, p.307)

[6] One possible reason for this is that the terms of the debates are not always clear. As James Beckford argues, those involved often have different understandings of what is meant by "religion" and "the secular": "disputants conceive of religion and its decline in radically divergent and incompatible ways" and "[a]wareness that the category of religion is itself a product of continuing social construction is low" (2003, p. 68).

[7] One of the consequences of this was that "religious nones" remained a "neglected category". For Glenn Vernon, it was necessary to address this neglect in order to provide "a more complete understanding of religious behaviour". Although he suggested this category might include "atheists, agnostics" and "those with no preference", he focused on "those who have no affiliation" (Vernon 1968, p. 219). Another important exception to this focus on the decline of "religion" was Colin Campbell's *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (1971). As Lois Lee argues, what was significant about Campbell's work was that, unlike other studies of "secularisation", it moved beyond the study of the absence of "religion" to the study of the presence of "irreligion" (Lee 2013, p. xxvi).

[8] Rather than trying to understand data about people who have "no religion" as it were "from the top", by seeing what existing concepts "fit", I agree with Johannes Quack's (2012) call for a more "bottom-up" approach.

[9] Day's qualitative research on belief included young people, but was mainly focused on those people who chose to identify as "Christian" despite some of these being "unbelieving Christians" (2009, pp.266-7). There have also been a number of large-scale quantitative studies of teenagers' beliefs and values (Kay and Francis 1995; Francis and Kay 1995; Robbins and Francis 2010) that have included research on specifically "nonreligious" young people.

own research into the lives of 14- and 15-year-olds from two non-denominational secondary schools in England addresses this lacuna and raises questions about the concepts that are used in this new field of study. This article describes the research choices that stemmed from a critique of assumptions about religion and nonreligion made by researchers in the field. While I will not, therefore, discuss all the findings from the project, which focuses more broadly on what these young people of "no religion" consider to be important in their lives, this article presents my methodology and focuses on a specific set of interview questions in which participants were explicitly asked about religion after having ticked the "no religion" box on a survey.

Belief in Religious Studies and Religious Education
Before turning to participants' constructions of religion, and their reasons for identifying as having "no religion", it would be useful to consider some of the possible influences on their understandings of religion. For many of the participants, religion was primarily concerned with belief. This is perhaps not surprising, given that this assumption is made within the academy as well as in religious education (RE).

In much of the sociological, historical and philosophical analyses of the transformation of western religiosity, the study of belief remains of central importance. As David Morgan has observed, the academic study of religion in the West has been "shaped by the idea that a religion is what someone believes", and by the assumption this amounts to a "discrete, subjective experience of assent to propositions concerning the origin of the cosmos, the nature of humanity, the existence of deities, or the purpose of life" (2010, p.1). Although there have been a number of scholars who have questioned the prominent role that belief should play in the study of religion, and, in particular, in the study of non-Christian religious cultures (Needham 1972; Smith 1977, 1978; Ruel 2002; Lindquist and Coleman 2008; Morgan 2010), many empirical studies of western religion continue to emphasise the importance belief plays in peoples' lives (Davie 1994; Bruce 2002).

This understanding of religion has also influenced how religion is presented to pupils in their GCSE RE lessons.[10] In recent years, Andrew Wright's critical realist RE pedagogy has had a major influence on the way exam RE is taught in schools. Part of Wright's concern with the way RE was taught in the past was that it was either too focused on a world-religion-anthropological approach or it was too experiential and focused on spirituality.[11] He wanted to prevent RE from losing its theological content and his work led to a "philosophical turn" in RE. Today, therefore, religion is often presented to young people as being primarily concerned with metaphysical beliefs and truth claims. For Wright,

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[10] The GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) is an academic qualification usually taken in a number of subjects between the ages of 14 and 16. RE syllabuses are decided by local authorities, but guidance on content comes from the non-statutory national framework for religious education. In England, RE has always been part of the state school curriculum, and schools often meet this requirement by getting all pupils to take a short exam course for GCSE, which was the case for all of the participants in this research.
[11] On the history of RE pedagogies in England, see Grimmit (ed.) (2000).

> The heart of religion lies ... in the claims to truth it makes about the objective nature of the universe and the place of society and individuals within this worldview. To reach a depth of understanding of religion thus involves not achieving insight into religious experience, but reaching an understanding of the worldview a religion holds ... It is the teaching of religions, their concrete beliefs, and the question of the coherence and truth of these claims that marks the heart of religion, as it is understood by believers themselves (1993, p.72).

This perspective on the nature of religion and the question of how it should be approached in RE lessons can be seen to have influenced many of the most popular GCSE and A-Level RE exam papers, which are designed to test young people on their ability to critique religious truth claims and to provide rationale for their own beliefs about what is true.[12] This understanding of religion may also have influenced some of the participants in this research, for whom "religion" was primarily concerned with metaphysical beliefs, as I shall illustrate shortly. But a similar emphasis on belief can also be seen in the way researchers approach the study of youth and religion.

Meaning and Purpose in the Lives of "Generation Y"
The social scientific study of youth and religion often couples the study of religious beliefs with an exploration of the ways in which meaning and purpose is constructed in the lives of young people. Researchers locate participants in their various historical contexts, leading to the study of youth and religion in relation to the differing characteristics of their generational cohorts: religion in, for example, "Generation X" (those born in the 1960s and 70s) or "Generation Y" (those born in the 1980s and 90s – also known as the "Millennial Generation"). As there are many similarities between these two cohorts, the term "post 1970 generation" is often used "as a concept that subsumes or includes generations X and Y because this broader group makes a clear break with the social and cultural conditions that made the Baby Boomers" (Possamai 2009, pp.3-4).

One of the most significant influences on the lives of "Generation X" was popular culture, and its influence on religious belief and on this generation's search for meaning has been detailed in a number of recent publications (Beaudoin 1998; Lynch 2002, 2005). Rather than searching for a metaphysical meaning to life, "Generation X" is often characterised as being more concerned with relationships, and family and friends. However, the fragmentary nature of many of these relationships means that this generational cohort are more concerned with finding answers to the question, "Will you be there for me?" rather than, "What is the meaning of life, of my life?" (Collins-Mayo 2010, p.21).

Recent studies of "Generation Y" suggest that an interest in popular culture and a concern about relationships with family and friends continue to be of central importance for young people today (Savage *et al.* 2006; Mason

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[12] For example: "Explain why some creationists do not believe in the Big Bang theory" (OCR Advanced Subsidiary GCE, January 2011); "Explain why some people say that religious revelation is only an illusion" (AQA GCSE Religious Studies Short Course Specification A, June 2010); "Explain why most Christians are against euthanasia" (Edexcel GCSE Religious Studies Religion and Life, May 2010); "Do you think the universe is designed? Give two reasons for your point of view." (Edexcel GCSE Religious Studies Religion and Life, May 2010).

et al. 2007). Sylvia Collins-Mayo's study of "Generation Y" suggests that, although young people might be deriving meaning from popular culture, they are not drawing on it for *religious* significance (2010, pp.22-3). If fewer young people are turning to religion to help make their lives meaningful, researchers assume that they are searching for meaning and purpose *beyond* religion. According to Sara Savage *et al.*, Hollywood films, soap operas, and dance music all help young people make sense of their lives and provide them with "a glimpse of what an ideal life might be – a happy, socially connected and authentic existence".[13] A quest for meaning and purpose, whether through religion or popular cultural media, is reflected in the findings of other recent qualitative studies. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton (2005), for example, identify what they call a "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" as the framework for meaning and purpose in the lives of American teenagers, a worldview in which "being good and feeling good" is the central goal of life (Smith 2010, p.44). However, as Gordon Lynch notes in his discussion of research on "Generation X", it is worth considering the extent to which the significance of belief, meaning and purpose emerges from the data or is imposed upon it by researchers. He writes:

> The Augustinian maxim ... that the human heart is restless and unfulfilled unless it finds some core meaning in life can be seen in the assumption that if members of Generation X tended to be alienated from institutional religion then they must necessarily be looking for sources of meaning elsewhere (i.e. in media and popular culture). Underlying this assumption – and much contemporary literature on spirituality – is an unquestioned view of the importance of metaphysical belief for individuals. (2010, p.37)

This is perhaps also the case within literature on "Generation Y". If fewer young people are turning to religion as the source of their metaphysical beliefs, many researchers focus on the derivation of meaning and purpose from popular or secular culture. But Michael Mason's research with young Australians, for example, suggests that this generation live without "an overarching vision, whether religious or secular, inspiring them and shaping their lives" (2010, p.57). Perhaps, then, as Lynch proposes, "assent to metaphysical or existential beliefs may play a relatively unimportant role in the day-to-day conduct of many young people's lives" (2010, p.38).

In much research on youth and religion, then, studies of religion or of its absence in the lives of young people are often coupled with an examination of the role the search for meaning and purpose plays in their lives, thus often implicitly conflating religion with beliefs and values. The young people who took part in my research identified as having "no religion". In order to consider whether they are searching for meaning and purpose beyond religion, or whether metaphysical or existential beliefs play an important part in their day-to-day lives at all, it would first be helpful to consider what they understand by "religion" and to examine the extent to which their constructions of religion repeat this equation of religion with meaning, purpose, belief and value. This will then help illuminate why, when asked about religion, they chose to identify

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[13] Savage, S. Collins-Mayo, S., Mayo, B. and Cray, G. (2006) *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-25-year-olds* London: Church House Publishing, p.23. Cited in Collins-Mayo 2010, p. 23).

as having none. But first it would be helpful to briefly explain the methods used to research the lives of the participants.

Photo-elicitation Interviews with Young People of "No Religion"
My research examines the lives of young people who have "no religion". By leaving the discussion of religion until the end of the interview and using the majority of the time to discuss other aspects of their lives, it was assumed that if religion or nonreligion was important to them it would arise in the conversation naturally. Such an approach enabled me to examine not only how having "no religion" manifested itself in their day-to-day lives, but whether this was something that was largely irrelevant for them and therefore only arose in their responses to the census question or during the explicit discussion of religion in the interview. In order to explore participants' lives, I followed the photo-elicitation method of setting a photography task for the young people to complete before discussing the photographs they had taken in a one-to-one interview. What follows is my justification of this method, since these research choices are directly related to debates about the relationship between survey and interview data in the study of religion and nonreligion.

Photo-elicitation interviews were carried out with Year 10 pupils (14- and 15-year-olds) from two non-denominational secondary schools in England.[14] A small pilot study consisted of five pupils from one of the schools. In the main study, the entire Year 10 cohort from the other school (208 pupils) was invited to take part, with 36 willing to participate. During the first stage of research, pupils were given a questionnaire which included the religion question from the 2011 Census.[15] This question was embedded alongside others that collected seemingly unconnected data, such as the subjects they were studying at school, and their hobbies and interests, so that the questionnaire could identify participants for the second stage of research without drawing attention to this religion question, since this might have had an impact on how pupils then approached and experienced the photography task and photo-elicitation interview. As part of my research involves examining Lee's inclusion of indifference in her definition of nonreligion, I wanted, as much as possible, to avoid disturbing any of the participants' a-religious lives by prompting them to think about questions of religion and nonreligion too early in the research process. I hoped that embedding the religion question as one among many would mean that participants did not try to explicitly relate their photographs to religion or to their experiences of having "no religion", having been alerted to this focus by the questionnaire. I needed to allow participants to feely take photographs of what was important in their lives, for

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[14] This age group was chosen as these pupils are close to the end of their compulsory education, but are not in their final year of school and therefore do not have the same pressures as Year 11 students (15- and16-year-olds).
[15] "What is your religion? No religion; Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations); Buddhist; Hindu; Jewish; Muslim; Sikh; Any other religion, write in".

the research project as a whole to be open to the possibility that neither religion nor nonreligion but only a-religion might emerge from this task.

Three of the five pupils from the pilot study (1 boy and 2 girls) and 20 of the 36 pupils from the main study (9 boys and 11 girls) ticked "no religion" and were then given disposable cameras and invited to take photos of what was most important to them.[16] Images might include people, places, objects, activities and times, as well as representing beliefs and values. These were then used as prompts for discussion in the one-to-one interviews.

Unlike other visual methodologies, photo-elicitation is often less concerned with the analysis and interpretation of the images per se and more concerned with the meanings and interpretations of images provided by the research participants who took the photographs. For Linda Liebenberg (2009), "photographs have no meaning in and of themselves: they take up meaning from the contexts in which they are inscribed" (2009, p.445). Following Liebenberg, the photographs that participants took for this research did not directly serve as data, but rather as "prompts and supports to participant narrative" (p. 448). The interviews built on discussions of the photos to address wider questions of values, beliefs and influences on their lives and were concluded with a more focused discussion on religion and their reasons for ticking the "no religion" box on the questionnaire.[17] The majority of the data that follows comes from the more explicit questions about religion that were asked towards the end of the interview, regardless of whether the subject had already been raised by participants themselves.[18]

Participants' Understandings of Religion

Although pupils had studied a variety of religious traditions at school, including Hinduism and Judaism, religion is primarily concerned with propositional belief.[19] For Alice, a religion consisted of "a group of people who have a belief

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[16] Photo-elicitation interviews were conducted with all five of the pupils from the pilot study primarily in order to identify problems with the research methodology, and so conclusions cannot be drawn from comparisons between data from those participants who identified as having "no religion" and the two pupils from the pilot study who identified as having a religion: Claire ("Christian") and John ("Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [Mormon]"). Although both these pupils spoke about their religion without being prompted by direct questions, I am unable to draw conclusions about whether young people who identify as having a religion are – without being prompted to do so by interviewers – more, less or as likely to talk about the importance of religion in their everyday lives than those young people who have "no religion" are to talk about the importance of nonreligion in theirs. Further, although my study of the lives of young people of "no religion" both supplements and might be supplemented by research that examines what is important in the lives of "religious" young people, my work does not require such a comparison in order to be validated as a site of study in its own right.

[17] One of the many advantages of the photo-elicitation method is that the balance of power within the interview is altered slightly as participants become "experts" on the images they have produced. For these interviews, discussing what was important in their lives before any questions were put to them allowed participants to build confidence to talk about other more difficult and contentious issues, moving to discuss, for example, the complexities of relationships within their immediate and wider families, and anxieties about dynamics within friendship groups, including bullying, racism and homophobia, as well as more abstract concepts like religion and nonreligion.

[18] Analysis yet to be conducted includes a comparison between reflections on "religion" that arose unprompted during the interview and responses to direct questions about this topic, left until the end of the interview.

[19] As Melissa Lane notes in her criticisms of the 2004 report on religious education by the Institute for Public Policy Research, Hinduism and Judaism both treat belonging and observance as primary (Lane 2010).

in something". When asked to explain what the term "religion" meant, Nick replied, "religion is, like, a belief in, not just, like, God, but all the kind of aspects that come with it, like, all the stories and whatever" and Beth said, it is "what someone believes they came from, and how they believe the world works, what created them and what created life, and what's going to happen to them when they've gone". As religion was tantamount to belief, it often had little significance for participants, such as Joanne, for whom religion "doesn't really have a meaning, it's what people believe" and for Rachel, who said that it is "just a matter of opinion and beliefs" that she did not share.

I return to participants' identification of religion with belief below, but a brief presentation of some of the other key factors in their choice to tick the "no religion" box is helpful in understanding their constructions of "religion" as a conceptual category. In particular, their views on religious mythology led many to question the veracity of religious narratives because, for example, the stories from the Bible seemed too fanciful. This was often because they were understood literally. For example, Ellie said,

> Well, a lot of things are technically impossible, so I don't believe in them. If they were stories that could theoretically happen then I'd probably believe in it, but Jesus can't rise from the dead, Moses can't part the sea, and Jesus can't turn water into wine. It's not possible so why should I believe in it. He can't heal people – that's never happened before, has it?

As well as viewing the Bible as a document that details a series of implausible events that lack credibility, religion more generally was compared unfavourably to science, as each are seen to be explanations of the way the world works. The biblical stories of creation were therefore dismissed as "theories" that have now been displaced by scientific knowledge. Although Alice was brought up in a Christian family, she began to question what she had been taught at home when she started to learn about alternative theories of creation,

> Well, um, when we learnt about evolution at school. That made me question whether we're really created in seven days, you know, as it said in the Bible. Why weren't we buried with dinosaurs? ... And of course there's the question of whether that's the actual time period or whether that's representative, but, so learning more about other theories as opposed to just the Christian theory.

This scientific narrative was believed to be more persuasive than the literal story of creation and for many participants the two were mutually exclusive. Sometimes this was because these narratives were presented to them in school as "competing" theories. As Abigail recalls,

> Um, well we had to do this sheet, and one side was about the Big Bang theory, and the other was about, I forgot what it's called, but you know, [pause] the Christian version.

For many other participants, the flaw in what they understood to be religious truth claims was that there was an absence of "evidence". The importance of a particular type of "proof" meant that religious interpretations couldn't really compete with science. As Michael said,

> Like, there's so much evidence for evolution that I think, "oh, that must be true, it's physically not possible for it not to be true". But people say, "Oh, that's not true, it's God". It just seems like I can't ignore the fact that they've got so much more evidence to prove their belief than religious people do.

For Nick, it seemed futile to believe in anything that couldn't be supported by evidence,

> I don't think there's any point believing in supernatural beliefs if you've just got belief in it. I think you've got to actually have seen something to believe in it, really ... I just think there's no point really believing in it if there's not like any evidence whatsoever. No solid evidence for the existence of any religion, really, so yeah ... Just things that are already here, just things that are in front of us, they're like there. And with God it's like He may or may not be up there, so there's just no point believing in it 'cos there's no way that anyone could know.

And for Craig, science could even be relied upon to eventually solve theological and philosophical mysteries,

> The only thing that can prove there isn't a God- Well, it's not really a religion, but the only thing that can prove the beginning of life is science. And, er, until science proves it, there's no denying that there might be a God because there could be and no one knows.

While they believed that it was not possible to prove or disprove the existence of God, many, like Alice, still felt that there was more proof in science than religion. "And", she adds, "as we get more proof of science, we get less proof of God". This led her to remark upon what philosophers call "the God of the gaps", helping us provide answers to mysteries that science will eventually solve,

> I kind of find he's a gap-filler, and if we don't yet know, or we haven't yet discovered we'll use God, and I think that's why belief has somewhat declined because we're able to answer more and more of the questions without, er, with better understanding and not just saying, "oh, well that's the way God made it to be". And I find that the gaps that God's needed to fill are getting smaller and smaller, and whether in time there's going to be any room for him, and there's anything that we can't not explain.

Participants' Understandings of Religious Identity
Some participants assumed that to be religious you had to believe and accept every element within that religion. In order to identify as a Christian, for

example, it would be necessary to accept every belief and, as participants felt that they were unable to do this, they ticked the "no religion" box. Other participants felt that because they had such diverse thoughts and opinions themselves these would not fit with any one religion, which was why they too chose to identify as having "no religion".

Rachel and Leah thought that being religious requires assent to all the beliefs associated with that religion. As Rachel said, "in Christianity you're supposed to believe in every single thing and that goes for every single religion". And for Leah, "to have a religion I think that you have to believe in everything that the religion believes, and I don't believe in everything that they believe". A similar view of religion was voiced by Abigail, who felt that a religion could never adequately reflect all of what she thought about life, and was therefore not something that she could accept,

> There could never be a religion that would fit with all that I thought because my thoughts are so diverse. Um, [pause] there would never be a religion for everything I thought.

However, for other participants, such as Laura, identifying as having "no religion" was just a more accurate reflection of what she felt at the time because her belief in God was not strong enough to identify as a Christian,

> Well, I don't think my belief in God is strong enough for me to tick "Christian". … I'm not really a dedicated Christian or anything, so- I mean that might change, because if there was a sort of in between box, I probably would have ticked that, but to categorise what I believe, I'd say I don't really have a religion.

Similarly, for David, strength of belief and frequency of practice was an indicator of one's religiosity. And so, although he believed in God and would sometimes pray, he still did not identify with any religion,

> I do believe in God, but I'm not the sort of person who every week goes to church and prays. I don't mean to offend anyone by saying that, but I do believe there is a God and if I am desperate, I may prayer, er, or pray, sorry, but I don't do it that often. It's only in desperate times.

Autonomy, Agency and Authenticity
For many participants, religion demands restrictive ethical beliefs and behaviours that limit autonomy and diminish one's authentic self. Religion was understood as an external authority that impinged upon their personal freedom and threatened their individual agency, and so they chose to identify as having "no religion". Religion was also understood as a set of ethical rules and commandments that some people choose to follow, while others do not. Followers of a religion did certain things and missed out on others. It was also therefore often suggested that they did not "experience" life as much as people who did not have to follow these rules. For Henry, religion limits freedom and happiness and religious people are letting God "dictate their lives". This means that

they might never experience things because they are worshippers of a religion and a God that says, "no, you can't do that" … I think that *choice* is one of the biggest things in life and if you choose, you're going to be a happier person.

While religion itself was sometimes seen as a choice, adherence to religion was then seen to restrict other choices in life. Karl often told me about the importance of remembering that "you only live once" and that you should "live life to the full". For him, religion often prevented this by occupying people's time when they could be enjoying life,

> Personally, I think it's a bit stupid. It's like living by rules. It's like I say, "you only live once" so just do what you want. It's your life … I've got nothing against people who are religious, but I just basically think it's a bit stupid 'cos you're just spending your time praying to something that's probably not even there, just praying to thin air, when you could be actually enjoying yourself.

For Zoe, obedience to the rules of religion restricts individual agency and also prevents people from being authentic: "I don't like the idea of having to stick to a religion and I think you should just be who you are". Observance of religion's ethical rules and regulations was also seen as unnecessary to leading a good life. Alice told me,

> we're good because we are, not because we're trying to gain something from it, not because we're afraid of hell or whatever else the punishment might be, or because we want to go heaven.

Religion encourages certain beliefs and behaviours based on a system of punishment and reward. In contrast, she said, "I want to think that we're good because intrinsically we are, not for a gain or to protect yourself from a loss". She concluded by telling me that she hopes she can be good "without necessarily having to have a reward for it". Abigail also thought that religion consists of restrictive rules that she would have to follow and was confused about what failure to follow ethical laws might mean for religious identity or affiliation. She said,

> I think that's why I couldn't be religious, because of all the rules and everything. Yeah, you can believe in God but ... no sex before marriage? If you do have sex before marriage, does that make you not a Christian? That's what confuses me.

For other participants, religious ethics were appreciated and adopted with less difficulty. However, ethics were often also separated out from religion, because the latter remained reduced to literal, metaphysical beliefs which they therefore rejected. Michael said,

> Although I don't believe in their idea of God, I believe in their morals – as in you shouldn't kill or you shouldn't murder or you shouldn't steal and things like that. So, you know, they've got their morals and things

right. ... I'd be fine being a Christian apart from the worshipping God part, yeah, which I can't sort of believe. ... I guess it's like the miracle stories, like the feeding of the five thousand, the virgin birth ... it sort of attacks everything that I believe in.

Similarly, although Craig does not believe in God, he finds religions are valuable sources from which to get ideas about how to live. He ticked the "no religion" box, but he also tells me that,

I'm not really a *non*-religious person. I'm more of a person who likes to follow different things from different religions. ... 'Cos I don't believe there's a God and I don't believe in a lot of things, but I like to take the values of what they say as important in life. ...Because it's not really the *religion* that I like. It's, like, I don't believe in the religion, but I like to look at different parts of religion and see if they link in with the way I live.

This data demonstrates the importance of reflecting on what the term "religion" means to respondents in order to understand why they might claim "no religion". However, these quotations come from a section at the end of the interview that directly addressed their understanding of religion and their reasons for ticking the "no religion" box – a methodological decision that was taken in order to more fully explore participants' lives beyond assumptions about the importance of beliefs about religion and that required a method of data collection that differed from a quantitative survey or a solely verbal qualitative interview.

Young People's Indifference to Questions of Religion
For these young people, religion was understood as largely being concerned with propositional belief (whether metaphysical, existential or ethical). This construction of religion is perhaps not surprising when it is considered that this is how religion has often been presented to them in RE, filtered down from the academy where it is also frequently characterised in this way. However, it is arguable that the academic study of youth and religion similarly contributes to a construction of "young people" as a group in need of a core set of beliefs and in search of meaning and purpose for their lives. This research left researcher-led discussions of notions of "religion" and "no religion" until the end of each interview in order to avoid repeating the assumption that there is a necessary relation between young people and the search for meaningful belief. This underlying assumption is perhaps reinforced by many of the methods used in conducting research about religion with young people, which either takes the form of large-scale quantitative surveys or more in-depth qualitative interviews. In both approaches to data collection, the methods are often designed to gain greater understanding of young people's responses to statements of belief and value. Surveys encourage young people to foreground their assent or dissent in relation to beliefs that may or may not be central to their everyday lives, while interview-based studies require

participants to express themselves verbally in ways that often take the form of propositional beliefs. It is therefore possible that if metaphysical or existential beliefs do not play an important part in the day-to-day lives of young people, as Lynch suggests, then studies of religion that utilise methods which focus on belief risk misrepresenting what is important to these participants and occluding their indifference towards belief, meaning and purpose, whether "religious" or "nonreligious".

During explicit discussion of religion and nonreligion, many participants chose to self-identify using markers that Lee characterises as forming part of the definition of nonreligion as anything that exists in a relationship of difference to religion: seven participants self-identified as atheist and two as agnostic. The remaining 14 participants expressed a range of stances, some of which might be described as that of a "religious none" or of someone "with no affiliation" (Vernon 1968, p.219), whilst for others it was clear that religious belief or any other type of metaphysical or existential belief was of little or no relevance to their lives, raising not only the subject of the relationship between self-identification and researcher-led survey or interview questions but also the issue of whether participants who appear indifferent to religion can be categorised by researchers as "nonreligious".

In Phil Zuckerman's study of the lives of "'nonreligious, irreligious, or religiously indifferent men and women" (2010 p.3) in Denmark and Sweden, he differentiates between what he terms the "benign indifference" and the "utter obliviousness" to religion that some of his participants exhibited (2010 pp.104-9). The benign indifference he encountered was exemplified by one participant who explained:

> *I don't believe in God ... but I've got nothing against religion. I think religion can be very comforting. It can be good for many people* (2010 p.105).

However, he also met people who had never considered questions about the existence of God and had therefore paused during their interviews to think about it for the first time.[20] He writes of one participant:

> She sat there, paused in thought...And then *she said that she hadn't really thought about it before*. She didn't know whether she did or didn't believe in God – not because she was philosophically agnostic, per se, but rather, because she found it somewhat of a novel question (2010 p.107).

What makes the position of utter obliviousness particularly interesting is that those who are oblivious to religion do not seem to be in a relationship of difference to religion; in order to be in such a relationship, it is necessary to have engaged with and reacted to religion in one's life in some way. The terminology of nonreligion, as defined by Lee, does not perhaps, then,

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[20] It is important to note that Zuckerman conflates benign indifference and utter obliviousness in relation to *theism* with benign indifference and utter obliviousness in relation to *religion* (2010[2008]).

describe the lives of those for whom religion and religious beliefs are of no significance. A number of young people are likely to have been brought up in families where religion is not mentioned, and religious or nonreligious beliefs about the world play no part. The lives of these young people therefore raise questions about the relationship between nonreligion and indifference.

Whereas Zuckerman differentiates between the nonreligious, irreligious and religiously indifferent people he met, for Lee, nonreligion includes indifference. Clearly, however, the form of indifference that she refers to is closer to the benign indifference of Zuckerman's participants than to their utter obliviousness. For Lee, presumably, utter obliviousness would not be considered nonreligious as it does not exist in a relationship of difference to religion. It would instead perhaps be closer to her understanding of what it means to be a-religious, having no relation to religion. It might, therefore, be better to describe people who exhibit an utter obliviousness to religion as a-religious rather than as religiously indifferent as Zuckerman does.

A particularly good example of this lack of interest was provided by one of my participants, Joanne, for whom, religion and beliefs about God seemed largely irrelevant. What was more important for her was being herself: "I've got my own beliefs and opinions and stuff - just being myself". But when asked to elaborate on what these beliefs might be, or what she believed in, she then said,

> Nothing really... I don't believe in things, like, in my RE mock [exam] it was, like, "What's your belief?", or "Is God real?", or something ... If He was real, it wouldn't affect me, but if He wasn't real, it still wouldn't affect me. So then it wouldn't really make a difference ... 'Cos it's not going to affect me in any way.

Lee suggests that indifference towards religion should be included within her definition of nonreligion because it is a stance that "requires at least some awareness of religion" (2012, p.131). But can Joanne's stance be described as an expression of nonreligion? Does it imply, in other words, a relationship of *difference* to religion? If it is only when indifference towards religion is disturbed that a position is taken, then can participants like Joanne be described as "nonreligious" or, rather, might this only be the case at such moments as when they tick a box or answer a question? Might their day-to-day experiences of life be closer to being a-religious?

What, therefore, is the value of the term "nonreligion" in contexts in which a-religiosity has not been disturbed – for example, in relation to the everyday lives of young people?

Conclusion
My wider research into the lives of young people of "no religion" will add to emerging theorisations of the concept of "nonreligion". Findings are beginning to enable me to contribute to debates about existing typologies of nonreligion, including Lee's definition of nonreligion as anything that exists in a relationship of difference to religion. I have emphasised the importance of establishing how "religion" is being constructed in studies of nonreligion, detailing how, for these young people of "no religion", religion is constructed as primarily

propositional. This suggests – once any indifference has been disturbed through survey and interview questions – that participants' nonreligion consists primarily of their expressions of belief that exist in a relationship of difference to metaphysical, existential and moral religious beliefs. But when religion is constructed outside social contexts where a certain type of belief is considered to be definitive of religion, nonreligion may well look very different.

One implication of this is that the study of nonreligion might struggle to access what might be called "nonreligion beyond nonreligious beliefs" if it limits its approach to survey and interview questions that presume the significance of meaning, purpose, belief and value, whether "religious" or "nonreligious", in the day-to-day lives of participants. As Lynch has suggested, research in the field of religion and youth studies often assumes that all individuals need, and are therefore involved in a search for, a core set or system of metaphysical beliefs. While this article has indicated some of the ways in which findings from my own research will provide insight into the theorisation of "religion", "nonreligion" and "a-religion", my wider project explores the people, places, objects, activities and times that are of central importance to young people of "no religion" and therefore offers a more nuanced understanding of their everyday lives beyond their beliefs about religion.

While young people might be categorised as "nonreligious" through the identification of a relationship of difference to their understandings of religion, such a classification is perhaps only possible once the relative insignificance of a formal set of beliefs in their lives has been disturbed by researchers. After all, many "young people of no religion" can only be described as such once they have been asked about religion. And this is, of course, a conclusion not restricted to the study of nonreligion; it raises questions about approaches to the study of religion as well.

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