

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ninety-Eight Atheists: Atheism among the Non-Elite in Twentieth Century Britain

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Widespread atheism in the general population is one of the defining characteristics of twentieth-century British society, yet until very recently, it has largely been unregarded by historians. This study attempts to contribute to the remedy of this omission by considering autobiographies and oral histories of non-elite atheists between 1890 and 1980. It shows that atheisation (the transition from religious belief to atheism) is principally a phenomenon of childhood and adolescence, with 80% of the sources becoming atheist by the age of twenty. The reasons the subjects gave for their irreligion were varied, of greatest significance were nearly two thirds who regarded religion as irrelevant to their lives, showing a lack of engagement with religion, its concepts and rituals. Many of these were from weakly religious or irreligious backgrounds who experienced 'irreligious socialisation', rendering religion irrelevant and contributed significantly to the progress of atheisation. Religious trauma, criticism of religion, personal trauma, radical politics, and rationalism accounted for similar proportions of reasons, and were mentioned by only 12–18% of sources. The potential influence of parental attitude to religion, other childhood experiences, religious education, reducing existential threat, historic events, and the social revolution of the 1960s are also considered as 'unarticulated causes' of the subjects' irreligion.

Introduction

There is only one social history of atheism in Britain in the twentieth century focussed on non-elite atheists: Susan Budd's *Varieties of Unbelief* (1977). This is surprising, given the volume of historical, sociological, and philosophical publications on the subject of religious decline and 'resurgence'. David Berman and James Thrower have both written intellectual histories of atheism, but these terminate in the early twentieth century (Berman, 1990; Thrower, 2000). There are also many works that appear to be histories but are not; many are arguments of a theological, rather than historical, nature about the future of atheism and modernity (for example Hyman, 2010; McGrath, 2004).

Susan Budd used obituaries from secularist and ethical organisations' journals to study the conversion experiences of 150 secularists, supplemented by 200 brief biographies (Budd, 1977). These covered the period 1850 to 1960, but are concentrated between 1870 and 1910 when the Radical Movement was at its height (Royle, 1980). Her sources were largely men who were long-term and leading members of the organisations. Despite this, she hoped her study would show "how ideas are adopted, simplified, made usable and incorporated into social activity not by great men, ..., but by ordinary men and women." (Budd, 1977: 1). Budd identified three principle causes of unbelief: "the reading of the Bible and the rationalist classics" (notably Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* and

Robert Blatchford's *God and My Neighbour*); the belief that Christian doctrines and ministers were wicked or politically reactionary; and criticism of belief in immortality (Budd, 1977: 106). She found that anti-clericalism was fomented by the perceived lack of rights of unbelievers as citizens. Radical workingmen resented compulsion to attend church to obtain charitable assistance. They also resented having to hide their opinions to retain their jobs or customers. High amongst these resentments were the attempts by well-meaning Christians to force deathbed conversions from the dying (Budd, 1977).

Budd identified differences between the age at which her sources lost their faith, typically between thirty and fifty years of age, and reported religious conversions, typically occurring in teenage years (Budd, 1977). She showed that, somewhat at odds with the traditional narrative of secularisation, it was not science or 'the Higher Criticism' that were given as reasons for loss of faith, but a range of moral and political concerns. Though it is often referred to in discussions of secularisation, Budd's work did not lead immediately to any other historical research of atheism or irreligion in the late nineteenth or twentieth Centuries.

In the twenty years after the publication of *Varieties of Unbelief* the social history of religion and secularisation were dominated by sociologists, and in particular by post-structuralists who revised classical secularisation theory to argue that, far from modernity leading to a decline in religion, they coexisted and religion has thrived beyond Western Europe and certain postcolonial countries. In the last ten to fifteen years this revisionism has been challenged on four fronts: social-historians of religion

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have constructed histories of religious decline in Britain, notably Hugh McLeod, Callum Brown and S.J.D. Green; a small number of sociologists have mounted a defence of a revised secularisation theory, notably Steve Bruce, but also David Voas; new perspectives on religion from a range of disciplines emerged, inspired by innovations in evolutionary-cognitive theories, notably from Pascal Boyer and Scott Atran; and from a politico-sociological perspective by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, who have described a correlation between existential security moderated by religious cultural traditions on levels of societal religiosity.

McLeod, Green and Brown have worked to re-establish religion as a central influence in the social history of the twentieth century, an influence that had been overlooked by earlier historians, while describing the declining influence of religious organisations (Brown, 2009; Green, 2010; McLeod, 1986). They argue that irreligion previously ascribed to the late Victorian and Edwardian working class had been considerably exaggerated, and that the eclipse of religion occurred in the 1960s, citing amongst other evidence the rapid decline in Christian rites of passage at this time. Further, Brown asserts that a declining emphasis on religious belief and observance in the construction of women's identities from the early 1960s, led to a decline in their commitment to religion which was expressed in their own lives and transmitted to their children, resulting in the 'Death of Christian Britain' (Brown, 2009; 2012). While Brown's most recent work directly addresses the issue of 'people of no religion' in four countries (not including the UK), charting the rise of the 'no religion' category in surveys and outlining conceptual approaches to constructing a history of no religionism (Brown, 2012), Brown, Green and McLeod's previous work predominantly used sources from religious organisations and believers, and paid little attention to the influence of atheists or atheism on the progress of secularisation.

This lack of focus on atheism in historiography has parallels in other disciplines. Colin Campbell noted that "no tradition for the sociological study of irreligion as yet exists"; he hoped to initiate such a tradition (1971, p. vii). Similarly, anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggested that the anthropology of religion is incomplete without a study of irreligion in traditional societies (1973). Yet neither discipline has pursued the study of irreligion, until recently.

In the 21st Century a growing number of social scientists have started to address non-religion, breathing life back into the debate about the progress of secularisation and theories of secularisation. Among them sociologist Steve Bruce is probably the best-known, certainly with respect to Britain. He has accused secularisation theory revisionists of purposely stating the theory in its most crude form in order to make it refutable (Bruce, 2006) and has offered counter-arguments to the key attacks on the theory (Bruce, 2011), including "European exceptionalism", residual religiosity, the cycle of Christian decline and renewal (Martin, 2005) and the 1960s as a watershed for religion in Britain. Instead his work defends and advances the gradual and continuous model of religious decline and irreligious growth. This is supported by the

work of David Voas in a number of papers. Working with Alistair Crockett, Voas used 'back projection' methods to reveal the patterns of change in religiosity in the twentieth century, using data from the British Household Panel Survey, British Social Attitudes and the European Social Survey, showing that successive generations have been less religious than their parents, and that religiosity does not increase with age, but is fairly consistent over time for a given cohort (Crockett & Voas, 2006). Voas has coined the term "fuzzy fidelity" for the category of opinion survey respondents who describe themselves as religious but have no commitment to, or investment, in their putative religion, he describes this as "a staging post on the road from religious to secular hegemony". This is supported by analysis of data from a number of European countries (not including Britain) to demonstrate how religious belief has given way to fuzzy fidelity and then to irreligion over two hundred years in several countries (Voas, 2009).

Using approaches from evolutionary psychology, anthropologists Pascal Boyer, Scot Atran and others have argued that the term 'religion' has no single referent, instead it identifies an aggregate of concepts that connect to emotional, social and inference mechanisms in our minds (Boyer, 2001). In their view all religious experiences, ideas and behaviours are thought to be a by-product of mental processes and systems evolved to confer survival advantage: "the explanation for religious beliefs and behaviours is to be found in the way all human minds work" (Boyer, 2001: 3). The apprehension of supernatural agents, such as ghosts, spirits and gods, is seen as a product of the ability to infer agency in animal behaviour, but triggered by phenomena which do not have agency, such as weather or chance events (Atran, 2002). Religious behaviours which require considerable diversion of resources and effort may appear to be either maladaptive or adaptively neutral for evolutionary fitness, yet can be seen as ways of signalling individual and group commitment to common goals which promote group cohesion and trust, and in this way confers survival benefit (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2008). The aim of such theories is reductionistic, testable, doesn't assume the existence of religious 'organs' or religious mode of function in the mind and provides an explanation of common features across different religious traditions (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2008). This provides us with new ways to think about the prevalence and form of religious and irreligious phenomena.

Political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have produced a reformulation of secularisation theory that sets out to address the criticisms of the revisionists and construct a new narrative based on two premises: that personal existential security is a key determinant of religiosity and that cultural tradition plays a significant role in the expression of religiosity. They have used many indexes of well-being in a cross-national study to show that a significant proportion of the difference in national levels of religiosity can be correlated with national levels of life security (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). They also found that religious culture accounts for nearly half of national

variability in levels of religiosity, demonstrated by quantitative comparison of aspects of religious culture in a number of countries from Protestant, Catholic, Christian Orthodox, Islamic and Eastern traditions.

This study revisits Budd's objective, to show how irreligion was incorporated into the lives of ordinary men and women, by using sources that are more representative of the population than hers, taken from oral history archives and autobiographies of Britons from non-elite backgrounds, whose parents had received no higher education and had little economic influence. How these sources can inform our view of the wide ranging approaches to religion and irreligion outlined above, is also examined.

There is no hard and fast definition of non-elite. I have used a similar approach to that adopted by historian Elizabeth Roberts, who based the designation of non-elite on the employment status and educational backgrounds of the households in which the subject grew up. Roberts was concerned to restrict her subjects to those from the 'working class', using familial employment status as the criteria, if they, or their parents or spouses were employed or unemployed skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled waged workers (1984). I have widened these employment criteria to include sole traders such as farmers and shop keepers, and to include some salaried workers from low-level clerical and managerial occupations such as secretarial work and trades supervisors. I have also used an education criterion, rejecting sources whose parents had university education or equivalent-level professional training, but have allowed technical education and apprenticeships.

The term 'atheist' is used throughout this study as a classification to denote those without a belief in a deity. The definition of 'atheist' adopted is Stephen Bullivant's (2011): "a person who is without a belief in the existence of a God (or gods)", and thus atheism is: "a lack of belief in the existence of a God (or gods)". This is an inclusive definition which treats agnostics and others who would not self identify as 'atheist' within its scope. Agnostics cannot be classed as 'theist' because they believe it is impossible to prove the existence or non-existence of God or gods and so must be classified as atheists. In practise though, the boundary between belief and unbelief is blurred: there are unbelievers who self identify as belonging to a religious denomination (The Pew Foundation, 2009; Voas & McAndrew, 2012), there are people who do not practice or identify with any denomination but still say they believe in a god or supernatural power(s), and there are those who are indifferent to religion. The question of whether someone who has little or no conception of God can meaningfully be described as denying theism is interesting, but for the purpose of this study, because they do not assert the existence of a God they have been classified as atheists. A further problem in the interpretation of people's religious views is their capacity to hold inconsistent beliefs or to behave in ways that contradict their professed beliefs. As the focus of the study is unbelief, and because of the complexity of identity, it was necessary to consider the subjects' religious practice and identity to establish whether they fit the classification of 'atheist'.

The term 'atheisation' has been used to denote the process of moving from a religious frame of reference to a non-religious frame and avoids confusion with apostates who adopt an alternative religious belief rather than unbelief. 'Apostate' is used by followers of a religion to describe those who had left it; they would call those who joined it 'converts', so 'apostate or 'apostasy' have connotations of antagonism to a particular religion. 'Atheisation' has a positive connotation of change to a new belief without implying criticism of religion, and so better reflects the attitudes of the majority of non-believers. Similarly 'atheiser' has been used as an alternative to 'apostate' to convey the same positive connotations.

The time period addressed by this study, from the 1890s to 1980, was determined by three factors. Firstly, changes in the style of oral history and autobiography mean that only this period is easily covered by both. Secondly, longitudinal sociological data on changing religious demographics exist from the early 1980s (Park & Clery, 2011), though this is capturing 'no religion' rather than atheism. Thirdly, by covering the years up to the 1960s and 70s it should be possible to contribute to the debate around claims that the 1960s marked a 'de-Christianisation' of Britain.

Methodology

Ninety-eight personal testimony sources form the basis of this study, a quarter of which are autobiographies; the rest are oral history interviews from a number of archives (all sources are listed in the bibliography).

Academic oral history developed after the Second World War in response to the desire to record 'ordinary people's' experiences and make them the foundation of social history (Perks & Thomson, 2006). In the 1970s, criticism of the use of oral history sources and to a lesser extent autobiographies developed. These were seen as methodologically problematic by traditional historians, concerned about the subjective nature of the sources, in comparison with what they saw as the less problematic nature of documentary sources. This prompted detailed investigation of the methodology of the interview and interpretation processes which allow more sophisticated interpretation of testimonies.

In an interview, the interviewee and interviewer together construct a reminiscence addressed to the interviewer and to a perceived audience, the record is therefore 'intersubjective' (Summerfield, 2004). Graham Dawson has developed the idea of 'composure', utilising the dual meaning of the word to express both the act of composing the life narrative, and the tendency of the interviewee to construct a narrative which gives them psychic comfort (Dawson, 1994). Personal narrative will also be influenced by the public discourses used to articulate personal experience which may introduce normalised but false recollections. In this way a "cultural circuit" is created in which public and personal discourses interact (Summerfield, 2004). People whose life experiences do not fit into public discourse may find it difficult to articulate and compose their memories, and the audiences for such memories may find them hard to understand and therefore regard them as illegitimate, so impairing dialogue and composure.

The approach to recruiting interviewees and the objectives and persona of the interviewers can all influence the content of the testimonies. Studies conducted by Paul Thompson (held by Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS), Universities of Essex and Manchester) contrast with the Elizabeth Roberts Archive (ERA) collection and the Bristol People's Oral History Project (BPOHP). In the latter, Stephen Humphries actively sought examples of deviant behaviour against authority including religious authority (Humphries, 1995). Elizabeth Roberts and her collaborator Lucinda Beier, did not seek religious narratives and may have inhibited their working class interviewees from expressing views not considered 'proper'. Hugh McLeod has suggested that the working-class oral histories of those raised in the Edwardian period could be biased towards the prosperous and respectable, and therefore over represent the religiously active (McLeod, 1986). Paul Thomson's studies used a demographically representative selection of interviewees, who responded to fixed question scripts with little variation or exploration by the interviewers, this produced results which yielded statistically valid results but didn't give scope for interviews to deviate from the scope of the study's scripts, with limited questions about religion and none about irreligion. These methodological differences provide different insights but make combined results inconsistent.

Szreter and Fisher (2010: 4–5), in their study of sexuality and intimacy between 1918 and 1963, adopted a method of unstructured, multiple interviews to address the problem of people being reticent about discussing their sex lives and "minimised the possibility that respondents systematically concealed significant or important aspects of their lives". Though the ERA and BPOHP interviews took a flexible approach, they did not use this extended interview method, with the exception of a few of the ERA interviews. As a result they and the ESDS studies may not have uncovered significant aspects of their subjects' atheism or atheisation.

Autobiographies have been included in this study to widen the range of sources and to try to address the absence of discussion of irreligious belief in the interviews. They present similar problems of interpretation to oral testimonies; the interviewer is replaced by an imagined audience for whom the author writes, raising similar issues of composure and memory. The genre of autobiography changed over the century, from a wide range of people, including working people, writing whole-life stories, towards the celebrity memoir. They were predominantly written by men. It would have been easy to include more artists, sports personalities, and politicians in the selected sources but in the interests of focussing on more typical lives, this has been resisted; however, the autobiographic sources do include ten writers, seven politicians, three academics, and an artist. In contrast the oral-history sources have no writers or politicians, and two who became academics and three who became artists.

Few of the sources discussed their irreligion at any length. Joseph McCabe (1947) is an exception, but he was a leading rationalist activist. Most of the sources say very little about their lack or loss of faith, which poses a

challenge in both identifying subjects and in classifying their limited expressive illocutionary acts. Typical of these minimal responses to questions about commitment to religion in interviews are:

Not a lot really, no. (Wall, 1987)

I never really thought about it really. No - I didn't particularly think about it. Religion was something - no, I never really thought about it. Never entered me mind really. (Nelson, 1987)

...not 100% sold on religion I could go one way or the other with religion... (Distin, 1998)

In order to make the representativeness of the ninety-eight sources used for this study as transparent as possible, prosopographical methods of analysis have been used. These methods are commonly associated with the exegesis of diaries and biographical material to understand the relationships and commonalities within discrete groups of people. A database of sources is built that allows comparison across a large number of sources, often characterised as 'collective biography'. This study uses methods from the "mass school" of prosopography (Stone, 1971), which take inspiration from the social sciences, focussing on subjects who are not members of a social elite, and are not from a discrete group, instead focussing on a large number of largely unconnected individuals defined by only a few shared characteristics and with only partial information available.

The key to the success of prosopography is in allowing quantitative analysis of qualitative information by classification of the data (Verboven, Carlier, & Dumolyn, 2007). The nature of the subject's irreligious belief at the time of the recording has been noted, along with the year of atheisation, if this can be determined. The date of the subjects' loss of faith, where it is not explicitly stated it, has been inferred from references in the text, and where they have apparently been irreligious from birth, the date of birth has been used. Loss of faith tends to occur over an extended period and the date recorded is the latest the subjects give for their atheisation.

The religious belief status and denomination of the subjects' parents, and the strength of the subjects' religious upbringing, were also recorded. Strength of religious upbringing has been classified as: strong - a personal religious belief, commitment to attendance at services or Sunday school and / or a strong family commitment to religious practice; weak - attendance at services or Sunday school and / or family identity associated with religious affiliation, but no personal commitment; none - attendance at services only if obliged, no family commitment to religion and / or overt assertion of atheism from youth. Crockett and Voas observed that there is a tendency for children to over-report parental religious affiliation; for this reason, I focused on subjects' own irreligious beliefs (2006). The subjects' religion at birth was not always clear. In some cases, particularly in the oral histories, it is not made explicit, especially where the subjects' personal engagement with religion is weak or nonexistent.

Age of authorship	11 – 20	21 – 30	31 – 40	41 – 50	51 – 60	61 – 70	71 – 80	81 – 90	91 – 100
Autobiography		1		3	4	8	5	4	1
Oral History	10	10	12	7	8	7	6	7	3

Table 1: Number of authors by age group.

Decade of authorship	1900–09	1910–19	1920–29	1930–39	1940–49	1950–59	1960–69	1970–79	1980–89	1990–99	2000–09
Autobiography				1		3		3	8	6	4
Oral History	1						2	26	36	4	4

Table 2: Number of authors / interviews by decade of authorship.

The Standard Occupational Classification 2010 was used to record social status at birth and at the date of authorship, together with parents' and subject's occupation(s), to indicate social mobility ("Standard Occupational Classification," 2010).

The causes the subjects' gave for their atheism and atheisation were assigned to aggregated groups based on the content of the source not on a priori classification, this approach created a set of cause groups that reflect the sources and are not related to a theoretical position. The subjects could have given more than one reason for their beliefs, and so are reported as the proportion of instances in each group, not the proportion of sources which could be misleading. The number of sources is too small to draw statistically valid conclusions over a ninety year period and analysis has been restricted to arithmetic comparison.

As with all historic sources, personal testimonies cannot be taken at face value. Textual analysis, cognitive psychology, and understanding of the process of composure and memory provide tools to address the problems inherent in these sources, which give us access to experiences not documented anywhere else. Prosopographical methods give insights not possible with textual analysis alone. In these ways testimony sources can contribute to the narrative of the cultural history of the twentieth century, by providing an evidential base built on a wide range of life experiences.

Ninety-Eight Atheists in Twentieth-Century Britain

The sources were mainly drawn from Britain and Ireland, though two were from Australia or New Zealand with strong connections with Britain. They came from a range of religious backgrounds, over 70% were from Christian homes (41% Anglican, 17% Catholic, 12% other), 7% from a Jewish background, over 12% were from homes without religion, and in 11% of cases it wasn't possible to determine their religious background. The age at which the interviews were conducted or books authored are widely spread, as shown in **Table 1**.

The dates of authorship are heavily biased towards the 1970s and 1980s, largely due to the oral-history archives that provide the majority of the sources (see **Table 2**). The autobiographers were older than the interviewees, with an average age at authorship of 68 and the youngest being

43. The oral-history subjects averaged 52, the youngest was 16.

The narratives used by the sources reflect the discourses that they experienced and used at that time in their lives, all the qualitative findings in this study must be read in this light. The earliest source was a devout Christian who preached and wrote pamphlets; it was experience of non-Christian religion, especially Hinduism, which started his personal journey towards atheism (Aldred, 1940). His testimony and those of the other early atheists were couched in very different terms than those born in the middle of the twentieth century. Typical of these later testimonies was Heather Lane (1986):

Q: Has religion meant anything, been a part of your life?

A: Well, it's never really - my mum and dad have never sort of said anything about it. I've never really thought about it a lot really.

Q: Do you go to church?

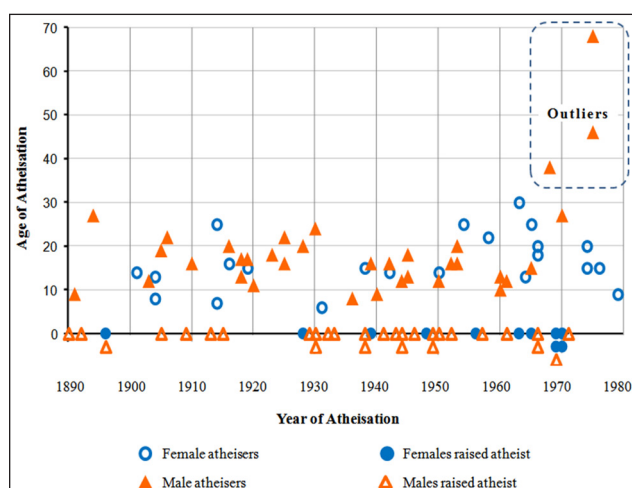
A: No.

Q: Have you ever?

A: Only for weddings.

The written style of the autobiographies and the interviews show no evidence of the stylistic tropes that Callum Brown (2009) associates with the evangelical tradition of autobiography, which is a feature of his argument about the causes of de-Christianisation. In contrast, these sources tend to be matter of fact and brief, lacking a narrative arc. That non-Christians didn't use Christian narratives to describe their lives is not surprising. Those with radical political views had access to alternative narratives in which religion, especially the established denominations, were seen as being in league with the bourgeoisie and so should be rejected. Wider public discourse didn't provide narratives of atheisation which atheists could use to communicate their experiences.

The autobiographers were more upwardly mobile than the oral-history interviewees; nearly 80% had a higher socio-economic status than their parents in comparison to 27% of oral-history interviewees, where 60% had the same status as their parents. Men wrote 80% of the autobiographies and 60% of the oral histories; the



Note: Symbols below the zero axis indicate multiple records in that year.

Figure 1: Age and Date of Atheisation by gender.

over-representation of men in the autobiographic sources is probably due to gendered ideas of what constituted a life worth recording. The gender difference in the oral histories could be due to the limited amount of data, but could also reflect a reticence to admit to atheism by female interviewees and the greater religiosity of women of around 10% as a proportion of the ratio of gender population (Crockett & Voas, 2006).

The date and age of atheisation of the sources together with their gender are shown in **Figure 1**. The atheisation of the sources tended to occur in late adolescence; the mean age was 17.7 years and the median was 16. This is similar to the findings of other studies (Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2010), which stress the importance of adolescent identity development on both religious and irreligious belief establishment, though this does differ markedly from Budd's findings (1977).

Three men identified as 'outliers' atheised in the 1960s and 1970s at a much later age than the other sources. The oldest of these rejected his faith when his wife died at the age of 51; he couldn't accept that it was God's will and didn't find comfort in his Catholic faith.

... I just couldn't understand it. I have, since that loss, I mean I wouldn't say that I was a terribly religious man, but - somehow, I've lost a lot of faith really since I lost my wife. I thought how could they take a person like that? (Canning, 1986).

The second was active in the Catholic Church, but when he fell on hard times, the suspicious and uncharitable attitude of his priest caused him to reject the Church and God (Crowther, 2009). The third was Anglican through experiences in the Boys' Brigade and National Service. Later in life he didn't attend church but prayed privately; his wife was strongly atheist and he slowly drifted from faith to doubt and ultimately rejection (Black, 2009). It is possible that this is evidence of the 'de-Christianisation' of Britain. Making it more likely that middle aged men

will atheise than would have been the case before the 1960s, due to reduced normative pressure to maintain their religious identity, and given the right personal circumstances. Though it is unsafe to conclude this with so few sources.

Ninety percent of the atheists took a prolonged period from their first doubts about their religion to the final realisation that they no longer believed. This aligns with findings from Hunsberger and Altemeyer's study of contemporary American atheists, whose atheisation averaged between six and 14 years (2006). In this study it was not always possible to define the point at which doubts commenced; however, it is clear that atheisation took several years, though as half atheised by the age of seventeen their atheisation occurred more rapidly than for the subjects of Hunsberger and Altemeyer's study. Six of the sources atheised quickly, two experienced the death of a near relative, a wife in one case and son in the other. Two were humiliated by vehemently religious teachers, one was let down by a priest (Canning, 1986; Carmichael, 2008; Crowther, 2009). One realised she couldn't believe shortly after a transcendental experience of oneness, while she sat with her father fishing and felt she "experienced the mystery of the universe", but shortly afterwards "I set my face against all organised religion" (Hewett, 1990: 94–95). This is too small a number of sources to draw a conclusion about rapid atheisation, though it is interesting that half felt let down by a religious official, and a third didn't find comfort in religion in a time of personal crisis. This suggests that rapid atheisation is associated with trauma that overturns religious socialisation and identity.

I have emphasized the sources who atheised, because, by rejecting religious faith they contributed to rise in atheism across the period, were those born atheist were reproducing their families' beliefs. However, the experience of those who were atheist from birth is also worth describing. Forty percent of the sources were effectively atheist from birth, 'effectively' in the sense that at the earliest age where they could ascribe a view to themselves they had no belief in God or a religion. Two fifths of the men reported they were atheist from birth compared with a third of the women. Nearly half were raised in overtly atheist households or in households indifferent to religion, and the remainder a weakly religious background, with the exception of one from a strongly religious background.

Q: Did religion come into your life at all?

A: No. My - Mum wanted me to learn about being Jewish so she sent me off for sort of Hebrew classes and we used to go to service on Friday nights together and then I got Barmitzvah'd but I'm just - not religious at all. (K. Millard, 1986)

The method used to record the reasons or causes given by the sources for their atheism has been described above. The reported causes have been placed into the eight categories for the purpose of analysing diachronic trends, and in relation to the various factors recorded for analytic purposes. These categories have been further aggregated

by placing them into three higher-level groupings: Anti-Religious, Pro-Atheist and Non-Religious.

The Anti-Religious grouping comprises:

Religious Trauma: Expression of powerfully emotionally negative experiences of religion or religiously sanctioned authority figures has been classified as '*religious trauma*.' Kaye Carmichael experienced cruelty from a nun in her convent school which when combined with reading Greek and Roman legends (given her by other nuns) led to her vehement rejection of Christianity at only five or six years of age (Carmichael, 2008).

Anti-religious: Criticisms of religion with less emotional content, such as inconsistencies between religious ideology and deeds, disliking Church attendance and disagreements with theology. Typical of naive criticism of doctrine:

A: Now they told us Jesus Christ was the son of God and he was found in a manger and his mother was the Virgin Mary. When we were young and that we believed it, but as you get older; I've never known a virgin to have a baby you see. (Mr_T.5.B, 1988)

Personal trauma: Experiences of personal trauma which led to loss of faith, such as the death of a relative, trauma due to historic events such as war, or the depression. Only two sources mentioned war time experiences, one through First World War combat and one influenced, though not immediately, by learning about the Second World War concentration camps (L. Millard, 1986):

A: Oh yes, I believed in God until the First World War, then I changed my opinion completely when I saw innocent children killed for no reason whatever. It made me an agnostic and I still am. (R039, 1979: 5)

A small number of sources lost their faith due to abusive behaviour by parents or more commonly by other adults acting in loco parentis. One subject from a strongly religious background reports being raped by her uncle. Her parents' reaction was to beat her for telling lies. She cites this emotional betrayal as the cause of her atheisation (R001, 1979).

The Pro-Atheist grouping comprises:

Radical politics: Many left-wing political movements and ideologies were inherently atheist, including communism, radicalism, left-anarchism and certain forms of socialism. Where such beliefs, described in association with non-belief, caused loss of faith, they were classified as *Radical Politics*:

From the beginning, socialism and atheism were inextricably linked in my mind, and I relinquished my Sunday school teachings easily and naturally. (McCarthy, 1953:38)

Rationalism: Scientific or logical beliefs that were seen as incompatible with religion, as well as those whose experience of other religions caused them to doubt their own.

Few sources mention rationalist argument explicitly but some talk of their reading matter and its effect on their beliefs (for example Mr_C.1.P., 1970). Several from the earlier decades mention doubts being triggered by exposure to other religions:

A: I went through a period in my early teens when I became very interested in religion and I used to read about it and listen to religious programmes on the radio and that. But then, when I got into my twenties, I became an agnostic again, because I found it so difficult to reconcile much of what the Christian faith is based on with what I read about science and other things..... (Mrs_B.4.L, 1988)

Contact with atheism: Contact with atheists was only mentioned in the early decades of the century, presumably because later in the century it was no longer noteworthy. Atheism was a pejorative term with connotations of inhumanity and intellectual delinquency, and atheists themselves were seen as socially inadequate loners (Campbell, 1971). This was significant for a small number of sources whose meetings with atheists precipitated their ultimate rejection of religion (Collins, 1988; Foley, 1969; Mannin, 1931; Moss, 1979).

This was a shock, after all the Roman Catholic propaganda I had listened to, it seemed incredible that these nice people could not believe in God. (Cummins, 1981:13)

None of the later accounts mention meetings with atheists, and few describe their peers' views about religion.

The Non-Religious grouping comprises:

Irrelevance: Indifference to religion was identified and commented on by contemporary observers as far back as the 1760s (for example: Squire, 1758), and since then the term has often been used to classify the irreligious (Bruce, 2006; Campbell, 1971; Green, 2010; McLeod, 1986; Snape, 2005). Despite its often remarked on persistence, indifference has not been subject to much critical analysis or research with the exception of Charles Scott's philosophical analysis (2007). The term *indifference* however doesn't accurately describe the attitude of the sources in this study. Unlike the other causes of atheism, it is not part of a narrative of theological criticism or rationalism. A typical comment on the irrelevance of religion was given by D. Brook (1988).

Q: Did you have to go to Sunday school or church?

A: When I was young I did, but I expressed a big dislike for that, so I was let off. But my mother always says that she's a strong church believer, which might be the case, but she rarely goes herself, she rarely made the effort herself. So that wasn't too bad.

Q: Does religion mean anything to you now?

A: It means a little bit to me in the sense that so many people believe in it. And I respect it. But it doesn't play any part in my life.

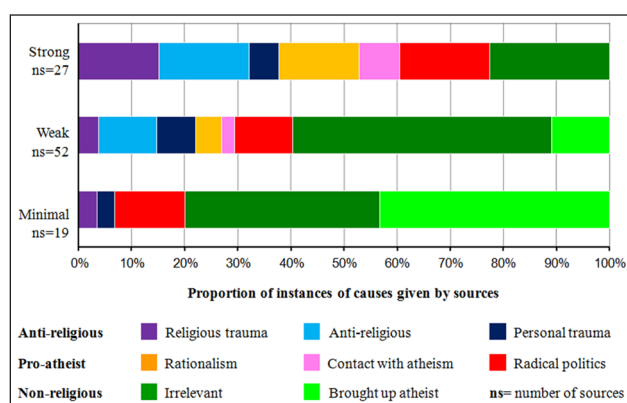


Figure 2: Causes by Strength of Religious Background.

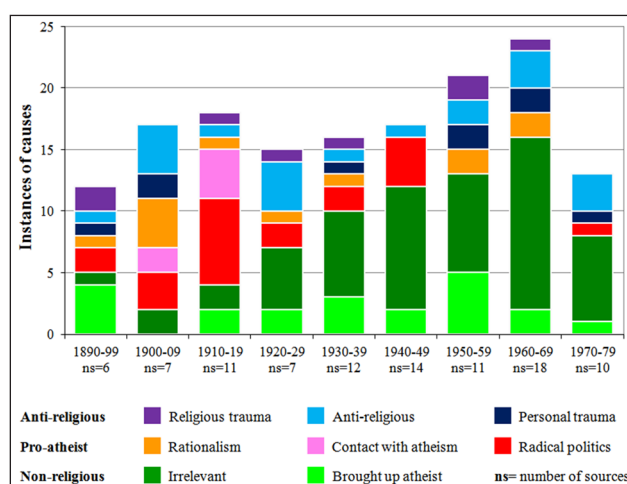


Figure 3: Cause groups by decade.

There is no sense of antagonism to religion though:

Q: How much would you say religion meant to you as a child?

A: Actually going and taking part, not a right lot. But I think I was brought up to be ... I wouldn't say religious, but not to shun it or anything like that. (Knight, 1986)

The issues of composure and memory discussed earlier are particularly relevant when considering irrelevance of religion. It is an attitude that is unlikely to have been discussed by the subject, and was not part of popular discourse, so was harder to articulate. Additionally, some would see religion as a component of respectability and would be reluctant to admit unbelief or be apologetic about it, as in "I'm afraid we weren't very religious or church-minded" (Bonilla, 1986). The indifferent may also have interest in aspects of unconventional religion such as astrology, the paranormal and ghosts, as David Voas has identified as common among "fuzzy Christians" (Voas, 2009).

Brought up atheist: Those brought up in households with no religious practice and without any belief themselves have been classed as 'Brought up atheist', though outside the home they may have participated in religious practices in school or clubs, but didn't express any religious convictions. This group is unlike those described above for another reason, in that none of those brought

up atheist used this aspect of their upbringing to explain their beliefs but it has been attributed to them because of the socialising effect of childhood experiences. Typical of these subjects was Gerald Handley:

Q: Did your parents attend a place of worship?

A: No. Although as I say my grandfather was a Jehovah's Witness minister.

Q: No religion?

A: No, the only church was really when I was in the scouts, obviously. The church parade, things like that.

Q: That was Church of England?

A: That was Church of England, yeah.

Q: How much would you say religion meant to you as a child?

A: Very little, I would have said, as a child. Mainly because mum and dad never used to take us to church. (1986)

The prevalence of the cause categories and groups have been analysed using many of the factors available from the recording method. Three are described here in detail: strength of religious upbringing, decade of atheisation and gender. Two other factors, socio-economic status in adulthood and educational experience, will receive less detailed treatment.

The strength of religious upbringing analysis (see **Figure 2**), shows that for those with a strongly religious background *Religious Trauma*, *Anti-Religious Attitudes*, *Radical Politics*, *Rationalism* and *Contact with Atheists* were all more often reported than for the 'weak' or 'minimal' groups. Apostasy has been described as 'defection' from parental and community values and rejection of familial religion as a basis of self-identification (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997), and for the atheists earlier in the study period this was certainly the case, except for those brought up in non-religious sub-cultures such as in strongly socialist communities, where community values could replace familial ones. (see: Dennis, 1986; Hattersley, 2003; Lee, 1963; Mrs_M.6.B, 1974). In more recent times, when religious values became more accepting of diversity of views and a higher proportion of the population were atheist, atheisation can be seen as joining an established, if amorphous and often self-authored, belief position, rather than defecting from a religious one, though it is still rejecting the faith position of one's families. Atheisers were still undertaking a more significant step than those from a weakly religious background, with attendant emotional as well as intellectual crises. This may also account for the much fuller accounts of their unbelief given by those from strongly religious backgrounds, providing more causes and often discussing them more fully than those from a weak background. The 'Irrelevant' category is more common amongst those from a 'weak' or 'minimal' background than those from a 'strong' background. They had been, at most, weakly religiously socialised and so religion had little or no meaning for them and thus was irrelevant to their lives.

Analysis by decade of atheisation, (see **Figure 3**), illustrates the relative diachronic prevalence for each cause

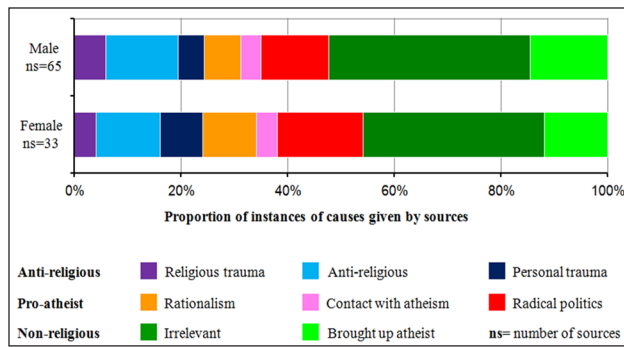


Figure 4: Proportion of Cause Groups by Gender.

category. The presence of *Brought Up Atheist* throughout the decennial cohorts and the steady growth of the *Irrelevance* category across a period of ninety years are the most striking features. The decade 1960–1969 is anomalous because few of those who were atheist from birth gave their inherited beliefs as a cause of their atheism, instead citing *Irrelevance* to a greater proportion than in other decadal groups. There are fewer subjects in the 1970–79 cohort because it is close to the period when several of the oral-history surveys were undertaken, the decline in whole-life autobiographies written by non-elite authors (except for celebrities), and typically autobiographies are written later in life, so they were not available to augment the oral histories.

Rationalism was present throughout the study period but only as a small proportion of the causes. Darwin was only mentioned by three sources (Black, 2009; Foley, 1969; Mr_C.I.P., 1970). Most mentioned philosophical questioning of religion without referencing the sources of their doubt. Some were brought up with rationalist attitudes: “From my mother we inherited a decided leaning toward rationalism, and I had already ceased to believe in the possibility of Gods by my seventh year” (McCarthy, 1953). Darwinism and other scientific ideas might have had more influence than the sources state, but they emphasised rationalist criticism of religion rather than science as a source of truth and as the stimulus that drew them away from religious belief.

The lack of records of *Radical Politics* for the 1950s and 1960s is probably due to the variability typical of small datasets, as these were highly politicised decades. As noted above, *Contact with Atheists* is confined to two of the earlier decades because of the relative novelty of atheists and the bad connotations of the term at that time.

The most significant feature of this analysis is the marked increase in the proportion of *Irrelevance* of religion over the range of nine decades. This is still evident when atheists from birth are excluded (not illustrated). When combined with the influence of strength of religious background this suggests a weakening of religious socialisation across the sample, with the prevalence of weak or minimal experience of religion becoming more prevalent over the course of the century. The anti-religious causes are at a fairly constant level throughout the period, while the pro-atheist ones get less significant as the levels of irrelevance rise.

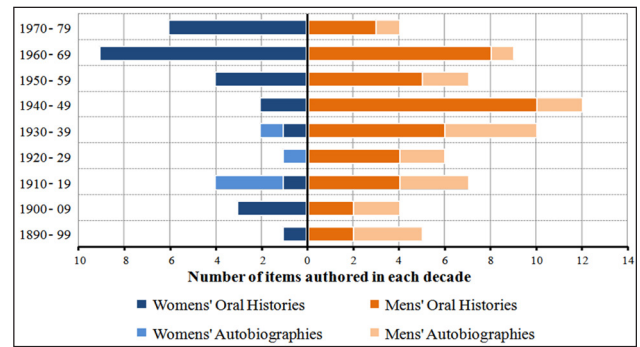


Figure 5: Ratio of the Genders by Decades.

The relationship between religiosity and gender has been discussed by many and so it is pertinent to look for differences in the causes offered by the sources in this study. This has been shown in **Figure 4**.

It is notable that the only marked differences between genders are the slightly higher levels of *Religious Trauma* expressed by men and the higher levels of *Personal Trauma* expressed by women. Though this difference, or lack of it, could simply be a product of the small sample size, never the less it is a surprising finding given the weight of evidence pointing to significant gender differences in religiosity (Brown, 2001, 2009, 2012; Miller & Stark, 2002; Stark, 2002; Walter & Davie, 1998). The ratio of the genders of the sources across the decades does show a marked change however, illustrated in **Figure 5**.

The increase in the proportion of women in the decadal groups starting in the 1950s and becoming the majority in the 1970s is marked, and possibly supports Brown's theory about second wave feminism, though the presence of women in the data from all decades and the relatively high proportion of women between 1900 and 1919 shows that women have always been a significant part of the atheist population. This needs to be regarded with caution though, not only because of the small sample size but also because the greater proportion of autobiographic sources in the earlier decades, which tend to have male authors, skews the ratio of men to women.

The discussion of this study's methodology identified many reasons why the sources had difficulty articulating the causes of their atheism, including the difficulties presented by the lack of personal and public narratives of atheisation, the lack of attention to this issue in the oral history interviews and the common reticence about expressing irreligious views. Having looked at what the sources said about their irreligion, it's now worth considering what they didn't identify as causes but that could have influenced their irreligious views.

The sources show that atheisation was a phenomenon predominantly of adolescence and early adulthood, and most lost their religious beliefs (if they really had them at all) over several years unless precipitated by a traumatic experience. The sources gave a wide range of reasons for their irreligion, anti-religious and pro-atheist causes were equally frequent in the early decades but over time non-religious causes became more prevalent, and pro-atheist ones (*radical politics* and *rationalism*) declined in frequency.

In the earliest decades of the study period most parents, if they thought about it, saw their role as inculcating the beliefs and values of their denomination in their children. This was certainly a common view amongst the middle and upper classes. As the century progressed, this was replaced by a new approach in which parents saw their role as a giving experience to their children but then allowed them to make up their own minds:

My parents were quite - there is no point in forcing anything down a child's throat, let him make his mind up when he is older - but sort of take him along now and if he likes it he will stay and if he doesn't he won't go. (Coverley, 1986)

The prevalence of the 'decide for themselves' attitude increased after the Second World War. As one oral history interviewee put it:

... I think it was up to the individual if they wanted to go to church, it was up to them. And as I say it was just left at that, there was no compulsion whatsoever. I think before the War, I think it was like a compulsion, you had to go whether you liked it or not. But after the war there was no great compulsion whatsoever. (Mr_M.14.B, 1988)

This source atheist in the 1940s, and similar attitudes were reported by several others who also atheist in the post-War period (Brook, 1988; Coverley, 1986; Nelson, 1987). Atheist parents tend to exemplify this approach to child rearing, allowing their children to decide their own attitudes to religion, even if this meant their offspring became religious converts (Knight, 1986; Schlarman, 1986).

Unarticulated causes

We must now consider the effect of unarticulated causes. These could arise from the lack of 'athesiation narratives' as discussed above, but may also be factors that are very unlikely to be mentioned in oral histories or in autobiographies. This section will consider the potential impact of changing religious practice in the home, religious education in schools, and the increase in life expectancy and well-being from 1890 to 1980.

Religious practice in the home and committed attendance in places of worship has been found by many studies to be the most influential factor with respect to adult religiosity (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). Hunsberger with collaborators found that atheists and atheisers had lower frequencies of church attendance, prayer and scripture reading, and had experienced less orthodox religious beliefs (Hunsberger, 1980, 1983; Hunsberger & Brown, 1984). This research, carried out in the 1970s and 1980s with Australian and Canadian students, though not demographically representative and with certain cultural differences, are from an applicable era and suggests agreement with this study's findings. These observations are supported by cultural-evolutionary theories that stress that performance of "credibility enhancing displays" of commitment to religion by parents or leading members of

society are the most significant determinant in the transmission of religion to the next generation (Henrich, 2009; Lanman, 2012). Credibility in this sense implies personally costly commitment; the role of ritual has been particularly stressed in developing commitment and in increasing separation from other faiths (Atran & Henrich, 2010). This theory is supported by a number of studies but has also been criticised for lacking a sound psychological foundation (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2008).

With less than 30% of the sources having a strongly religious background it is not surprising that most reported weak religious socialisation in the home. Religious practice in the home was mentioned by a few of the earlier sources, but mainly with little enthusiasm; "Except for the obligatory grace and prayers before bed when we were little, religion never played much part in our lives" (Hewett, 1990).

The significance of parental agreement on religion has been stressed by several researchers (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). Maternal religiosity is found to be a stronger influence in general and on belief in particular, where paternal influence emphasises practice, such as church attendance. The influence of maternal grandmothers on childhood experience of religion could be significant too. In the early part of the century, it was common in some communities for the maternal grandmother to raise the eldest daughter (Moran, 1987). Sometimes family circumstances lead to grandparents acting in *loco parentis* (Hoggart, 1988). In other cases, the need to be 'respectable', as defined by the grandmother, led parents to insist that their children attend church, chapel or Sunday school (Mr_H.7.L, 1989; O'Farrell, 1986; Robbins, 1986). This demonstrates that extended family, particularly on the maternal side, can prolong religious practices that would otherwise have been rejected by subsequent generations.

Mixed marriages occurred in 32% of the testimonies where both parents' religion was clear, a much higher proportion than in the general population. One interviewee said, "Well, my mum was Catholic religion. Me dad was Protestant. We were the 'in-betweens' type of thing (laughs)" (Morris, 1986). Her parents didn't explain the difference between their denominations, and though she attended Sunday school occasionally, her 'in-between' status clearly made it difficult for her to associate with either denomination. Many studies show that children in mixed religious homes are more likely to follow their mother's affiliation (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997), though this has been recently challenged (Voas & McAndrew, 2012).

There were parents who insisted on church or Sunday school attendance but didn't attend Church regularly themselves (Collins, 1969; Mr_M.13.B, 1988; Mr_T.2.P, 1979; Mr_T.4.B, 1988; Mrs_T.4.B, 1988; R063, 1979). Colin Osbourne wasn't even sure of his parents' religious affiliation because they never attended Church; he attended a Baptist Sunday school because his brother was in the Boys Brigade based there, but thought his parents might have been Anglicans (1986).

A few children attended church because they felt compelled to by convention not by their parents. Mary Lear (1986), for example, had an irreligious father and a catholic mother who didn't attend church, but Mary felt she

should. Likewise, Mrs. B.4.L (1988) was attracted to religion but her parents didn't attend, "But because there was no-one to go with - my mother wouldn't have gone, my father hadn't time - the opportunity went past,...".

The influence of peers has been hard to access because very few of the sources discuss peer relationships. The religious inclination of friends can only be inferred. Hunsberger and Brown (1984) investigated the reported influence of friends and found that though they were the second-strongest influence across all denominations (after parents), friends ranked second for agnostics, more weakly than for Anglicans and other Protestants, but behind teachers and 'self' for atheists. Abby Day, working with contemporary adolescents, found that "young people's beliefs tend to be co-produced, through participation with family and friends in creating and maintaining beliefs" (2009: 276). She didn't discriminate atheists from other belief positions. This potential influence on atheisation needs further investigation.

Religious education (R. E.), including Sunday Schools, provided another source of religious socialisation. Education Acts from 1870 onwards made provision for religious instruction in state-funded schools that was Christian, nondenominational, prohibited teaching of any catechism or formulary and was not compulsory. The latter measures were required to address the concerns of non-Anglican Christians that state-funded schooling would be used to promote Anglicanism. Until the Second World War the teaching of religion was conceived of as part of citizenship education and was coupled with and in many ways subordinated to teaching imperialist values. The association of Church and Empire persisted until decolonisation in the 1950s, though it was challenged in the 1930s (Freathy, 2008). The churches constituted a strong lobby that dominated the thinking about pedagogic practice in R. E. and the wider curriculum, until new approaches to teaching, such as child centred education became influential in the late 1960s, and in the 1970s, when a multicultural approach to the curriculum began to develop (Copley, 2008). Catholic schools had a more committed approach to R. E., coordinating teaching with church activities such as Mass in a way not practiced by other denominations.

Until the 1970s there were very few specialist R. E. teachers; most were committed Christians who had other teaching backgrounds. In Sunday schools most of the teachers were members of the congregation who had little training or supervision. In both settings the approaches to scripture and pedagogy were based on personal experience with little development of methods except through the Church's education advisors. This began to change in the 1960s.

Religious education in schools was popular with some pupils, though often because arts and crafts activities and storytelling were absent elsewhere in the curriculum in the early decades of the twentieth century. Though for others it was something to be endured:

It was part of your - the medicine you had to take
- you were going to school and you learned this or

grasped it the best way you could so you could show the teacher you'd actually read it... (R047, 1979).

The effectiveness of R. E. was often questioned. In both World Wars Army Chaplains and others commented on the religiosity of the conscripts. In the First World War a 'Committee of Enquiry upon the Religious Life of the Nation' produced a report highly critical of religious education, the purpose of which it defined as to teach the men 'the facts of Christianity' and to reason abstractly about morals (Cairns, 1919). This criticism was repeated in the Second World War by B.G. Sandhurst who estimated that half of conscripts had no faith, which he ascribed to the inadequacy of religious education as religious instruction and decried the failure of 'thorough going Christians to successfully teach their faith' (Sandhurst, 1948). Research in the 1980s showed that state religious education had little or no pro-religious effect, Catholic schools had a slight positive effect and Church of England schools had a slight negative effect (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997), indicating that R. E. continued to be ineffective as a means of inculcating religious values.

Sunday school was attended by the more than half of children at the beginning of the century but declined to fewer than 10% by the 1970s (Bruce, 2006). The original educational purpose of Sunday schools had focused on literacy, but after 1870 they emphasised religious instruction (Roberts, 1973). Some of the sources enjoyed going: "Sunday School was good. I used to do colouring and big wall murals, but the lessons didn't mean a thing" (Dennis, 1986; see also Nelson, 1987). For others, Sunday school gave access to outings which they wouldn't otherwise have (Hubbard, 1986). But it didn't suit everyone. Some found the experience disturbing and off-putting; other sources saw Sunday school as a way to get them out of the house rather than because their parents had any conviction (Benson, 1979).

Q: Did you ever go to Sunday school?

A: I did go to Sunday school - yeah. Only because my friend used to go. We used to go together. But I didn't go for very long - maybe two or three years. (Bonilla, 1986)

A few experienced the socialist Sunday schools predominantly found in areas of Northern England and in Scotland. They mostly provided education that mimicked the moral and social teaching of the religious schools but with an emphasis on socialist communitarian values and sciences, or "the moral teachings of the New Testament without the theology," as one source put it (Mr_C.1.P., 1970). Unsurprisingly these schools were popular with the sources because there was minimal compulsion to attend and because the ethos matched their and their families' inclinations (Foley, 1969; Hattersley, 2003; Mrs_M.6.B, 1974). Socialist Sunday schools had largely died out by the Second World War.

Religious education was seen by policy makers and most educationalists as central to teaching children the essential values of their society. According to Loukes 'There is a

belief that as P. E. [physical education] is good for muscles so R. E. is good for morals' (1962: 7–8). Yet despite support at high levels it was under-resourced, amateurishly taught, and ineffectual as a substitute for religion in the family environment in the case of the atheists.

The work of Norris and Inglehart (discussed above) focuses on personal existential threat as a cause of religiosity or irreligiosity. At the turn of the century nearly one in five infants died in their first year and three percent of children died between the ages of one and 19. By 1980 infant mortality fell to one and a half percent, and childhood mortality was a sixth of one percent. Men born in 1901 had a life expectancy of 45 years and women 49 years; in 1980 this was 70 years for men and 76 years for women (Hicks & Allen, 1999). Whilst infant death, because of its shocking nature and the large numbers, gets most attention, adolescent death is more economically significant because of the greater effort invested in adolescent children and the loss of earnings they might contribute to the household (Boyer, 2001) and therefore has a greater impact on the well-being of siblings. Reduction in infant and child mortality, coupled with increasing affluence, did lead to reductions in family size by various methods. Increasingly parents chose to limit the number of children they had, and with this came a change in attitude to children, which focussed on children as individuals. Children's rights became more important than their responsibilities and whilst the ideal of the companionate marriage, which had existed since the eighteenth century, may not have been often realised, the 'companionate family', in which both parents and children had rights and a say in what happened, started to become an ideal aspired to by many (Roberts, 1995).

The relationship between fear of death and religious faith has been much studied and the positive correlation is well established; thinking about death and the actual threat of death leads to more religious thoughts (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). It has been shown that religious individuals fear death less and that individuals are more likely to be religious in societies or situations where death is more likely. The Bristol Peoples Oral History Project BPOHP asked respondents about their experience of and thoughts about death, which was also addressed by some of the other oral history interviews. With few exceptions subjects reported that they knew about deaths of children and others, but accepted it sanguinely (see R063, 1979). It is therefore reasonable to see reduced existential threat as a factor in loss of religious belief, but this study's sources do not provide testimonies to support this view.

It is striking how few of the sources report pressure to retain their beliefs once they started to entertain doubts, even those from apparently strongly religious backgrounds. With respect to the oral history interviews this may be because the interviewers didn't question further about their families and communities reaction to their irreligion because this was not in the interview script. Among the autobiographers Paul Bailey mentions that his mother was sad about his atheisation (1991). Others came from families with strict observance and reported the

anger of relatives (Mr_F.2.P, 1979), but most didn't report negative reactions from their families. However, it does seem likely that if their atheisation had a consequence for their lives it would be mentioned in their testimonies. Current research shows that some non-believers are subject to high levels of discrimination. Cragun et al (2012) found that in the United States overt identification as a non-believer leads to more experiences of discrimination in a country with high levels of distrust of non-believers. Even in contemporary Britain some strongly self-identifying non-believers have negative experiences (Mumford, 2012). It may be that the lack of overt identification as 'atheist' meant that few of this study's sources experienced direct resistance to their irreligion. One source didn't tell his fiancé about his loss of faith—she "wasn't religious but she believes in religion and if I told her she'd have been upset"—and was, like many others, apologetic about his atheism (Coppick, 1999).

Discussion

The intention of this study was to take a fresh view of atheism and atheisation as reported by a portion of the ordinary people who through their life decisions contributed to one of the most significant cultural changes of the twentieth century. The study uncovered different characteristics of atheisation from those described by Budd. Atheisation, like other forms of religious conversion, usually took place in adolescence and early adulthood, when individual, independent identity was being established. It took place slowly for nine-tenths of atheists, sometimes taking years. As with Budd's study, the reasons subjects gave for their unbelief included anti-religious causes; objections to theology were as prevalent as traumatic experiences of religion or personal traumas that caused religious doubts. However, though rationalism, atheistic political radicalism and contact with atheists constituted about a quarter of the reasons given, there was very little reference to the 'rationalist classics', to science, or to Darwinism.

The finding that childhood and early-adult experience with little or no commitment to religion, led to religion being irrelevant to the lives of many of the subjects, suggests that changes to religious education and observance within families, resulted in a decline in socialisation of religious understanding. This became evident in the late nineteenth century and more prevalent as the twentieth century progressed. Stephen M. Merino (2012) has identified a similar phenomenon in recent US subjects, which he has called 'irreligious socialisation', where an increasing number of children have limited experience of religion in the home, or of attendance at places of worship, leading to increasing numbers of people who are atheist from birth. This lack of experience of religion in early life, combined with changing social factors such as increased likelihood of marriage to a non-religious spouse, is resulting in a rise in those who self-identify as having 'no religion'. This parallels Voas' (2009) concept of 'fuzzy fidelity' as a transitional stage between religion and irreligion, as it provides a mechanism by which weak religious affiliation can become 'no religion'.

Brown (2009, 2012) and McLeod (2007) have both identified the 1960s as a watershed for religion in Britain, this study is equivocal on this. The increasing proportion of female atheist sources in the decades of the 1960s and 70s could be indicative of changes in women's religious attitudes as identified as significant by Brown, but they were also present in significant proportions in the earliest decades of this study (see **Figure 5**). None of the female sources mentioned feminism or the relationship of women to the church or church teaching, in their testimonies and there was little difference between the reasons women and men advanced for their irreligion. The three outlying sources identified in **Figure 1**, which show older men atheising, could be indicative of a development that would have had to occur for the rapid rise in 'no religionism' identified by Brown (2011; 2012). This phenomenon would also need to have occurred amongst older women. There are too few sources who atheised in the 1960s and 1970s to draw the conclusion that these decades were significantly different to earlier decades.

This has been a preliminary study that points to areas of further research before a comprehensive social history of atheism in twentieth century Britain can be written. The prominence of atheists in many cultural spheres could have influenced the wider acceptance of atheism but has not been considered. Further research into and a critique of 'irreligious socialisation' is required to determine whether this is a useful concept in understanding atheisation and the progress of secularisation. Additional personal testimony sources who atheised in the 1960s, 1970s, and the 1980s are required to confirm the existence of the changes to the characteristics of atheisation which have been hinted at in this study. There are many more avenues for research.

For a full list of primary source material please follow this link: <http://www.secularismandnonreligion.org/pages/view/primarysource>

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