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# Much more than a negation of religion: a qualitative exploration of the diversity of non-religious identities in England and Wales

Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor , Kingsley Purdam , and Paul Weller 

## ABSTRACT

Census data for 2011 suggested that around 14.1 million people in England and Wales state that they have no religion and recent survey evidence suggests that the number could be even higher. Drawing on evidence from focus group discussions with people who broadly self-identify with the descriptor ‘non-religious’, this article examines the diversity of non-religious identities and the interfaces with religion and equalities law. Through analysis of the identity narratives of people who see themselves as non-religious, the findings indicate that people use various conceptualisations of non-religion, belief, and spirituality to describe their identities. Moreover, non-religious people also reported experiences of unfair treatment and discrimination due to their identities. The term ‘non-religious’ can be problematic; it can be homogenising and limit people to identifying themselves in terms of the negation of religion. The findings highlight different non-religious identities and thus bring into question the conceptions, both popular and official, of the category ‘non-religious’ and the wider discourse of non-religion. It can be questioned whether the negative label of being non-religious is fit for purpose. There is a need for a new vocabulary to articulate, describe, and understand non-religious identities and experiences.

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Belief; identity; no religion;  
non-religious; religion;  
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## Introduction

In the Census of England and Wales in 2011, in response to the voluntary question “What is your religion?”, 14.1 million people—around a quarter of the adult population—reported that they had ‘no religion’ (ONS 2012). This was a substantial increase since 2001. Evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey suggests that 52% of adults now describe themselves as having no religion, compared to 31% in 1983 (Curtice et al. 2019). Evidence also points to increasing numbers of people, including young people, describing themselves as non-religious in Europe, the US, and the Middle East (BBC News and Afro Barometer 2019; Brown 2017; Bullivant 2018; De Jong 2018; Voas and Chaves 2016). However, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor

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et al. (2013) highlight that the category 'no religion' raises a number of issues about the way people articulate and are labelled in public and official discourses.<sup>1</sup> Research by David Voas (2009) and Ingrid Storm (2009) has pointed to both the decline of religion and the existence of more informal religious identities and connections and what is referred to as 'fuzzy fidelity' rather than just being non-religious.

The 'nons' or 'nones', as they are sometimes described, are a diverse population who hold a wide range of views (Clements 2017; Cragun 2014, 2019; Smith and Cragun 2019; Purdam et al. 2007; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017; Woodhead 2016; Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016), including, for example, humanism, atheism, secularism, agnosticism (Cotter 2015; Kettell 2013; Lee 2012, 2015a, 2015b), certain spiritual beliefs (Ammerman 2013; Weller, Hooley, and Moore 2011), unbelief, and those who are not religious and do not affiliate to any particular group (Baker and Buster 2015; Conrad 2018; Drescher 2016; Hassall and Bushfield 2014; Langston, Hammer, and Cragun 2015; Prideaux and McFadyen 2013; Sumerau and Cragun 2016; Ursic 2014). Research has also found that around one fifth of adults in the UK who state that they are non-religious pray (Sherwood 2018a). There is also research on non-religious identities, childhood, and upbringing, including education (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019; Voas and Crockett 2005; Voas and McAndrew 2012).

It is important to take account of the changing legal context. At the European level, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms guarantees recognition of the freedom of thought and conscience, alongside the freedom of religion, in the UK. Following the decision in the landmark appeal of the employment tribunal case *Grainger Plc and other v. Nicholson* (2009), environmentalism was deemed to be a philosophical belief; it was further clarified that those who hold such beliefs were entitled to the legal protection that would be accorded to people living their lives by a religion. The Equality Act of 2010 recognized nine different but interlinked identity characteristics to be protected against discrimination, including religion or belief. Thus the aspect of a person's identity that can be described in terms of belief now has a stronger recognition in law. At the same time, a person's non-religious identity is interlinked with other aspects of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, which are also protected in law (Stewart, Frost, and Edgell 2017).

In this article, evidence from six focus group discussions across England and Wales, involving people who self-identified as being non-religious, is used to examine the nature of their identities and lived experiences. While the qualitative and ethnographic research about non-religious identities in different countries is growing (see e.g. Bullivant and Lee 2012; Catto and Eccles 2013; Cotter 2015; Cragun 2014; Day, Vincett, and Cotter 2013;

Langston, Hammer, and Cragun 2015; Lee 2015a, 2015b; Quack 2012; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017; Woodhead 2016), it is still limited in England and Wales and thus further research is needed.

In order to address the gaps in the evidence, the key research questions are: in what ways do people who see themselves as non-religious describe their identities? How are other aspects of people’s identities interlinked with their non-religious identities? How do those who see themselves as non-religious view religion, belief, and religious groups?

Methodology

The focus groups took place in six locations across England and Wales: Blackburn, Cardiff, Derby, Leicester, Newham, and Norwich. Table 1 lists the population in each case study city who described themselves as having no religion, according to the most recent (2011) Census in England and Wales.

Focus groups are a valuable tool for exploring people’s attitudes and experiences (Bloor et al. 2001). The aim of using focus group discussions was to examine how different people understand and experience non-religion, while also considering how discussions of non-religion evolve as participants compare and contrast each other’s experiences in a group setting.

In total, 50 individuals took part in the focus group discussions. Participants were recruited through targeted advertising, snowballing, and word of mouth. A diverse sample of participants who could be considered actively and passively non-religious (Hassall and Bushfield 2014) was recruited. Actively non-religious individuals tend to belong to more organised groups; hence, in each local area, organisations and local groups of atheists, humanists, and secularists were contacted in order to reach those who actively identified as non-religious. Non-religious individuals who did not align with any particular institution, organisation or group were recruited through open invitations. It was also considered important to include non-religious people of different ages, gender, ethnic, and

Table 1. ‘No religion’ respondents in the 2011 Census by case study area.<sup>1</sup>

Case Study City	Number of ‘No religion’ responses in the 2011 Census	Percentage of ‘No religion’ responses in the 2011 Census	‘No religion’ ranking in 2011 (out of 384 local authorities)
Blackburn	20,374	13.8%	342
Cardiff	109,960	31.8%	37
Derby	68,668	27.6%	114
Leicester	75,280	22.8%	255
Newham	29,373	9.5%	348
Norwich	56,268	42.5%	1

<sup>1</sup>The ranking is by numerical order of percentage of the non-religious population in each local area relative to 384 local authorities across England and Wales.

educational backgrounds in order to explore a range of identities and experiences (Eccles 2012; Lewis 2015; Voas 2015; Voas and McAndrew 2012).

Advertisements and posters targeting non-religious populations were disseminated online (including community web sites relevant to each case study location, mailing lists of local organisations, and local e-newsletters) and off-line (including notice boards in community centres and other public places as well as publications, e.g. local newspapers). The posters and advertisements invited people who did not consider themselves to be religious to participate.

As shown in Table 2, male and female participants, including people from black and minority ethnic communities, were recruited in order to reflect some of the diversity of the non-religious population in England and Wales and to take into account the possibility of different identities and experiences.

The focus group discussions explored participants' lived experiences of being non-religious. Questions for discussion included:

- How do you understand the term non-religious?
- What does it mean to you?
- How does the non-religious aspect of your identity link with other aspects of your identity?
- How would you describe your personal position in relation to religion or belief?

The purpose of these questions was to capture the often complex lived experience of non-religion, while also gaining an understanding of the way this experience varied on the basis of individual differences and other aspects of identity, including ethnicity.

In order to limit any risk of identification, the data were anonymised and ages were categorised into three broad brackets: young (18–35 years), middle-aged (36–55 years), older (55 years and over). The youngest participant was 18 years old; the oldest was in the mid-eighties and had

**Table 2.** Focus group participants by gender and ethnicity.

Case Study Area	White			Black and Minority Ethnic			Total		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Blackburn	6	1	7	0	0	0	6	1	7
Cardiff	6	5	11	0	0	0	6	5	11
Derby	5	5	10	0	0	0	5	5	10
Leicester	2	2	4	1	0	1	3	2	5
Newham	5	1	6	2	1	3	7	2	9
Norwich	3	5	8	0	0	0	3	5	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>50</b>

only recently felt able to identify publically as non-religious. The sample included people who were in education, retired, unemployed or employed in unskilled, skilled, and professional roles.

## Data analysis

The data analysis was informed by an ethnographic approach that positions individuals as meaning-makers who mediate and describe *their* world and *their* lives (Goldbart and Hustler 2005, 16). The focus group discussions were transcribed and the data were analysed thematically using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. For the first level of analysis, the transcripts were coded using a set of initial codes that were derived from the themes and objectives of the research; this stage of coding may be described as deductive. At the second, deeper level, the coding developed inductively from the narratives of participants. The transcripts were then coded to explore further levels of classification within the data.

The themes and patterns that emerged both deductively and inductively from the data are described in the next section. The quotations are representative of the patterns that emerged in the analysis. To locate the quotations in participants' everyday lived experience, identifiers for each quotation are given. In the brackets after each quote, the key demographics of the participant and the term by which they self-identified in relation to being non-religious are listed. In addition, a section of a transcript from one of the focus groups is provided. This is followed by an analysis of the participants' self-descriptions of non-religion. The transcript excerpt gives a sense of the discussions between participants in order to highlight in detail the variations in self-identification among the non-religious and the role non-religion has in their lives. In this section, in order to help readers follow the narratives, a number is used for each participant. Participants were asked to treat the views and experiences shared during the focus groups as confidential. All quotes have been anonymised. The research was approved by the university ethics committee.

## Findings

All the participants in the focus groups identified themselves as being non-religious, but these identities had different narratives. This was evident in the opening moments of the focus groups when participants discussed how they had heard about the research and their reasons for deciding to join the group. A number of participants reported that the recruitment poster for the focus groups had encouraged them to reflect on their identity regarding non-religion and religion. These issues and the complex interplay of different aspects of identity, categorisation, and labelling are explored in

more detail below. As outlined in the methodology section, the non-religious self-descriptions used by the participants are indicated.

### ***Non-religious as not being something***

The majority of the participants indicated that the identities and labels regarding ‘non-religion’ and ‘no religion’ could be problematic. Such labels were generally seen as a negative form of description, which suggested that without religion, non-religion could not exist. One participant commented:

How do you define yourself as a non-smoker? You have to say, ‘Well, I don’t smoke because there are people who smoke.’ So we have to define ourselves as non-religious, which sounds terribly negative. (middle-aged white male, humanist, Newham)

About a third of participants also suggested that the term ‘non-religious’ was too prescriptive and homogenising. One participant commented that the term does not reflect the wide range of narratives that individuals shape for themselves:

Being a non-religious person you inherently get categorised [in] to a category that you don’t accept. [...] I don’t have a religion, but I have beliefs. These are not necessarily spiritual beliefs, but they are beliefs about life. So I think this is a very restrictive framework that I don’t think in anyway represents diversity. Black and white categories cannot capture this information. (young white female, non-religious, Newham)

Nevertheless, the majority of focus group participants were in agreement that, although there were problems with the use of the term ‘non-religious’, in the absence of other terminology, it had some practical use for describing their identities. A middle-aged woman from Leicester who preferred ‘non-religious’ to the term ‘non-believer’ commented:

We get referred to, or categorised as, non-believers or people of no faith and I just think really carefully because I don’t necessarily follow a religion, but I have my own beliefs. So I think ‘non-religious’ is probably a good enough term. For me, a religion is an organised, recognized, established religious grouping and I guess none of us necessarily believe we belong to any of those. [...] in some ways, yes, it’s got better because there was the campaign before the Census [...] to tick ‘non’ on the form. [...] So, in some ways, I think we have moved on because finally now you can tick ‘non’. (middle-aged white female, humanist, Leicester)

For this participant, as for a majority of all the other focus group participants, having a category, albeit problematic, within which she could place herself meant that the response of ‘no religion’ was counted in the Census for England and Wales and elsewhere, including, for example, official monitoring of equal opportunities. However, there were differing

views on this. One female participant from Cardiff in Wales stated that she found the Census question problematic:

Just to pick up on the point, we find we are filling in the Census and you have to put yourself as 'non-religious'; I just want to put myself as 'other', you know, and the Jedi thing, but I won't. (middle-aged white female, humanist, Cardiff)

### ***Non-religion: diverse identities***

Although those identifying as non-religious in the focus groups were a diverse group in terms of other aspects of their identities, it is arguable that an initial broad distinction can be made between those who might be described as being actively or passively non-religious (Hassall and Bushfield 2014). The actively non-religious can have a particular non-religious identity and may articulate and experience non-religion as part of a formal or informal group, which includes having official roles. For example, one focus group participant explained:

I am a humanist and regard myself as a humanist. I have been conducting humanist ceremonies for the last 18 years and was also on the national committee. I am a member of the local Secular Humanist Society. (older white male, humanist, Norwich)

Being passively non-religious generally describes individuals who do not assign any particular label to their non-religion or align with any particular non-religious group. Despite the rejection of a label, non-religion was salient in many of the participants' lives. One person commented that being non-religious and of South Asian heritage did not represent neat categories and that

I don't actually want to be part of any grouping or category; I'd rather just be myself and have my own sort of belief system. I don't categorise myself in any way, really. (middle-aged South Asian male, non-religious, Leicester)

There was overlap between active and passive non-religious categories for some non-religious individuals. One participant identified with humanism but was not a member of the British Humanist Association (BHA):

I describe myself as humanist now and extend that more or less to animals as well, in terms of respect for people and sharing our planet. [...] I have an appreciation for religion without necessarily believing in one. I am not active in the British Humanist Association. (middle-aged white male, humanist, Newham)

The diversity within the non-religious group extended further. In all six focus group discussions, participants were asked to reflect on their non-religious identities. The edited transcript excerpt from the focus group organised in Derby gives a sense of the polyphonic, sometimes fluid and emergent nature of some participants' understanding and articulation of



their non-religious identities. The quotations are listed in the order they were made during the discussion. As outlined in the methodology, in this section, each participant has been given a number to make the discussion easier to follow.

Derby focus group discussion regarding the question “What does your non-religion mean to you?”

Participant 1: I see myself as non-religious because I don’t follow any religion at all, I don’t believe in God, don’t believe in really any kind of religious dogma at all, but I do believe in a fundamental sense of right and wrong and do try to live my life like a good person. So I guess you could call that spirituality, but I don’t; I call it just being true to myself. (middle-aged white female, non-religious)

Participant 2: I agree with everything you’ve just said. ‘Spirituality’ is a reasonable word and it’s only used by religious people, but if it means [...] feeling content with yourself and your place within the universe, then I feel quite happy with it. It’s a tough word for non-believers, but I understand your reluctance to use it. I’ve been an atheist for my entire life. (middle-aged white male, atheist, member of the local humanist organisation)

Participant 3: I began my life as a Christian; I’ve dabbled in Hinduism and Buddhism along my journey. I am at the moment sitting nowhere, apart from believing myself. I am still on a long journey. (middle-aged white female, non-religious)

Participant 4: I was raised [in the] Church of England so I was baptised and sent to Sunday School and all the rest of it and Church School and I self-identified as atheist from the age of ten. (young white male, atheist)

Participant 5: I think, in that I’ve explored lots of different religious groups, including going to India with a *guru* when I was 19, but, I think, for a long time I would have defined myself as agnostic, but probably over the last 10–15 years I would say that I am an atheist. (middle-aged white female, atheist)

Participant 6: I decided to totally reject all of [religion], being faced with a scientific approach to life [...] in adopting that, I felt it entirely feasible to live a moral and a modest good life without [...] [religion] and then I just do lots of voluntary work to prove the point that you don’t have to be religious to do good. (middle-aged white male, non-religious)

Participant 7: I’ve no doubts about whether I’m spiritual or not spiritual; I’m just an atheist and I actually believe that religion is a strong force of ill in our society. (middle-aged white male, atheist)

Participant 8: I have called myself a humanist from about age seven when my parents decided that they would bolster the numbers of the BHA [...] and I used to go round freaking out other kids at school by explaining the theology [humanism] to them. I think, I’ve definitely been an atheist since then. (young white female, atheist)

Participant 9: I would describe myself as an atheist or I would describe myself as a humanist. I believe in people and people’s ability to change the world and their situation and their view of it. I also believe that religion is a human construct; the need

for religion is clearly deeply embedded in all of us—or at least the need to believe in something mythological and magical, but that doesn't necessarily explain that something is there. I see myself very much as, I suppose, a scientifically minded humanist. (middle-aged white male, humanist)

Participant 10: I'm not a believer or at least I don't practise religion, but I still think that it sort of influences my life because I have been brought up through that. I can see that it influences me, but I don't believe in it; I don't practise it. (young white female, non-religious)

In describing their non-religious identities, the participants also reflected on the non-religious narratives of the others. The construct of non-religion is personal to the individual articulating it. Far from being a singular homogenous entity, non-religion is diverse and represents a range of positions and narratives that have differing relationships with each other and religion.

The discussion also highlights that a number of participants had rejected or moved away from the religious identity with which they had been brought up (participants 4 and 6). This emphasises the range of individual experiences in relation to the formation and articulation of non-religious identities. The participants described the sense of a journey that involved exploring different religious and non-religious positionalities before arriving at their current non-religious identities (participants 3 and 5). Some also described that being non-religious had brought meaning to their lives and given them a sense of principles through which they could define their identities and which could inform their life decisions (participants 1 and 6).

For a number of participants the sense of a journey was ongoing. For example, the definitions of non-religion from participants 3 and 5 are revealing. Both are middle-aged white women who described having explored different faiths and philosophies. Both had arrived at an identity that, for them, was distinctly non-religious. However, whereas one was sure that she was now an atheist, the other felt that her journey was ongoing and that the only thing she believed in was 'herself'.

The sense of a journey to non-religiosity emerged differently during the focus group discussion in Newham which included two participants who had only recently begun their journeys towards non-religion. One was a woman of African-Caribbean heritage who was a regular churchgoer when a young child. She had recently become disillusioned with the Church, which, she felt, had become a "money thing". She now self-identified as non-religious and commented:

I am quite upset with religion now. I am just trying to find my journey. I am trying to take bits of each religion, whether Muslim or new world order<sup>2</sup> [...]. There are a lot of religions that are trying to push things down people's throats and I am so hurt. Growing up I liked the idea of going to church. A while back I went to church and it wasn't the same. [...] So it just upsets me that I want to believe in something but [...]

pauses . . .] I am just being honest but I cannot decide what to believe in. (young black female, non-religious, Newham)

In the same focus group, a young Romanian from an Orthodox Christian family described similar concerns:

I am little jealous of religious belief because they [those who have it] have a peaceful life that is governed by rules and regulations. I don't have a peaceful life. I find it hard to be a non-believer. I don't have proof not to believe in God. Non-believers are rational, but I find it hard to find proof to be a non-believer. My stance as a non-believer is more difficult. (young male, non-religious, Newham)

Both participants were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds; in the section below, the impact of these ethnic socio-religious contexts on non-religion and the challenges this can bring to individuals' lives is considered. Being non-religious was interlinked with other aspects of identity, including ethnicity and culture. During this focus group discussion it was notable that other participants offered both participants support.

In each focus group, participants also described how they had individually chosen what and how they believed. This led to a diversity of positions in relation to participants' lived experience of non-religious belief and the worldviews that they currently held and articulated, also in relation to religious groups. While describing their understanding of non-religion and reflecting on their lives, focus group participants often referred to spirituality or being spiritual. In the extract above, participants 1 and 2 from Derby discussed 'spirituality' as a 'reasonable word' to describe some non-religious viewpoints and in other focus group discussions, participants agreed that it was possible to be non-religious and spiritual. One participant stated:

Probably the key criteria for those that aren't religious is not believing in a God, although you may get people who believe in a God, but don't necessarily follow any particular religion. Equally I think it's still possible to be spiritual or believe in some sort of spiritual energy without necessarily having a belief in God as well or following a religion, so I think it's quite difficult really. (middle-aged South Asian male, non-religious, Leicester)

The focus group discussions further highlight that the significant diversity within the category 'non-religious' can lead to disagreements about spirituality. As noted in the Derby discussion, with regard to the word 'spiritual', participant 7 asserted that

I've no doubts about whether I'm spiritual or not spiritual, I'm just an atheist. (middle-aged white male, atheist, Derby)

Similarly, in three of the six focus groups, disagreements about humanism were voiced. For example, the statement from an atheist directed towards a humanist celebrant represents a common theme:

I was put off humanism. It seemed to me that it was replicating what religion does. To me, non-religion is doing away with all the ceremonial stuff. (older white male, atheist, Norwich)

Such comments were often followed by humanist participants presenting a robust defence of humanism and its non-religious nature. It was clear from the discussions that these disagreements extended beyond the focus group setting and were an expression of long-standing debates and differences within local communities.

### ***Non-religion and belief***

Discussions around the category 'belief' were another source of tensions in the focus groups. Belief or the absence of it was a recurring theme. In the transcript excerpt above, it is important to note that some participants use the term 'believe' to articulate their non-religious views, while others in the same group spoke about what they did not believe in. Around a quarter of participants described themselves as non-believers. Most participants agreed on the absence of structured or religious forms of belief in their lives. According to them, this was the neutral position. One participant commented:

I consider myself that I do not have any belief systems. I think my position is the default position. (older white man, atheist, Norwich)

The diversity of non-religious identities becomes evident in individuals' personal positioning with regard to whether they have beliefs. The above comment from the older man led to sharp rebuttals from other participants who pointed out that they 'believed' and that everybody had beliefs, albeit beliefs that were unstructured and not religious. These included an understanding of ideas about good and evil and claims of moral codes and values. One participant commented:

The fundamentals, as far as I understand, are to question, investigate, and use a rational approach, but I can develop my own beliefs in terms of my own systems of conduct and values; they can be based on a personal belief that can stem from many things [...] from philosophy. (middle-aged white male, humanist, Cardiff)

As an illustrative example of these kinds of beliefs, participants stated that, when non-religious people involved themselves in charitable or voluntary acts for the benefit of society, they did so because they 'believed' that this was a good thing to do.<sup>3</sup>

When the view was expressed in a focus group that all beliefs were irrational as they were not rooted in science, this was rebutted by four participants in that discussion who stated that their beliefs did not need to be scientific. One participant said:

I am reluctant to use the word 'belief', but I do have a belief that is beyond the material and I believe this, even though there is no evidence. (middle-aged white male, humanist, Norwich)

For several of the participants, their description of their non-religion seemed to bridge religious, spiritual, and non-religious beliefs. One non-religious participant, who also described himself as a Buddhist, acknowledged that his position was possible because, in his view, "true Buddhism did not call upon believers to believe in God" (middle-aged white male, Leicester).

A young atheist from Blackburn said he enjoyed celebrating Christmas because it was part of his identity and upbringing. According to a middle-aged female participant, who identified as non-religious but was an active member of a local Unitarian church, it was all about your 'personal consciousness'. She stated:

I cannot call myself a Christian, but I would say that principles of life can come from any religious tradition and which are set down for humanity to follow. There is no supernatural element. I mean science is exploring the wonders of creation. I see the beauty of everything, oneness of everything. It's all down to your own personal consciousness. (middle-aged white female, Norwich)

For some focus group participants, the distinction between belief and non-belief and not being something was not salient. One participant commented:

I don't really think about it [my beliefs] really. I just get on with life being logical and rational. (middle-aged white male, non-religious, Newham)

### ***Unfair treatment and being non-religious***

Around half of the focus group participants indicated that, as soon as people who were religious found out that they were non-religious, assumptions were made about their lives. In the focus group discussions, participants spoke about being perceived negatively or looked down upon. One participant commented:

There is this default position that you are supposed to be religious, preferably Christian, in this country and, if you're not, you are in some way a bad person or a deficient person or a dodgy person in some shape or form. (middle-aged white male, humanist, Cardiff)

There were negative implications of such attitudes, including difficulties with religious friends who would try to convert them and assumptions that non-religious people did not do charity or voluntary work. One participant stated:

I think, somehow, a big, big assumption is made that you don't contribute to the local community unless you are religious. It is more annoying than necessarily discrimination. (middle-aged white male, humanist, Norwich)

Another participant recounted the meeting with a Christian preacher when out shopping with his five-year-old daughter. When he told the preacher that he was non-religious, he was told that he would 'rot in hell'. His young daughter was disturbed by this comment. An older white participant from Blackburn reported that it had taken him 60 years to feel confident to talk openly about his non-religion, but that it was now easier:

I think there was a stage when people without a religion were regarded as half way to being wicked and faithless and [as people] who don't care and are people who should not be respected. Ignorable, yes. I think there has been an improvement because of people putting forward the views of the non-religious, but I still think there is quite a bit of that attitude. (older white male, humanist, Leicester)

Similarly, another older humanist participant spoke of the time when he first became a celebrant: people would distance themselves from him as soon as they had learned what he did. He had also experienced antagonism from some Christian ministers who perceived what he did as wrong. However, over the years, he felt things had improved:

On the whole I am now treated by Christian ministers with respect and friendliness. I have seen positive change. (older white male, humanist, Norwich)

Further discussion of the often complex and sometimes difficult relationships between people who see themselves as non-religious and religious groups can be found in other research (see Cragun et al. 2012; Sumerau and Cragun 2016; Ursic 2014; Zimmerman et al. 2015).

### ***Black and minority ethnic non-religious identities***

Of the four black and minority ethnic focus group participants, two described negative perceptions and experiences of discrimination that had come from within their ethno-religious communities. For example, a South Asian man from a Sikh background spoke about not disclosing his non-religious identity to his family:

I didn't tell my parents immediately; I'm not sure they even know now, but it wasn't even a conversation I had to have with them, where I had to say, 'Mum, Dad, I reject our faith.' I just sort of carried on [with] my life [. . .]. So yeah, I gave up on religion quite a long time ago and I decided to be honest about it, mainly to myself. I don't go around telling people I've stopped believing in God unless the conversation comes up. You know, a lot people in my extended family—and I've got a huge family—probably don't know that I regard myself pretty much as an atheist. (middle-aged South Asian male, atheist, Leicester)

A Bengali man of Muslim heritage, who described himself as “a secular Muslim, if there is such a thing”, spoke about his experience of discrimination:

I can give a number of examples where secular Muslims were beaten up for not fasting. Or where they have been abused for not wearing cultural clothes or have received threatening phone calls. So it is beyond prejudice or discrimination, it is taking an air of violence to get people to conform. (middle-aged South Asian male, Newham)

Although the numbers involved are small, the discussions with the different black and minority ethnic participants indicated that the influence of what could be called religious culture might be more significant in their everyday lives than for the white British participants. This was linked to the way they self-identified and the complex interplay of different aspects of identity. For example, the South Asian participant of Sikh heritage continued to attend religious rituals and ceremonies because he did not want his non-religiousness to be known; he also felt they were part of his culture and he wanted to respect the religious practices that were important to his family. These events were social events where the family got together. For the Bengali non-religious man, his Muslim faith was important as a marker of his identity; he was intimately aware of, and engaged with, Bengali Muslim culture and he worked with Muslim communities.

According to a participant, who is a youth worker, where a person lives has significant implications for the links between different aspects of identity:

Lots of young Sikhs are not religious, but they consider themselves culturally Sikh. People are comfortable about this and, in this area, there isn't any peer pressure involved and they don't feel a threat. That is different in Southall where the sense of being a Sikh is positioned as religious and abandoning your religion would be seen as an issue. (middle-aged white male, Newham)

It is notable that there was an unsuccessful campaign by some Sikh groups for the Sikh identity to be included as an ethnic group category rather than as a religious group in the 2011 Census for England and Wales (ONS [2018](#)).

In the discussion below we examine the issues emerging from the focus groups, including the way the identity of being non-religious can be officially recognized.

## Discussion and policy implications

All the participants in the research were recruited on the basis of them broadly perceiving themselves as non-religious, yet the participants articulated different identities and narratives of belief and non-belief. Although the term ‘non-religious’ can be problematic if it is proposed as a precise categorisation, it can be of value in capturing and representing the diversity of identities.

The focus group participants agreed that non-religious identities were an important part of the social and political fabric in England and Wales and

that there was a need for their diverse identities to be recognized. Arguably, there is no single category that would fully capture the range of different identities. Moreover, such identities are interwoven with other aspects of identity, including gender, ethnicity, and culture. The category ‘non-religious’ includes a wide range of attitudes in relation to religion, including those which are more overtly anti-religious. Existing research supports these findings (Cotter 2015; Lee 2015a). There is also considerable variation in participants’ opinions of the relationship between non-religion and religion. Whereas some participants reported that they had sought to work with religious groups, others felt that religion had no place in the public sphere. Two non-religious participants stated that, although they belonged to groups that are usually defined as religious, they interpreted their personal beliefs as non-religious philosophical views. Other participants belonged to religious communities in a cultural sense, even attending religious ceremonies, but did not believe in the formal doctrines of these religions.

These findings bring into question whether the negative label ‘non-religious’ is fit for purpose. One of the key issues for the participants who self-identified as non-religious was that this identity carried negative connotations of not being something and being a negation of religion. While official statistics such as the Census for England and Wales collect information under such a label, participants in this research articulated a desire to assert their non-religious identities as positive identities as opposed to not being something. For the participants, being non-religious is more than simply rejecting religion. Participants also reported experiencing unfair treatment and discrimination from members of religious groups, although some noted more recent positive changes and acceptance.<sup>4</sup> Other research has focused on people who identify as non-religious and experience discrimination (Cragun et al. 2012). It is notable that humanist chaplains have been appointed by the UK’s National Health Service to support the emotional and spiritual needs of patients who do not identify as religious (Sherwood 2018b). It is clear that between what is perceived as non-religious and what is perceived as religious, there exists a multiplicity of identities that need to be better understood and recognized. The evolving meanings of non-religion, belief, and religion might thus be better seen as the ends of a multi-dimensional continuum of beliefs, which allows for a number of diverse, decentred, and changing positionalities, rather than two mutually exclusive identities.<sup>5</sup> The interface between non-religious and religious identities is potentially creative. As discussed by Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. (2013), those who affirm being spiritual are a diverse population. David Voas and Steve Bruce (2007) argue that the emergence of spirituality is linked to secularism and Paul Heelas et al. (2005) have highlighted that the growth in numbers of those linked with



spirituality is an indication of the transformation of religion and religious identity into something that is less hierarchical and less formal.

It is important to consider the policy implications of the research and possible ways forward. Research by Paul Weller, Tristram Hooley, and Nicki Moore (2011), involving a survey of staff and students in higher education in the UK, revealed a diverse range of identities among young people in relation to religion and belief, including being spiritual, which were not aligned with any particular religion. The findings contributed to the decision to include voluntary questions in the Higher Education Statistics Agency surveys of students and staff, which added the category 'spiritual' in the questions about religion or belief to the options usually used in the Census for England and Wales. The categories used in the Census are, despite their limitations, often adopted in different areas and for different purposes, for example, official administrative matters such as identification, as well as health, employment, and housing. Official recognition of the diversity of identities often described as non-religious could help to build understanding between the non-religious and religious groups. However it is notable that in the Census in England and Wales in 2021 no further differentiation of the 'no religion' category was added.

We acknowledge the limitations of the data arising from this research. As outlined in the methodology section, the findings are based on a series of focus groups. While such a qualitative approach limits the generalisations that can be made to the wider population, the data provide new and important insights into the different identities, attitudes, and experiences of people who identify as non-religious.

In conclusion, it is clear that there is need for a new vocabulary to articulate, describe, and understand non-religious identities and experiences. As argued by Lois Lee (2014, 2015a), Linda Woodhead (2017), and others, given the large number of people who self-identify as having no religion and the issues they can face in terms of articulating their identities, it is important to have a more robust and in-depth understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of non-religious identities. In the longer term, this could also help inform the wider understanding of religious identities and religious belief.

## Notes

1. In this article, the terms 'no religion' and 'non-religious' are used. They are commonly used in public and official discourses. The terminological issues are at the centre of the research reported in this article.
2. By 'new world order' the participant was referring to alternative and 'new age' spiritualities that are not formally linked to religion.
3. For related research in this area, see Langston, Hammer, and Cragun 2015 and Ursic 2014.

4. In 2017, the actor Stephen Fry was accused of blasphemy in the Republic of Ireland for criticising God, but the police dropped the case. In a subsequent referendum, the country voted to remove the blasphemy offence from the constitution (see BBC News, 6 May 2017 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39830447>, accessed 8 December 2018; BBC News, 28 October 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46010077>, accessed 3 January 2019).
5. Further discussion can be found in Sumerau and Cragun 2016, Ursic 2014, and Zimmerman et al. 2015.

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