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Non-Religion as Religion-Related Discourse: An Empirical Invitation

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[R]ather than seeking to discern-or project-essential differences that separate "whites" from "blacks" "women" from "men," "savages" from "moderns" or "religious" from "not religious" we will seek to avoid essentializing any of these groups, of whatever sort. (Martin 2017, 61)

This century has seen a marked rise in individuals across the (Western) world choosing not to identify with a 'religion' when prompted in various contexts. Recent figures suggest that nearly twenty percent of Americans and twenty-five percent of Canadians (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017, 64), somewhere between forty and fifty percent of British (Bullivant 2017, 8; Humanists UK 2019), and 16.4 percent of the global population (Pew Research Center 2015) are religiously 'unaffiliated'. Similar cases can be made by looking at declining levels of beliefs traditionally associated with religion (Bullivant 2017; Sutherland 2018; Bullivant et al. 2019), or at decreasing levels of participation in stereotypically religious – usually Protestant Christian – practice (Bruce 2011; Bullivant 2017; Kasselstrand 2018). Debates continue on the significance and meaning of these trends, and the causal relationship between these statistical 'facts' and methods that have produced them (Ramey and Miller 2013; Day and Lee 2014; Cotter 2015). However, the past decade has seen a related rise in academic studies of what it might mean to be other than religious, which map and theorize the beliefs, identifications, values, practices, and social contexts of these seemingly non-religious populations.

Much of this work has a great deal to offer in terms of in-depth studies of ritual, politics, parenting, gender, material culture, identity formation, and more. Yet, as this

chapter's epigraph from Craig Martin's *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* suggests, much of it falls foul of the charge that it essentializes the differences between two constructed categories – religion and non-religion – and simultaneously reproduces and perpetuates problems associated with the category 'religion', and substantiates a category – 'none' – created for multiple choice surveys. This kind of argument is emblematic of the critical approach to the study of religion, and cuts to the core of much of the contemporary study of the 'other than religious'. It is also a helpful shorthand for the position that will be spoken from in this chapter. In what follows, I begin by introducing the 'critical religion' perspective before turning this on contemporary non-religion research. In doing so, I champion a discursive approach as a way forward for the field, particularly because it enables us to tackle the problem of essentialized identities – viewing them, rather, as contextual acts of identification (Bayart 2005). I then present an extended empirical example to demonstrate the utility of such an approach, and conclude with reflections on the nature of specific discursive entanglements, on how identifying and being identified as non-/religious means more in certain circumstances than in others, and on how scholars ought to be relentlessly self-conscious in their approach to these matters (J. Z. Smith 1982, xi)

Critical Religion

'Critical religion' – a shorthand for 'the critical study of religion' – is defined by Timothy Fitzgerald as the 'critical historical deconstruction of "religion" and related categories' (2015b, 303–4). Academic discourse and practice is just as open to criticism as any other – indeed, perhaps more so – and 'critical' need not be taken to imply 'cynicism nor dissimulation' (Lincoln 1996, 226). Rather, as conscientious scholars:

We dismantle ideas, dissect arguments and concepts, consider their limitations, their intellectual and social significance, and place them in their historical, social, political and cultural contexts. (Cotter, Quadrio, and Tuckett 2017, 2)

Scholars whose work exemplifies a critical religion approach include Talal Asad (1993, 2003), Timothy Fitzgerald (2000, 2007, 2011, 2015b, 2015a), Naomi Goldenberg (2018), Aaron Hughes (2015), Bruce Lincoln (1992, 1996, 2003), Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), Russell T. McCutcheon (1997, 2003, 2007, 2014), and Jonathan Z. Smith (1978, 1982, 1998). Naturally, these scholars do not present an entirely unified front, with divisions in the ranks surrounding the utility of the category 'religion', the nature of empirical work, and the continued existence of the academic field of Religious Studies. However, the following five points of summary, drawing on Goldenberg's 2018 chapter, are unlikely to raise eyebrows among this constituency.

First, religion 'is a modern concept that operates as a distorting anachronism when applied to the study of earlier epochs' (2018, 80). The concept 'is absent in the ancient world' (Nongbri 2013, 4) and comes to its contemporary usage first in the *religio* – worship practices, superstition, etc – of the early decades of the first millennium, through the mediaeval development of the twin concepts *religiosus* and *saecularis*, which distinguished between monastic clergy and those pursuing their calling in the 'secular' world (Nongbri 2013, 5, 28–31; Asad 1993, 39).

This leads to the second point: that the concept 'has roots in European colonial ambitions and intellectual history' (Goldenberg 2018, 80; cf. J. Z. Smith 1998, 275; Cotter and Robertson 2016). Indeed, until the early Enlightenment period 'there was arguably no concept in the English language' either of 'a religion' or of 'secular neutrality', with 'religion'

being applied solely to 'Christian Truth' in contrast to the 'barbaric superstitions' of others (Fitzgerald 2007, 283). In the Enlightenment period, the notion of 'religions' began to take shape due to 'an explosion of data' (J. Z. Smith 1998, 275) brought about by the European 'discovery' of new worlds and the rise of colonial exploitation. Religion, in this view, 'is a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture. It is the other, in these instances colonialists, who are solely responsible for the content of the term' (1998, 269). Indeed, many accounts of 'religion' have – implicitly or explicitly – justified the cultural superiority of Christian Europe (Martin 2017, 13). Moreover, this same period also saw the development of 'the secular' as a separable 'neutral' space and the compartmentalization of 'religion' into 'the private sphere, the realm of conscience, apart from the public sphere of the state' (Knott 2005, 66).

Third, pushing this analysis on a specific point, the very concept of 'religion' is 'a citation of Christianity as idealized prototype' (Goldenberg 2018, 80). C. P. Tiele (1830–1902) and F. Max Müller (1823–1900) – early pioneers of the 'comparative' study of religion – each utilized an ostensibly scientific model derived from Protestant Christianity, which prioritized 'belief' and 'doctrine' as preserved in texts as the *sine qua non* of 'religion' (Lopez Jr. 1998, 21). This underpinning led to assumptions that there simply was no religion in colonial contexts (Chidester 1996) or that these contexts exemplified 'primal' or 'primitive' forms of religion (Cox 2007), or led to the construction of other 'isms' – Hinduism, for example – according to Protestant norms (Cotter and Robertson 2016, 6). These theologically-informed assumptions have fed the *sui generis* discourse on religion (McCutcheon 1997) which was 'used to support the proselytization of Christianity in the colonies, as it was presented as the paragon of religions over what was perceived as 'primitive', or completely absent' (Cotter and Robertson 2016, 6). To this day, any claim that

'religion' is a timeless, universal phenomenon promotes Christian hegemony (Goldenberg 2018, 80), and thus a seemingly innocuous notion can prove particularly problematic in politics, legal cases, social cohesion, and more.

Fourth, picking up on the epigraph to this chapter, 'whatever is considered not religious (i.e., that which is labelled secular or political) in any given context is a function of dynamics of power' (Goldenberg 2018, 80). A frequent occurrence, any presentation of 'non-religious' groups 'as more reasonable than "religious" groups' seems just as self-serving as narratives that privilege one "religion" over another' (Martin 2017, 11). Moreover, buying into models of 'religion' as somehow more 'irrational' than other 'secular' phenomena has, historically and to the present day, been 'a convenient way to justify killing enemies we can successfully label as irrationally "religious"' (Martin 2017, 12; cf. Cavanaugh 2009).

Finally, the focus upon religion in the critical religion approach does not imply that 'religion' is a thing that requires special treatment (Ramey 2015). Indeed, a central aspect of Fitzgerald's critique of the field of Religious Studies is that it is an industry that serves as

a kind of generating plant for a value laden view the world that claims to identify religions and faiths as an aspect of all societies and that, by so doing, makes possible another separate "non-religious" conceptual space, a fundamental area of presumed factual objectivity. (2000, 8)

Despite the history outlined above, 'religion' can seemingly be applied to 'anything and everything that exists in the world and/or that pertains to human beings' (Goldenberg 2018, 83). However, as we have also seen, 'religion' is a problematic and contested domain, particularly prone to assertions of self-evidence, and is thus particularly deserving of critical

historical deconstruction (J. Z. Smith 2015, 30). In sum, the critique above *matters*, and to continue to treat religion as an unproblematic, self-evident category ‘at best impedes clarity of study and at worst obscures operations of political ideology’ (Goldenberg 2018, 80).

Critical Non-Religion

Following an initial undergraduate foray into examining the ‘New Atheism’ as presented in the work of four white male authors (Cotter 2011a), my postgraduate work began with the construction of an analytic typology (Cotter 2011b) of ‘non-religion’ based on the narratives of seemingly ‘non-religious’ students at the University of Edinburgh. I adopted an early iteration of Lois Lee’s definition of non-religion – ‘anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion’ (2012, 131 emphasis in original) – yet soon began to take my lead from Johannes Quack’s ‘relational approach’ (2014) as my work developed in a more critical direction.¹

Quack advocates utilizing non-religion as ‘a descriptive term for a certain group of understudied phenomena and not as an analytical term aiming to draw clear boundaries between religion and non-religion’ (2014, 441). In this understanding, non-religion is not everything which is not religious. Utilizing the term does not mean that one is defending ‘any universal distinction between religion and non-religion’ (2014, 441), nor do the two terms cover the full range of extant phenomena. Just like religion,

“Non-religion” is not to be understood as a something with thing-like existence, not as something that has clear definitions with primary and secondary features but as denoting various ways of relating to religion (whatever is understood to be religious in any specific case). (2014, 448)

¹ It is worth noting, of course, that Lee’s definition is also relational.

As we shall see below, a discursive adaptation of this relational approach provides an effective means of embracing the study of non-religion within the critical study of religion and avoiding the pitfalls of other approaches.

Until recently, much of the research that mentioned the 'non-religious' included them as a residual category, or abnormality (as in, for example, Sherkat and Ellison 1999, 367; C. Smith et al. 2002, 600; Bryant 2006). Such work exemplifies subtractionist approach which 'pervades social scientific research' and 'is visible in religion-centric methodologies, in which the secular is viewed as a context in which religion exists and is enacted.' (Lee 2015, 50). In other words, this sees religion as something substantial and interesting, as opposed to the insubstantial baseline norm that remains when it is removed. As Aaron Hughes argues, this amounts to a reification of 'the "religious" as if it somehow existed independently from more social or political (i.e. mundane) concerns' (2015, 1), and unjustifiably constructs scholars as rational outsiders studying a bounded phenomenon known as 'religion'.

Other approaches attempt to substantiate what it 'means' to be other than religious. This is a logical progression of a broader move away from secularization theory and the attendant radical particularism of the problematic 'lived religion' approach.² Although, much of this work has a great deal to offer, at least three cogent criticisms can be raised.

² With 'lived religion' understood as 'religion as expressed and experienced in the lives of individuals' (McGuire 2008, 3). This is problematic because ascribes authenticity to this aspect of 'religion' as opposed to (presumably inauthentic) institutional or traditional forms. At the same time, 'lived religion scholars [...] seldom accept without qualification the statements of participants in physically violent movements or activities that these scholars consider unacceptable' (Ramey 2015, 4).

First, the very idea that there are growing numbers of individuals who are ‘non-religious’ is often built upon a residual category constructed by censuses and surveys. Once in place, this ‘none’ or ‘no religion’ category has seen many rushing to ‘imbue this group with a material face, social interests and political persuasions, as if this group, always there but now with a name, is available for their commentary and speculation’ (Ramey and Miller 2013, n.p.). The phrase ‘the nones’ has ‘no meaning except in relation to multiple-choice grammars’ and thus, ‘in accommodating and attending to non-affiliation, academics are implicated in the creation not only of a population but of a social group’ (Lee 2015, 132).

Second, many have argued that the non-religious effectively represent the ‘world’s “fourth largest religion”’ (Lee 2015, 61; cf. Baker and Smith 2015, 1; Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016, 4–6), or more subtly that ‘being “secular” might not only be a matter of being *without* religion but also a matter of being *with* something else’ (2015, 5). Whilst there is admirable logic of inclusion here, there is a danger that this simply ‘rearranges the deckchairs on the Titanic’ (Sutcliffe 2016, 27) and we repeat and reinforce a discredited World Religions model. The idea that the category ‘religion’ can be subdivided into various ‘World Religions’ – typically ‘Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism’ and ‘almost always presented in that Abrahamocentric order’ (Cotter and Robertson 2016, 2) – has been thoroughly critiqued by critical religion approach as outlined in the preceding section. As David G. Robertson and I have argued, although moves to ‘expand the tent’ by adding the non-religious ‘might seem at first a positive step’, this actually further entrenches the typology (2016, 12). Additional categories such as non-religious or secular ‘act as “pressure valves”, allowing for voices which otherwise do not fit’ and essentially forcing them ‘to behave like World Religions’, homogenizing differences and prioritizing certain religion-like features (2016, 12).

Third, non-religion is explicitly relativized to definitions of 'religion' (Jong 2015, 16) and, as such, substantive approaches to non-religion will be plagued by the same issues associated with religion. Fitzgerald argues that to 'imagine that either side of this binary – "religion" or "non-religion" – can be addressed as a topic of research is an act of reification succumbing to, and reproducing, a central ideological illusion of Liberalism' (2015a, 263–64). Of course, one might argue that Western cultural history itself is what reifies the religion from which non-religion, 'spiritual but not religious' etc. are differentiated (Lee 2015, 26). In this way, the study of non-religion can be seen simply as the study of a culturally dominant reification. However, the core of Fitzgerald's critique still stands: through being tied to religion, empirical studies of non-religion seem doomed to 'focus on the negation and not the object being negated, although we do not accept the object in the first place' (Engelke 2015, 136).

One possible way to sidestep much of this critique is that scholars be 'vigilantly specific about the aspect of "nonreligion" that they are interested in' (Jong 2015, 20) through being restricted to very particular contexts – historical, textual, ethnographic, and so on. Indeed, Naomi Goldenberg has gently chastised me for my continued use of the mystifying categories of 'religion' and 'non-religion' – why not be more specific? She argues that doing so would not 'completely dispel the nebulae which surround all meanings,' but

By naming groups more specifically as Jews, Catholics, and Hindus, rather than as "religions," I momentarily stop propagating the idea that "religion" exists as an abstraction of which there are only examples. The more specific the name of the group the greater will be the gesture towards particular histories, behaviours and politics. (2018, 92)

However, as my interest is in the very categories of religion and non-religion – rather than some objective phenomena behind the categories – I argue such radically contextual studies

have much to say when they are read critically via a ‘discursive’ approach which takes up Fitzgerald’s challenge: ‘Surely the only topic here that makes sense as an object of study is the discourse itself?’ (2015a, 264 fn. 22)

Discursive Approaches to Non-Religion

The critical religion approach has understandably led some scholars to be increasingly wary about defining religion. Drawing on more formal discourse analysis within linguistics (see, e.g., van Dijk 2007; Wodak and Meyer 2009), recent attempts to address this have been ‘to move away from attempts at defining the term “religion”’ (Quillen 2015, 30) and focus instead on discourse, on ‘the processes that *make* certain things [...] recognizably religious’ (Bender 2012, 275).³ For my purposes a discourse is a ‘relatively coherent set of statements (action through speech) which produce a particular version of events’ (Taira 2013, 28), and discursive analysis ‘considers the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used’ (Paltridge 2006, 3). Approaching religion and related categories discursively enables us to shift the focus to ‘the *social effects* of the way people talk, rather than the apparent meaning of their words’ (Martin 2017, 104). Moreover, no speech act can be attributed to a single person but these are part of a complex socio-historical context – ‘every utterance is related to earlier utterances’ (Bayart 2005, 112). This enables individuals to be analytically incorporated into the wider societal conversation of which they are part, without making proscriptive statements about whether they are ‘religious’ or ‘non-religious’.

³ See Wijsen (2013) for an overview of discourse analysis in the contemporary study of religion, and Garling (2013), Resigl and Wodak (2009) or von Stuckrad (2013) for guides to its application, although each study incorporating discourse analysis is unique (Hjelm 2011).

Going further, Jean-Francois Bayart argues in *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (2005) that ‘identities’ are political, ideological and, ultimately, historical constructs (2005, ix). He convincingly builds a case that we should rather speak of ‘acts of identification’, and that ‘an individual’s act of identification is always contextual, multiple and relative’ (2005, 92). While an individual might define themselves as a resident of a street, district, town, nation, or continent, or by their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, employment status, job title, or health condition depending on with whom they are interacting (2005, 92), ‘none of these “identities” exhausts the panoply of identities at an individual’s disposal’ (2005, 92–3). Approaches which (unintentionally) reify these so-called identities – such as the substantive approaches to non-/religion discussed above – into natural, primordial, fixed and stable categories are flawed

because, not being satisfied with erecting into an atemporal substance identities in continual mutation, [they conceal] the concrete operations by which an actor or a group of actors define themselves, at a specific historical moment, in given circumstances and for a limited time. (2005, 93)

These issues disappear when one takes a discursive approach which focuses upon identification rather than identity.

I have attempted to apply a discursive approach to ‘non-religion’ whilst avoiding reifying it as a substantive phenomenon or identity by adapting Johannes Quack’s terminology of ‘religion-related’. ‘Non-religion’ can be conceptualized within a religion-related field, which comprises ‘all phenomena that are generally (or according to a certain definition of “religion”) considered to be not religious, but stand in a determinable and relevant relationship to the religious field’ (Quack 2014, 12). This ‘determinable and relevant relationship’ can take the form of criticism, competition, collaboration, mirroring, functional equivalence, interest, and so on. Thus, ‘religion-related’ usefully provides a wider

encapsulation of discourse on religion which can be operationalized empirically in a non-stipulative manner and which rhetorically reminds both reader and researcher that religion need not be a dominant, normative, or positive term in the discourses studied. I shall now briefly introduce the research project that provides the empirical component of this chapter, before turning to a specific interview extract as a major empirical example.

Religion-Related Discourse in Edinburgh's Southside

The argument advanced in this chapter has been articulated at much greater length in my doctoral dissertation (Cotter 2016) and forthcoming monograph – *The Critical Study of Non-Religion: Discourse, Identification, and Locality* (Bloomsbury, 2020). There, readers will find a more detailed account of the critique above, the field of non-religion studies, my research agenda, methods and context, and conclusions relating to 'local particularity' (Jenkins 1999) and the performance of 'indifference' to religion (Quack and Schuh 2017; Cotter 2017) that are not of relevance to my thesis in this chapter.

In order to operationalize my discursive approach to non-religion, I required a bounded body of data. For reasons outlined in the texts above, I also desired to analyse religion-related discourse as employed in non-institutional social interaction by non-elite social actors. I elected to utilize 'locality' as an orienting metaphor for this empirical work, viewing localities as spaces, whether material or discursive, that are 'meaningful for those [actors] within it, [...are] important for individual and group identity, and [...are] practical working environment[s]', which are also amenable to academic study due to their size and relative internal coherence (Knott 1998, 283–84). The locality selected was the Southside of Edinburgh, where I have been resident since 2004. The Southside is a porously bounded, densely urban, post-industrial area of the city, steeped in sedimented layers of history. The

table below shows some results for this area compared with Edinburgh and Scotland from the Scottish Census 2011. They are presented with minimal commentary but suffice to say the Southside is considerably more 'diverse' than the city and nation, with a higher proportion of residents selecting 'no religion' on the census.

Table 1: 'Ethnicity' and 'Religion' in 'Southside', Edinburgh and Scotland – 2011 Census⁴

'Ethnicity'	Southside Population: 22,494	Edinburgh Population: 477,000	Scotland Population: 5,295,000
'White'	85.20%	91.80%	96.00%
'Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups'	1.81%	^	0.40%
'Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British'	10.88%	5.50%	2.70%
'African'	0.79%	^	0.60%
'Caribbean or Black'	0.20%	^	0.10%
'Other'	1.12%	^	0.30%
'Religion'			
'Church of Scotland'	10.64%	24.30%	32.40%
'Roman Catholic'	10.79%	12.10%	15.90%
'Other Christian'	9.82%	6.90%	5.50%
'Buddhist'	1.25%	*	0.20%
'Hindu'	1.15%	*	0.30%
'Jewish'	0.62%	*	0.10%
'Muslim'	3.23%	2.60%	1.40%
'Sikh'	0.20%	*	0.20%
'Other religion'	0.54%	*	0.30%
"No religion"	53.05%	44.80%	36.70%
"Religion not stated"	8.69%	7.10%	7.00%

My data included participation in local heritage groups and food banks, consultation of local histories and newspapers, observation of the built environment and linguistic landscape, and 71 interviews and 62 questionnaire responses. New interviewees were solicited by

⁴ Source: <http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/ods-web/standard-outputs.html>. 'Southside' results generated using "Local Characteristic Postcode Sectors" EH8 9 and EH9. Edinburgh and Scotland populations rounded to the nearest 1,000. All ^ are amalgamated as 'other ethnic groups' in the Edinburgh data, at 2.80%. All * are amalgamated as 'other religions' in the Edinburgh data, at 2.10%. (Accessed 29 September 2016).

asking for participants who considered themselves to have a connection to Edinburgh's Southside (regardless of religion-related identification). Existing interview transcripts from Cotter (2011b) and the *Peoples of Edinburgh Project* (City of Edinburgh Council 1996) were also incorporated into my analysis. With this context in mind, I now turn to an in-depth discussion of an extract of roughly five and a half minutes from my conversation with Keith in November 2014.

Keith

Keith, a man in his late forties who is Southside born and bred, has lived there for almost his entire life, has managed a pub in the area for many years and claims to have never been 'big on religion.'

C: ...but we've been talking a little bit around religion there, and you've said, um, that you're not really religious, and you've said that you went to the church there for some school stuff...

K: Aye.

C:...so maybe if you could just tell me your, sort of, story relating to religion... just, you know like <pause> you know, yeah just tell me a bit about you and religion. It doesn't have to be... there doesn't have to be anything, but em...

K: Right. I never, em, <pause> I was never, I was never big on religion.

The extract begins with me asking Keith to 'just tell me a bit about you and religion.' My evident uneasiness was repeated almost uniformly in each interview when asking this question and can largely be explained by my reticence about reifying religion unnecessarily in these individuals' lives and about potentially leading the interviewee to construct a narrative that had not previously been formed or articulated. In this instance, my reticence

was magnified by Keith's indication that he had little investment in the notion of 'religion,'⁵ and a clear worry that he would feel obligated to construct a narrative that might be pleasing to me. Keith responds that he 'was never big on religion,' creating a narrative of continuity in his personal (non-)engagement with this area of discourse. Religion is something that he has been aware of throughout his life, but this response positions Keith as 'indifferent': he's not *anti-religious*, or even *not religious*, but 'not big on religion.' In this context, this deprecating phrase implies that being 'big on religion' means going to church (i.e. greater religiosity is attributed to those who engage in social practices deemed 'religious'). It also invokes the notion that others *are* 'big on religion,' setting up a dichotomy between 'normal' and 'excessive' or 'immoderate' interest.

Keith continues:

Eh, I've probably been in... I've probably been in Catholic churches more now, coz my wife's Catholic, so I'd probably be more at church now, eh, with her and her family, than I have been <pause> for anything else.

The normative framework within which he positions our interaction is thus non-Catholic, and this simple statement hints at wider societal discourses on Catholics being more inclined to be 'active' in their religion – or, indeed, that Catholicism demands more of its adherents. Similarly, the unelaborated manner in which he attributes his church attendance by recourse to his wife's identification invokes common sense notions that spouses and family members engage in 'religious' activity because of the desires or habits of other members of the family and, potentially, to avoid causing offence. It is also worth noting that,

⁵ In retrospect I need not have been so reticent, as the point of these interviews was to generate religion-related discourses, and not to obtain some form of definitive or 'authentic' picture of these individuals in relation to religion.

throughout this extract, the individuals who are singled out as being particularly religious are female.

Keith then describes perceiving his interactions with religion to be increasingly dictated by attendance at funerals:

I notice as I get, as I get older, I seem to be going to more funerals as well [...] eh, which is weird. I'm getting to know hymns a lot better. But, me... but me growing up, I was... I was never. I wasn't... my mother and father weren't religious either, so we weren't... we were never a religious family

In an upbeat aside to this 'weird' situation, he jokes about 'getting to know the hymns a lot better,' emphasizing the significance of hymns and other learned behaviours as banal but important indicators of 'proper' insider status, and also further driving home that he was unfamiliar with the context. He traces this unfamiliarity to his family, constructing his upbringing as a non-religious context or container, and placing significant weight upon the religiosity of parents influencing that of their children. This phrase further emphasizes that Keith does not consider his current or past participation in 'religious' activities as making him religious – yet, as we shall see, he is willing to use the participation of others as a barometer of their subjective religiosity.

Keith then concludes the narrative arc of this section:

and, em <pause> em, not that I had any, I never had a faith, but eh... when I lost my mum and dad to cancer [...] that just sorta put [an end to it], coz they weren't, I mean, they were a good age but then I just sorta... any interest, any interest I had <pause> I probably lost [...] eh, when they died, aye. And, various other members of my family. So... <pause>

Clearly, religion is implicated in discourses on death and mortality and, in the case of this individual and the loss of his parents, it has been tried and found wanting. Keith feels the need to mitigate the significance of religion in his life prior to this event by stating that he 'never had a faith' before this occurred – notice the easy slippage from 'religion' to the

more subjective, intellectualized, and 'Protestant' notion of 'faith' – tracing his own movement from a position of disinterested indifference to the field of religion, to one with more hard-and-fast boundaries.

Discussion then turns specifically to Keith's increasing familiarity with Catholic church services:

But [saying that] I suppose since I met my wife and gone to... Catholic church, and... a couple of times, four or five times, em... I've probably, <laughs> I've realized I'm glad I'm not a Catholic, because they're very long-winded [...] services, so <laughs> eh, yeah... but it, it doesn't inspire me to change my religion and become a Catholic [...] after being there.

Once more, Keith explains this increasing familiarity through his relationship with his wife, and jokes that the services are 'very long-winded' and that he isn't inspired 'to change my religion and become a Catholic after being there.' Notice that theological aspects are not discussed here; what Catholicism means to Keith is an experience that is uninspiring and boring. He sees himself as an outsider experiencing another's community, and this experience has made him 'glad I'm not a Catholic.' That being said, he doesn't feel overly negatively towards this infrequent attendance, and makes no reference to any ideological aspects or disagreements. His aside about not changing his religion invokes a variety of discourses, from the basic idea that Catholics/Christians have an agenda directed towards changing or supplying him with a religious 'identity', to the notion that attendance isn't enough, that there is something deeper that needs to change or a declaration that needs to be made, to the implied distinction between Catholicism, Church of Scotland, and 'not big on religion,' as different religions.

Discussion then returns to funerals and mortality:

Em, as I was saying, as I've got older, I've gone to more and more funerals [...] em, and I've found <pause> that's probably the closest I've got to religion is being... is going to funerals. [...] More and more funerals, eh <pause> and I just, I just find... they always seem to use the same sermon,

which doesn't... which never makes it feel, em, very personal. [...] Which puts me off as well. Em
<pause> yeah, it puts me off.

Funerals are Keith's major point of interaction with religion. Here, he gets engaged and pays attention; indeed, the times he claims to have shown any interest in religion are where he perceives a connection to his personal relationships. I have already discussed how he explains his attendance at Catholic services by recourse to his wife. Similarly, he attends church funerals because of the relationships that he wishes to commemorate. Here, 'they' are castigated for preaching impersonal sermons 'which puts me off'. Thus, religion *should* be personally meaningful and relevant. If the experience of these funerals produced the 'right' feeling, and if the material were judged to be more relevant and personalized this might make a difference to Keith, but here churches are judged to be superficial and cynical, as going through the motions, and not concerned with the individuals 'they' are supposed to be commemorating, the very individuals who have necessitated his encounter with church in the first place. This compounds the barrier between Keith and religion that was precipitated by the death of his own parents. What is also significant here is what is *not* said: Keith neither questions the right of churches to perform this social function, nor does he engage with potential reasons why these commemorations occurred in churches in the first place (those who have died aren't described as having been particularly 'religious,' for example). Here we have an example of 'the Church' being constructed as the hegemonic default option for life cycle rituals, while at the same time being found wanting in this regard.

Picking up from a natural break in conversation, I was keen to understand Keith's motivations for attending services with his wife, and the way such attendances come about.

C: Alright. How do you... <pause> so, how do you end up going along like with your, with your wife and stuff... like, does she go like every week? Or...

K: She doesn't... no she doesn't go as regular, I mean we go to, em, what's it? We go to her nephews' and nieces', eh, communion, em... and, we were at her father's funeral not that long ago. Em, and a couple of other things, and [that's just... <inaudible>] what's that thing the kids get? It's not communion. Is it communion they have?

C: Aye they have the, the first communion...

K: Aye, yeah so and she's got a lot of nephews and nieces, so we've been to 5 or 6 of them, funerals... maybe a couple of other things that I didn't know what they were.

C: That's alright.

My interest in the frequency of her attendance invokes discourses of authenticity, salience, and the meaningfulness of practice: how observant is she? Is she a 'real Catholic' or 'merely' a 'cultural' or 'rites of passage' one? In Keith's response we gather that he is aware of an 'insider discourse' with specific terminology and understandings of specific rituals, but that he does not consider himself part of this discourse. The Catholics are a 'they,' and while he clearly positions himself as not part of the group, he doesn't indicate that this is of any great significance. For Keith, being married to a Catholic means that certain events happen as a matter of tradition; because his wife and her family participate, he does so too.

Next, Keith expands on what he sees as the reasons for his wife's desire (and, indeed, that of her family) to participate in Catholic life cycle rituals.

K: They have to... but when they go, I mean they're from East Kilbride, so when they go it's the family thing, the... the family chapel, church... em, and they've all got, you know, it's like the family seat...

C: Right.

K: ...eh, but then my wife, my wife's mother, she's very religious. Eh, she's in, she's in church twice a week, 3 times a week. Eh, so when we go to see where, we sometimes go, go on a Sunday and then we go, go to church with her [... any time we go on a Sunday <inaudible>] But, eh, she's very religious.

He explains this behaviour by her family's geographical origin, implying that East Kilbride is an area with a different religious hegemony (Catholicism),⁶ and a greater proclivity to displays of religiosity than one would expect to encounter in the Southside. This is *what they do*; they go to the church that they've always gone to and sit in the 'family seat'. Indeed, this disclosure is prefaced by the phrase 'they have to,' suggesting that there is an element of obligation and coercion involved. Not only is this behaviour constructed as characteristic of East Kilbride, it is apparently motivated by the maintenance of family tradition and a desire to appease Keith's mother-in-law. She is described as 'very religious' – exemplified solely by her multiple attendances each week – and thus he and his wife attend church when they visit her, the implication being that this is not something that they would choose to do, that it will make her happy, and that they do not see any harm in the practice. Thus, Keith 'explains away' the 'religious' behaviour of his immediate family as a matter of obligation and keeping the peace with an older family member who (still) places significant weight upon such behaviour.

At another natural break, I ask about how Keith found 'it growing up,' drawing attention particularly to the interaction between 'religion' and 'school.'

C: Yeah. Um, and how did you find <pause> how did you find it growing up? Like, you know, so the school would have things, and things like that... so was there <pause> yeah, like what was... what was the normal sort of thing for you?

K: I mean it was... when we went with the school it was, it was, eh... we always went at Christmas, we did a... just at the church up the road, we did all the carols and stuff, and then we went at, em, <pause> I can't remember what it's called now, at harvest time [...] went then. Easter, went then. Em <pause> yeah, I mean I'm, I'm going back to... I'm going back 30-odd years [...] it was, eh <pause> I liked going and singing the songs, I don't think I would... it would never,

⁶ Indeed, the Roman Catholic population of the Southside (10.79%) according to the 2011 census is less than half of that in East Kilbride (22.8%).

it would never, eh <pause> it wasn't like a crowd-puller for me... you know what I mean?
<laughs>

C: Yeah.

K: <inaudible> To make me go back. And then we, I did, I had a, eh, we did RE at secondary school, eh <pause> I didn't pay much attention in RE. It was just a... it was something that I've never ever got, got involved in.

My initial emphasis ties into discourses surrounding the importance of children to religious institutions, religion and education, and religion in the public square. Keith describes a situation where he and his classmates 'always' journeyed to 'the church up the road' at points throughout the year, in order to participate rituals such as Christmas and 'harvest time'. Here, Keith constructs an unproblematic and hegemonic link between the practices and routines of (certain) schools and (certain) churches in the Southside. His uneasiness with terminology, and his mitigating phrase 'I'm going back 30-odd years' indicate a) his awareness once more that there is a vocabulary that comes with regular participation, b) that he hasn't regularly participated, c) that insiders will know what these terms are and what they mean, and d) that even when he was participating on a semi-regular basis – as was everyone in the school, it would seem – there was no explanatory or credibility enhancing discursive framework for him as a child.⁷ What he remembers is the relatively benign experience of some appealing songs and little else – certainly nothing to encourage him to investigate further. Could this be indifference *par excellence*? Similarly, Religious Education (RE) is remembered merely as something that everyone had to go through; it just happened. His memories of RE aren't invested with any negativity – indeed, it is barely remembered at all, as he 'didn't pay much attention' – and this view is echoed in his contemporary construction of 'religion' as both harmless and boring.

⁷ See Lanman (2012) on 'credibility enhancing displays'.

Finally, we return to the theme of death and mortality:

Although, as I say, as I've got older I've probably been involved with more, em <pause> and sometime... eh, especially if it... let's say, if we're at funerals, especially if, you know, if it's close friends or family, and you sitting there... especially if they were young, and <inaudible, pause> I don't understand why, I don't... I still don't understand why people, some people have to die so young [...] when there's arseholes still alive, like you know what I mean? That's the bit I don't get. [...] I don't think anybody could ever explain it to me, so...

The implication of Keith's opening statement here (given his following remarks) is that he has been involved in *thinking about religion* more, due to his attendance at many funerals. Because of these interactions in particular, religion is connected with death, mortality and theodicy, and is perceived to be attempting (inadequately) to provide solace, comfort and explanations for why people die and where they go after death. Ultimately, Keith dismisses such attempts. For him, religion is deeply implicated in societal discourses on death, mortality and morality. He has an ideal model of what religion *should* be, yet his subjective experiences stand in stark contrast with this model and thus religion is found wanting.

To summarize, here we have encountered a multitude of religion-related discourses, on engagement and identification, moderation, hegemony, family transmission, offense and obligation, death, mortality and morality, belonging and insider discourse, the meaningfulness of practice, indifference, embodiment, superficiality and sincerity, ritual, tradition, friendships and more. But what does this individual, and others like him in Edinburgh's Southside, tell us about non-religion?

Discussion

It should not have gone unnoticed in the above analysis that the religion-related field of discourse in the Southside encompasses a wide variety of discourses and is significantly entangled with other discursive fields. In some cases, these discourses are effectively a-

religious, in that they can be 'described and analysed without any reference to religious phenomena' (Quack 2014, 446), and are quite loosely entangled with the religion-related field. Think here of Keith's model of authentic and personal funerals, or his construction of the family as a unit that dictates, motivates, explains and legitimizes behaviour. Other examples that were prevalent in my Southside data, though not evinced above, were discourses celebrating the perceived multiculturalism of the Southside, or those constructing the Southside as embattled against external forces such as the University of Edinburgh, the City of Edinburgh Council, or disruptive inter-/national politics. However, despite this theoretical a-religiosity, many of these discourses were contextually entangled with the religion-related field, rendering the apparent a-religiosity meaningless. For example, in the popular imaginary of the twenty-first century UK, multiculturalism remains a prominent arena for religion-inflected clashes of cultures (cf. Huntington 2011), despite this discourse arguably lacking an empirical basis (Sharify-Funk 2013). Thus, we can conclude that the theoretically a-religious character of some discourses is rendered effectively meaningless in certain contexts. Going further, some other discourses could not be described without recourse to contextual constructions of religion. Examples would be Keith's construction of East Kilbride as Catholic, or his distinction between people who are or aren't 'big on religion'. These observations demonstrate the importance of looking beyond the surface of discourses in order to understand the tightness of their entanglement in the religion-related field, and the significance of the acts of positioning taking place by relevant actors. They temper the temptation to reify the religion-related field simply because of certain entanglements and focus our attention instead on the nature of these entanglements.

Turning specifically to the relational category of non-religion, it makes little sense to refer to the discourses encountered above as 'religious' or 'non-religious'. What can be said is that these are resources that are utilized by social actors to contextually position themselves and others in relation to religion. Some of these contextual acts result in the positioning of phenomena as non-religious, in Lois Lee's sense of being 'primarily understood in relation to religion' but not being 'considered to be religious' (2015, 32). However, in many of the discourses in the Southside – particularly those surrounding dress, the built environment, sights, sounds, smells, and visible practices – 'non-religion' or 'the secular' were seemingly much less visible than religion. I should note that a minority of my interviewees spoke about instantiations of the non-religious, in the form of 'atheist' bus adverts and irreverent material culture, and of a feeling of oppression in 'secular' public space. Also, methodologically, the overwhelming focus on 'religion' might be explained to a degree by the approach taken in my interviews, and what my interviewees deemed my research to be about – the nominal focus was, after all, 'religion'. Yet, we can also go further and argue that it is the position of the speaker, the presumed shared perspective within which our interviews took place, that is constructed as the 'neutral' secular space which provided the context for differentiating between religion and non-religion. Likewise, the Southside was regularly constructed as a neutral, secular (and post-Christian) space from which pronouncements could be made, or exceptions to the rule noted. Thus, we should not fall back on naïve notions of insubstantial secularity, non-religion etc (see Lee 2015, 49–69), but be aware that the non-religious might be implicit in the subject position of those actors utilizing religion-related discourse, rather than explicitly articulated. And so, as I said before: religion-related discourses are resources that are utilized by social actors to contextually position themselves and others in relation to religion.

Moreover, I previously emphasized the importance of moving from conceiving religion-related 'identities' as static categories and viewing them rather as acts of identification – as the contextual acts of positioning just mentioned. As we have seen in the brief section of Keith's narrative above, and evinced throughout my discursive data, religion-related identifications are characterized by 'indeterminism, incompleteness, multiplicity and polyvalence' (Bayart 2005, 109), depending less on our perceived membership of a community or culture 'than with respect to the communities and cultures with which we have relations' (2005, 95). Identifying oneself or others as non-/religious – or not – is a profoundly contextual discursive act, entangled in webs of discourses that are impacted by subjective, spatial, relational and conceptual factors. Some discourses, such as those I encountered which focused upon the (former) church buildings in the Southside, and their place within an 'urban heritage economy' (Knott, Krech, and Meyer 2016, 127; Beekers and Cotter 2019) were clearly entangled with the religion-related field, but this entanglement was relatively uncontroversial and peripheral to their central themes. Or think of Keith's interaction with his wife's familial Catholicism (in contexts excluding funerals). In my analysis of these discourses, we do not really see a 'non-religious' position being constructed, adopted or spoken from. Seemingly, it is not so important to be 'non-religious' when confronted with 'banal religion'.

However, other discourses, such as those connecting religion with death, mortality and morality, were entangled in a much more contentious and disruptive fashion. Keith effectively banned conversations on religion in his pub because 'it leads to arguments', and as we saw in his interview, religion was implicated in delicate balancing acts with other family members, death and mortality, insider-outsider dynamics, morality, and Christian hegemony. In these discourses, the religion-related field is invested with power, and this

investment carries with it the potential for oppression and being oppressed. Here, the non-religious subject position becomes much more meaningful (as do all related positions). These discourses involve contextually normative configurations of religion-related categories – such as religion and science as competing epistemological frameworks, or transmission of religion from parents to children – meaning that the discourses function by positioning phenomena relative to this standard model. Quite simply, being positioned as religious or non-religious means more in certain circumstances than it does in others. Thus I argue for a shift in approach from studying social actors *as* ‘religious’ or ‘non-religious’ to the ongoing process through which social actors ‘manage that continually shifting set of similarities and differences that simultaneously unite/estrangle us to/from all others – thereby creating different selves and different identities’ (McCutcheon 2017, 157).

Conclusion

At the heart of the critical strand of Religious Studies is Jonathan Z. Smith’s famous statement that

while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious – *there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his [sic] imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. (1982, xi)

The six word italicized phrase ‘there is no data for religion’ can easily be taken out of context and critiqued in the face of the data ‘out there’ that is so obviously ‘religious’ (e.g. Hedges 2016). However, in my reading Smith is not arguing that scholars should therefore cease all empirical work on social phenomena deemed ‘religious’, nor that they should abandon the category altogether, nor that ‘religion’ is uniquely problematic when compared to some of the other categories that are ‘created for the scholar’s analytic purposes’. I argue

that a key element in Smith's argument lies in the sentences immediately following this oft-cited passage:

For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his [sic] primary expertise, his foremost object of study. (1982, xi)

It was in this spirit of relentless self-consciousness that I undertook my doctoral research in order to critically engage with, reframe and, to some degree, rehabilitate the burgeoning body of contemporary research on 'non-religion' – a term that is definitively 'the creation of the scholar's study'.

A discursive approach blurs the boundary between 'religion' and 'non-religion' and demonstrates that they are dynamic subject positions. Phenomena can occupy both positions at the same time, or neither, depending on who is doing the positioning, and what issues are at stake. Conceptualizing such acts of positioning discursively demonstrates that social actors do not necessarily operate with a coherent or set understanding of what religion is, nor do they necessarily invoke a religion-related discursive repertoire at all. Rather, they assign specific phenomena or encounters to particular fields of discourse and engage with them by negotiating a repertoire of contextually relevant entangled discourses. Religion is one potential but not necessary field. Understanding this mitigates against naïve ideal-typical approaches, particularly in public discourse, which deny the localized and 'situational' (Stringer 2008) nature of religion-related discourse.

In this chapter, I have not taken a position on what 'non-religion' is, or claimed that anyone is 'non-religious', or that this would have any meaning in their day-to-day lives. What I have attempted is to emphasize that a socially constructed 'religion' exerts enormous power in certain contexts, and that therefore certain positions are placed into conversation with religion in contemporary society and might be contextually considered as

‘non-religious’. My discursive approach avoids reifying ‘religion’ as in some way unique, whilst also enabling ‘non-religious’ subject positions to be incorporated into the academic study of religion. Hopefully, this can act as a bridge between two increasingly fortified positions in the contemporary Religious Studies – one focused upon understanding ‘religion in the real world’, and the other on understanding the discursive processes by which that statement makes sense (Cotter et al. 2016, 98). To adapt Smith’s phrase: *there is no data for non-religion*. But as long as we can remain ‘relentlessly self-conscious’ in our approach, and avoid essentializing differences between religion and non-religion (Martin 2017, 61), this need not be a problem.

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