

Non-religious young people in Britain possess a range of different identities

In a *recent article* for the *Journal of Youth Studies*, **Nicola Madge** and **Peter J Hemming** draw on findings from the *Youth On Religion* study to explore the meaning of non-religious identities. They find that young people display a wide range of non-religious identities with different levels of religiosity, and that being non-religious does not confer an automatic identity. There is also considerable fluidity of religious identity and behaviour, over time and depending on setting.



Image: Flickr, U.S. Embassy London

As the non-religious grow in number, it is important to realise that young people identifying themselves in this way comprise a very diverse group. A non-religious identity has no single meaning for them. Moreover, being non-religious does not necessarily mean that religion plays no part in their young lives. Indeed there is some suggestion of a continuum of religiosity with non-believers at one end and those with committed faith at the other. Young people may consistently remain at one point on this continuum or they may show some fluidity in their religious beliefs and behaviours.

The Youth On Religion study

The **Youth On Religion (YOR) study**, funded by the AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society programme, investigated the meaning of religion and non-religion in the lives of young people. Information was collected through an online survey with over ten thousand 13 to 17 year-olds as well as interviews, discussion groups and eJournal entries with 157 17-18 year-olds. The study took place in three British multi-faith locations, the two London boroughs of Hillingdon and Newham, and Bradford in Yorkshire.

The non-religious sub-sample was identified within this study through the personal identifications made by young people themselves. In the study survey, participants were given the option of ticking a 'no religion' box or a range of religions (to mirror the Census), but were also given the

opportunity to provide further descriptions as appropriate in a text box. Almost one in five survey participants (1,940 young people) self-reported a non-religious identity. For discussion groups and interviews, participants were asked to write down their religious status in their own words. Overall, three in twenty (24 young people) fell within the broad no religion group.

Demographic background and (non-) religious identity

Not surprisingly, ethnicity and place of birth, of both the young people and their parents, affected the likelihood that they would identify as non-religious. The young people in the YOR study as a whole came from a range of faith positions including, most numerous, Muslims, Christians, religious 'nones', Sikhs, Hindus and those of mixed faith, and a variety of ethnicities. Those within the no religion group were strikingly more likely than the rest to be white, and to have mothers born in the UK. They were also overwhelmingly likely to have been born in the UK themselves.

Non-religious identities

Not all those with non-religious identities described themselves in the same way. The most popular descriptor for interviewees was 'none' or 'no religion' although six young people opted for 'atheist' and two for 'agnostic'. Four gave other answers suggesting less certainty. These labels reflected real differences. For example, those who definitely did not believe in God differed from those who had largely drifted away from religion but may still have had some beliefs. It was also apparent from interviews that young people varied considerably in the amount of thought they had given to their religious or non-religious identity and its priority in their lives.

Four anonymised responses illustrate some of ways young people described their non-religious identity.

'I'm probably atheist out of everything. I just don't believe in anything.' (RICK: male, no religion, religion not very important)

'Like I'm not saying that I don't believe in God, I just don't know what to think. I don't know, I'm not fully decided yet. I don't know.' (ANNETTE: female, no religion, religion not very important)

'I think there probably could be something there but I'm not sure what it is at the moment.' (BOBBIE: female, no religion, religion not very important)

'I don't have to literally see it to believe it, but it's not something I've ever really looked into properly.' (LOUISE: female, no religion, religion not very important)

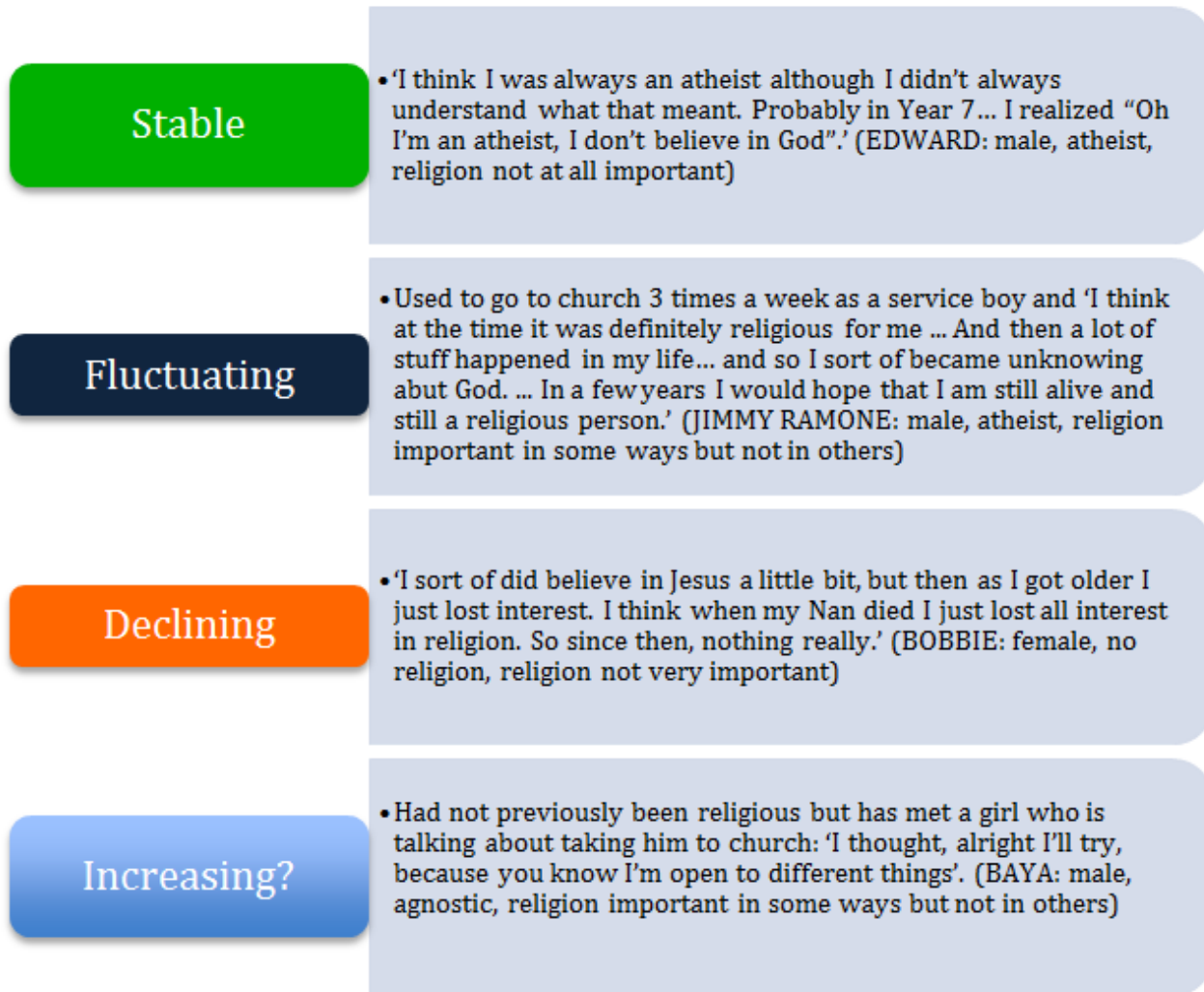
There were also differences between young people in whether they reported stable or fluctuating non-religious identities. Four possibilities are illustrated below.

Stable, fluctuating, declining and increasing religiosity among the religious 'nones': discussion group and interview data (reproduced from Madge and Hemming, 2016)

Religion and the non-religious

Interestingly, religion could play an important part in young people's lives even if they said they were non-religious. For example, while 86% said religion was not at all important or not very important in their lives, a not insignificant minority were less certain: religion was seen as important in some ways but not others for 11% and quite or very important for 3%.

Particularly strikingly, only just over half (976 young people) of the survey sample identifying



themselves as non-religious categorically stated that they did not believe in God. The largest group among the remainder (485 young people) were unsure about the existence of God. Of the rest, 101 said they did not believe in God but did believe in a Higher Power of some kind, 192 said they believed in God at least some of the time, 116 said they had doubts but did believe in God, and 47 were sure that God really exists. A small number of young people said they attended services and prayed on their own: these numbers were greatest for those who expressed some belief in God.

Influences on religiosity

According to the young people in the survey, the majority were quite or very similar to their mothers in religious views, whether they identified themselves as religious or non religious. The effect was stronger for those who gave themselves a religious label, but still 45.9% of the non-religious group said their views were very similar and 15.6% said they were quite similar. Only 12.0% and 9.4% said they were very different or quite different respectively.

Young people in the interview sample reinforced the importance of family in influencing their religiosity, even though science was the most frequently mentioned influence for the non-religious group. As can be seen from the table below, there were notable differences in the influences on religious views mentioned by those reporting religious and non-religious identities.

Rank order of factors influencing religious views quite a bit or a lot by religious or non religious identity: survey data (reproduced from Madge and Hemming, 2016)

	Family	Teachers	Friends	Religious leaders	Scripture	Internet	TV Radio	Science
Religion	(1)	(7=)	(5)	(3)	(2)	(7=)	(6)	(4)



No religion	(2)	(6)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(8)	(7)	(1)
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Context was an additional factor influencing the depiction of religious or non-religious identity, with young people taking part in interviews reporting changes in religious practices according to where they were and who they were with. For instance, some participants described how they would present themselves differently when with friends or with families and members of their nominal faith, just as they would when in their own communities or in other locations.

Conclusion

These findings overwhelmingly suggest that while there are those who are clearly religious and those who are adamantly not religious, there is a considerable amount of middle ground and some sense of a continuum of belief. Half of the non-religious group in the YOR study did not believe in God and, in the main, had minimal links with personal or organised religion. The other half, however, reported a greater presence of religion in their lives. They might have some beliefs in God and they may show involvement in traditional religious activities.

A key conclusion, therefore, is that young people display a wide range of non-religious identities with different levels of religiosity. In other words, being non-religious does not confer an automatic identity. Furthermore, there is also considerable fluidity of religious identity and behaviour, over time and depending on setting. At its most extreme, this is illustrated by two young people who changed their mind about their identity during interviews. They further suggest the importance of context for identity.

In a separate article based on these same data, we explore further the notion that non-religious identity is not simply a lack of religious identity. Young people who do not consider themselves religious do not necessarily share a common identity with one another, but they do have a clear sense of who they are, how religion fits into their lives, and what this means for their understandings of themselves as citizens.

The findings of the study as a whole have been published in 'Youth On Religion. The development, negotiation and impact of faith and non-faith identity' by Nicola Madge, Peter J Hemming and Kevin Stenson (Routledge, 2014).

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