Sacred Freedoms and Subtle Restrictions: The FACTs of religion's presence in English state education

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Abstract

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Britain's religious landscape has changed radically over the last century. The population here is now more pluralistic and nonreligious than ever before, with religion and spirituality increasingly perceived through neo-liberal frameworks as highly individualised, privatised, and even marketized affairs. However, the English education system does not reflect this new reality – all state-funded schools must lead pupils in daily Christian worship, prioritise teaching about Christian beliefs over other worldviews in RE, and most faith schools, if oversubscribed, are able to religiously discriminate against applicants when allocating school places. None of this aligns with the neoliberal emphasis on freedom of choice and personal agency thought to be prominent in wider British society. Using information gathered from the websites of nationally representative samples of English state schools, the present thesis investigates this apparent contradiction. I outline how schools claim to involve religion in collective worship, RE, school values, and, where relevant, faith-related admissions criteria, and analyse whether and how individual freedoms are considered and navigated here. This not only offers valuable insights into how schools appear to engage with religion – something we currently lack large-scale research into – but also sheds light on broader societal attitudes towards religion in contemporary Britain. My findings, summarised in the acronym "FACT," indicate that while schools rarely *explicitly* state their commitment to protecting individual religious choice and agency (F is for Free Choice), most *implicitly* indicate this (A is for Ambiguity, and C is for Contrasting Approaches) in describing these elements of school life. However, any attempts to protect religious freedoms are also always subject to limitations (T is for Tacit Restrictions) and therefore we should be cautious of oversimplifying the influence of individualism on modern perceptions of and interactions with religion, or indeed of overlooking simultaneously influential collectivistic ideals.

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Declaration

I declare that this is entirely my own work and has not been submitted elsewhere in full or in part for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

1. Introduction and Literature Review

Religious Schooling in "Nonreligious" England

Technological advances made in recent decades have meant that information about current events has never been more accessible. People can follow minute-by-minute updates about a national election or natural disaster occurring almost anywhere in the world without leaving their beds. And yet, despite this constant onslaught of information, some occasions are so momentous that they stand-out from the crowd; most adults in Britain can probably tell you where they were when they heard about the horrific events of 9/11, or, more recently, what they were doing when the first UK Covid-19 national lockdown was announced. The death of Queen Elizabeth II on 8th September 2022 could be another example – not because people necessarily held strong views about her or the British monarchy,[1] but because most sensed the historical significance of what was happening. She reigned as Queen for seventy years – longer than any other British monarch in history – and in that time became intricately connected with the country's national identity.[2] Many will remember her as a figure of stability and loyalty,[3] quietly committed to her duties[4] – and, apparently, marmalade sandwiches[5] – through decades of significant social, cultural, and political change. One example of this is her steadfast commitment to Christianity even as the surrounding religious landscape transformed irrevocably. She described her Christian faith as "the anchor in [her] life"[6] and took seriously her official titles as "Supreme Governor of the Church of England" and "Defender of The Faith;" these do not appear to have been considered *particularly* unusual or controversial at the beginning of her reign, but were substantially more so by the end. Consequently, she leaves a formidable legacy that, amongst many other things, highlights the dramatic ways in which patterns of religious identity, belief, and practice, have changed in England.

[1] Jane Corbin and Sean Coughlan, 'Coronation: How popular is the monarchy under King Charles?', *BBC*, 24 April 2023 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-65326467> [accessed 20 December 2024].
[2] Sophie Gilbert, 'No One Performed Britishness Better Than Her Majesty', *The Atlantic*, 9 September 2022 <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2022/09/queen-elizabeth-ii-death-british-monarchy-identity/671392/> [accessed 20 December 2024].
[3] 'Queen Elizabeth II symbolized stability throughout her record-long reign', *The Washington Post*, September 8 September 2022 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/09/08/queen-elizabeth-legacy-stability-britain-monarchy/> [accessed 20 December 2024].
[4] 'Obituary: Queen Elizabeth II', *BBC*, 8 September 2022 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-61605149> [accessed 20 December 2024].
[5] The Royal Family, 'Ma'amalade sandwich Your Majesty?', YouTube, 6 June 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UfiCa244XE> [accessed 20 December 2024].
[6] Catherine Pepinster, 'How the Queen – the 'last Christian monarch' – has made faith her message', *The Observer*, 24 December 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/dec/24/queens-christmas-message-article-of-christian-faith> [accessed 20 December 2024].

The first half of this chapter will outline some key developments in this respect, such as the declining prominence and popularity of Christianity and the rise of a complex version of "non-religion" where boundaries with religious and spiritual ways of life are often highly blurred. It will also outline some possible explanations for these trends, with particular attention paid to a theory positing that the neoliberal values of individualism and personal agency have increased in popularity and prevalence in modern western societies, leading to notions of "free choice" being widely considered "sacred"[7] and/or "sovereign"[8] in relation to matters of religion and spirituality.

The second half of this chapter will explore whether the English state-funded education system poses a challenge to this theory. I will show that despite the trends outlined above, these schools are legally required to engage with religious beliefs and practices within their curriculum and regular activities, and some are able to overtly evangelise to pupils during these sessions. I will suggest that official legislation and guidance concerning these requirements, and what we know of schools' responses to them, do *not* immediately evidence a widespread respect for, or concern to protect, individual freedom of choice in relation to religious or spiritual identities, beliefs, and practices.

Finally, I will propose that further research is needed if we are to better understand the apparent "sacredness" attributed to notions of individual agency and free choice in relation to religion in contemporary Britain, and how these impact modern manifestations of, and attitudes towards, religious and spiritual matters. My research aims to do just this by interrogating if and how English state-funded schools' approaches to the government-imposed religious requirements protect and/or limit individual freedoms of choice.

A changing religious landscape

Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in 1953 via an extravagant Christian ceremony which was described at the time as "a great act of national communion"[9] and "a reminder…that the British people still profess and call themselves Christian."[10] Though these statements likely overstated the religiosity of ordinary Britons at this time,[11] it is generally agreed that significant proportions of the population were members of Christian churches and professed to adhere to Christian beliefs.[12] The decades that

[7] Linda Woodhead, 'The rise of no religion in Britain: the emergence of a new cultural majority', *Journal of the British Academy*, 4 (2016), pp. 245-261, (p. 251).
[8] Mathew Guest, 'The Reproduction and Transmission of Religion' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. By Peter Clarke (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 651-670, (p. 656).
[9] Edward Shils and Michael Young, 'The meaning of the Coronation', *Sociological Review*, 1.2 (1953), pp. 63-81 (p. 80).
[10] Mathew Guest, Elizabeth Olsen and John Wolffe, 'Christianity, Loss of monopoly' in *Religion and Change in modern Britain*, ed. by Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (Routledge, 2012), pp. 57-78 (p. 58).
[11] Ibid., (p. 59).
[12] Ibid., (p. 58).

followed, however, charted significant transformations in this respect. Despite some indications of modest growth among charismatic forms of Christianity and Cathedral attendance during the 21st century,[13] research generally demonstrates sharp declines; Christianity has "lost its monopoly"[14] in British society.

This is most clearly evidenced in statistics from national censuses. The 2001 census was the first since 1851 to include a "religion" question – specifically, respondents were asked to select their religion from a list. Of those who answered this question, 72% identified as Christian.[15] When it was repeated in 2011 this figure dropped to 59%,[16] and by 2021 it had reduced again to 46.2%.[17] In this time, censuses show that the proportion of Britons identifying with non-Christian religions slightly increased – 3% identified as Muslims in 2001 compared to 6.5% in 2021, Hindus went from 1.6% of the population in 2001 to 1.7% in 2021, and Sikhs from 0.6% to 0.9%.[18] However, the most significant growth appears to have occurred within the "nonreligious" category – 15% of census respondents in England and Wales identified as such in 2001 compared to 37.2% in 2021,[19] and other studies put this figure even higher. The British Social Attitudes survey claimed that 52% of Britain's adult population identified as nonreligious in 2019,[20] and due to methodological limitations of the census survey, these higher projections are often considered more accurate[21].

Surveys exploring participation in Christian practices also indicate waning societal interest. Attendance at Christian church services was once a pursuit enjoyed by between 40-60% of the English population in 1851[22] but in 2021, only 1.7% of the population regularly attended Church of England services.[23] Furthermore, although larger percentages of the population turn to churches to

[13] Rob Warner, *Secularization and its Discontents* (Continuum, 2010), p. 54.
[14] Ibid., (p. 57).
[15] 'How Religion has Changed in England and Wales', Office for National Statistics (2015) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/howreligionhaschangedinenglandandwales/2015-06-04> [accessed 20 December 2024]
[16] Ibid.
[17] 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021', Office for National Statistics (2022) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021> [accessed 20 December 2024]
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] J. Curtice and others, *British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report* (NatCen, 2019), p. 4 <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/BSA_36.pdf> [accessed 12 December 2024].
[21] Abby Day, *Believing in belonging: belief and social identity in the modern world* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 33; David Voas and Steve Bruce, 'Research note: the 2001 census and Christian identification in Britain', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 19.1 (2004), pp. 23-28.
[22] Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 9.
[23] Dr Ken Eames, *Statistics for Mission 2021* (Church of England, 2022), p. 6 <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/2021StatisticsForMission.pdf#:~:text=The%20total%20all%20age%20average,and%20605%2C000%20peopl

mark rites of passage such as infant baptism, marriage and funerals, occasional engagement of this sort also reflects "considerable decline."[24] According to the Office for National Statistics, only 18.2% of marriage ceremonies in 2019 were "religious" compared to 63.9% in 1969[25], the Church of England declared that 55,200 baptisms or services of thanksgiving occurred in 2021 compared to 89,100 in 2019,[26] and Co-op Funerals' 2019 report claimed that 77% of their funeral directors noted increased requests for nonreligious funerals over the previous five years[27].

Patterns of decline have also been identified with regards to religious beliefs – Clive Field's *British Religion in Numbers*[28] resource demonstrates that commitment to conventional religious beliefs such as in the existence of a personal God or Life Force[29], the possibility of religious miracles[30] and belief in the divine authority of the Bible[31] have become significantly less-common throughout the 21st century. Some churches have responded to this apparently unrelenting tide of secularization by introducing new initiatives[32] and updating theological teachings in line with modern moral values,[33] in attempts to encourage the public – particularly the younger generations – to engage with local Christian communities. However, nothing has yet successfully stemmed the flow of individuals moving away from Christian belief and practice – or indeed, never having seriously explored it in the

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e%20in%202021.&text=14%25%20of%20the%20average%20weekly,%2C%20and%2012%25%20in%202021> [accessed 12 December 2024].

[24] Steve Bruce and David Voas, 'Vicarious Religion: An Examination and Critique', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 25.2 (2010), pp.243-259 (p.256).

[25] 'Marriages in England and Wales: 2019', Office for National Statistics (2022) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2019#type-of-ceremony> [accessed 12 December 2024].

[26] Eames, *Statistics for Mission 2021* (2022), p. 8.

[27] Co-Op Funerals, *Burying Traditions: The Changing Face of UK Funerals* (Co-Op Funerals, 2019), p. 3. <https://assets.ctfassets.net/iqbixcpmwym2/5v6n2gA1yGR5BCDRJ4kNKu/93696c8e8e2f9e260795c941fa96c6c9/3876_1_Funeralcare_Media_pack_artwork_SML_v4.pdf> [accessed 12 December 2024].

[28] Field posts updates on more recent research and polling in Britain on his newer website - "Counting Religion in Britain"; 'Counting Religion in Britain', Clive D. Field [n.d.] <https://clivedfield.wordpress.com/counting-religion-in-britain/> [accessed 12 December 2024].

[29] 'Belief in God, Divinity of Christ, and the Resurrection', British Religion in Numbers, [n.d.] <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/belief-in-britain-1939-2009/conventional-belief/belief-in-god-divinity-of-christ-and-the-resurrection/> [accessed 12 December 2024].

[30] 'Belief in Miracles, Resurrection, Sin', British Religion in Numbers, [n.d.] <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/belief-in-britain-1939-2009/conventional-belief/belief-in-miracles-resurrection-sin/> [accessed 12 December 2024].

[31] 'Belief the Bible is of Divine Authority', British Religion in Numbers, [n.d.] <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/belief-in-britain-1939-2009/conventional-belief/belief-the-bible-is-of-divine-authority/> [accessed 14 December 2024].

[32] 'What is Messy Church?', Messy Church, [n.d.] <https://www.messychurch.brf.org.uk/> [accessed 14 December 2024]; 'Try Alpha', The Alpha Course, [n.d.] <https://alpha.org.uk/> [accessed 14 December 2024].

[33] 'Church of England to have Women Bishops', The Church of England (2014) <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/church-england-have-women-bishops> [accessed 14 December 2024]; Callum May, 'United Reformed Church approves gay marriage services', *BBC*, 9 July 2016 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36756387> [accessed 16 December 2024].

first place;[34] in fact, younger generations are now much more likely to consider themselves "nonreligious" than "religious." In 2015, Linda Woodhead surveyed nationally representative samples of adults in Britain and found that among 18-24 year olds, 60% identified as "nonreligious" and 40% as "religious".[35] Religious faith is still more common among older generations – 60% of the over-60s in her sample identified as "religious" and only 34% as "nonreligious" – but as other studies demonstrate that religiosity does not necessarily increase in individuals as they age,[36] this is of little consolation to dwindling congregations. It is likely that when older generations pass away, so will their faith; in Woodhead's words, "Christianity is literally dying out."[37]

There exists a wealth of academic research which explores patterns of belief and unbelief in Britain – so much that it is impossible to summarise everything without oversimplifying the complex patterns identified. While the prevailing conclusion is often that religious identities, beliefs, and practices have declined significantly in this country, this is not always as complete or linear as the trends and figures outlined so far in this chapter might suggest. The British Monarchy, again, provides a helpful demonstration of this.

One might expect that when Queen Elizabeth II's heir, King Charles III, was crowned in 2022, overt connections between the Monarch and the Church of England in both their official titles and the coronation ceremony might have been altered to reflect the present religiously plural and increasingly secular era. However, this was not the case. While I write this thesis in 2024, England's Monarch remains officially the "Supreme Governor of the Church of England" and "Defender of The Faith," and the ceremony in which he was crowned was intensely and prominently Christian in nature – some slight adaptations acknowledged the increasingly multi-faith nature of contemporary English society[38] but in general, the event was presented as "first and foremost, an act of Christian worship."[39] Public reception of this historic event is impossible to gauge without conducting large-scale research, but where criticisms were voiced in the news media these tended to question the

[34] Madeleine Davies, 'Church of England decline is 'a personal failure' – Archbishop of Canterbury bares his soul', *The Church Times*, 13 June 2023 <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/16-june/news/uk/church-of-england-decline-is-a-personal-failure-archbishop-of-canterbury-bares-his-soul> [accessed 21 December 2024].
[35] Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority' (2016), p.247.
[36] Ruth J. Wareham, 'Death knell or revival? Navigating religious education in the age of the non-religious', *Journal of Religious Education*, 71 (2023), pp. 225-238 (p. 226).
[37] Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority' (2016), p.247.
[38] Esther Addley and others, 'King Charles III and Queen Camilla crowned at Westminster Abbey', *The Guardian*, 6 May 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/06/king-charles-iii-crowned-at-westminster-abbey-coronation> [accessed 21 December 2024].
[39] Harriet Sherwood, 'Defender of all faiths? Coronation puts focus on King Charles's beliefs', *The Guardian*, 4 May 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/04/defender-of-all-faiths-coronation-puts-focus-king-charles-religious-beliefs> [accessed 14 December 2024].

compatibility of monarchy and democracy, challenging the Institution's historic links with colonialism, racism and injustice.[40] Complaints about its overt ties with Christianity, despite this being the proclaimed religion of only a minority of Britons, were rare.[41] Therefore, the very same country that appears to continually and increasingly eschew Christian identities, beliefs and practices recently bestowed religious titles upon their new Monarch with an intensely Christian ceremony, in an explicitly Christian church, led by the most prominent of the Christian clergy. That this paradox does not appear to have been more widely decried demonstrates the complex relationship that contemporary English society has with Christianity and religion more broadly. While the public likely did not revel in, or perhaps even understand, the religious symbolism and significance of the coronation proceedings,[42] they appeared to generally tolerate the religious trappings; something that would have been unthinkable in a more consciously secular country such as France, and challenging philosophical paradigms which pitch "modernity" and "religion" as mutually exclusive – the former ringing the death knell for the latter.

Blurred beliefs and reluctant belonging

Some philosophers and early sociologists in the 19th and 20th centuries predicted that as modernity progressed, and scientific, and rational ways of understanding the world became more accepted, religion would no longer be needed or desired and would inevitably disappear from human society.[43]

The Secularization Paradigm grew from such voices, highlighting the dramatic shifts in both the visibility of religion and public attitudes toward it in contemporary Western societies, and offering explanations for this that centred around the inescapable influence of "modernity". While Secularization theories caught the imagination of many sociologists around the end of the 20th century, the expected "death" of religion has not yet occurred; social research suggests that while religious affiliation, belief and practice have undoubtedly declined among the British population over

[40] Samuel Osborne, 'Adjoa Andoh's 'terribly white' coronation remark becomes most complained about moment of 2023 Ofcom says', *Sky News*, 10 May 2023 <https://news.sky.com/story/adjoa-andohs-terribly-white-coronation-remark-becomes-most-complained-about-moment-of-2023-ofcom-says-12877889> [accessed 21 December 2024]; Sonali Battacharyya, 'Abolishing the monarchy is an important step towards building a fairer society', *Independent*, 18 September 2022 <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/king-charles-abolish-monarchy-inequality-b2169737.html> [accessed 21 December 2024].

[41] The National Secular Society published this, but it was not a core argument found within news-media: Megan Manson, 'The coronation isn't for us. It's for the Church', National Secular Society, 2 May 2023 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2023/05/the-coronation-isnt-for-us-its-for-the-church> [accessed 30 November 2024]; Humanists UK released this statement after their Chief Executive was invited to attend the ceremony. 'Humanists UK to attend Coronation', Humanists UK, 6 May 2023 <https://humanists.uk/2023/05/06/humanists-uk-to-attend-coronation/> [accessed 21 December 2024].

[42] Ramazani Mwamba, '"I'm, not bothered" – What the young people of Manchester have to say about the King's Coronation', 3 May 2023 <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/im-not-bothered-what-young-26831230> [accessed 21 December 2024].

[43] Warner, *Secularization and Its Discontents* (2010), pp. 20-21.

the last century, this has not been replaced with fervently anti-religious or atheistic worldviews. Rather than there being two distinct categories into which every individual can be easily sorted – religious and nonreligious – contemporary attitudes towards religion exist on a wide spectrum[44] and, in general, people do not congregate at either extreme (wholeheartedly believing or not) but more commonly they exist in the "fuzzy middle."[45]

Woodhead's 2015 surveys noted that British "nones" were "not straightforwardly secular." Only 41.5% of her sample were "convinced atheists" and only 13% demonstrated a strong secularity akin to that of Richard Dawkins. Rather than being intensely opposed to religion, most demonstrated ambivalent attitudes towards religious leaders, institutions, and authorities,[46] and some even claimed to hold beliefs and engage in practices that could be considered spiritual or religious; some self-professed "nones" claimed to believe in God or a higher power – or thought that these *might* exist – and some admitted to engaging in private religious or spiritual practices such as prayers.[47] This blending of religion and nonreligion is also evidenced in broader British popular culture – for example, beliefs and practices associated with spirituality or the supernatural such as astrology and horoscopes,[48] tarot,[49] and "manifestation"[50] appear to have gained popularity and visibility in recent years despite most adults now identifying as "nonreligious." Furthermore, although censuses show that only a tiny proportion of the British population officially self-affiliate with Wicca, Shamanism and Paganism,[51] other figures indicate that broader interest in these worldviews also appears to

[44] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain – a persistent paradox* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), p. 8.
[45] David Voas, 'The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe', *European Sociological Review*, 25.2 (2009), pp. 155-168 (p. 164).
[46] Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority', (2016), p.250.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ali Roff Farrar, 'Why is astrology making a twenty-first-century comeback?', *Pan Macmillan*, 6 January 2022 <https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/lifestyle-wellbeing/the-popularity-of-astrology> [accessed 21 December 2024]; Lucy Sheref, 'HORROR-scope? Quarter of Brits leave MAJOR decisions to 'the stars' relying on horoscopes', *Express*, 16 August 2016 <https://www.express.co.uk/life-style/life/700513/horoscope-british-star-sign-life-decision-advice-research-jewellery-tattoo> [accessed 21 December 2024].
[49] Elle Hunt, 'When the mystical goes mainstream: how tarot became a self-care phenomenon', *The Guardian*, 27 October 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/oct/27/tarot-cards-self-care-jessica-dore-interview> [accessed 21 December 2024].
[50] Stuart McGurk, 'Making dreams come true: inside the new age world of manifesting', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/mar/20/making-dreams-come-true-inside-the-new-age-world-of-manifesting> [accessed 21 December 2024].
[51] 'Religion, England and Wales 2021', Office for National Statistics (2022) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=Among%20the%20405%2C000%20(0.7%25%20of,Jain%20(25%2C000> 'Religion, England and Wales 2021', Office for National Statistics (2022) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=Among%20the%20405%2C000%20(0.7%25%20of,Jain%20(25%2C000> [accessed 25 November 2024].

have grown.[52] Though few academic studies have reliably mapped the prevalence of these practices in the UK, Pew Research Centre published research in 2018 indicating that they have experienced modest growth in the US, too.[53] While not enough to counter secularising trends evidenced in broader British society, the situation is clearly complex; individuals in Britain engage with and express religiosity or spirituality, and non-religiosity, in highly diverse ways, and sometimes simultaneously.

Many sociologists have attempted to make sense of these complex and convoluted trends. Grace Davie's "Believing Without Belonging" theory is perhaps one of the most famous proposed explanations. In the 1990s she noticed that statistics concerning religious change in Britain showed certain forms of religiosity to be declining at a slower pace than others; religious *beliefs* were "disappearing" more slowly than religious *practices*. Consequently, she suggested that Britons were "Believing Without Belonging." Her theory has faced much criticism, largely because it was assumed to be an attempt to challenge statistics demonstrating persistent and irreversible religious declines upon which the then-popular secularization theories were predicated.[54] However, this does not appear to have been Davie's intended argument – she did not expect that "believing without belonging" would forever be the norm in this country, but instead wished to explore the complexity of the transformation that Britain's religious landscape was clearly undergoing.[55] Her research challenges simplistic interpretations of the Secularization Paradigm and highlights that although statistics may indicate overall declines, Britons are not immediately switching from being a religious people to one completely devoid of religion, where religious beliefs and ways of life hold absolutely no meaning. Instead, both religious and nonreligious identities and worldviews appear to co-exist in complex and nuanced ways for individuals within our society – in Woodhead's words, the boundaries between the religious and secular are often highly "blurred."[56]

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[52] Robert Booth, Carmen Aguilar Garcia and Pamela Duncan, 'Shamanism, pagans and wiccans: trends from the England and Wales census', *The Guardian*, 29 November 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/29/ten-things-weve-learned-from-the-england-and-wales-census> [accessed 21 December 2024]; Suzanne Owen, 'Could more people be turning to Paganism in turbulent times created by world issues?', Leeds Trinity University, 7 March 2022 <https://www.leedstrinity.ac.uk/blog/blog-posts/could-more-people-be-turning-to-paganism-in-turbulent-times-created-by-world-issues.php> [accessed 21 December 2024].

[53] Claire Gecewicz, ''New age' beliefs common among both religious and nonreligious Americans', *Pew Research Centre*, 1 October 2018 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/> [accessed 21 December 2024].

[54] David Voas and Alasdair Crockett, 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging', *Sociology*, 39.1 (2009), pp. 11-28.

[55] Grace Davie, *Religion in modern Europe: a memory mutates* (Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 8; Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion: a critical agenda* (SAGE Publications, 2013), p. 77;

[56] Linda Woodhead, 'Intensified Religious Pluralism and De-differentiation: the British Example', *Society*, 53 (2016), pp. 41-46 (p. 46).

In her later work, Davie further expounds and revises her initial theory, suggesting that the apparent preference for religious belief over religious practice or membership of religious communities could be rooted in negative perceptions of organized religion as opposed to a broader opposition to the supernatural; "most nones do not decisively reject God, they resist any kind of identification with "religion" or with the label "religious"."[57] More recent research supports this; Lois Lee's interviews with self-proclaimed "nonreligious" Britons explored the various views and identities subsumed under the umbrella term "nonreligion" and concluded that many affiliated with this term simply because they wanted "to represent themselves in contradistinction from religion" and not because they necessarily held strong atheistic beliefs.[58] Similarly, Guest et al's research into the beliefs and practices of UK university students found that many participants who identified as "Christian" in the study avoided publicly affiliating with religion by, for example, regularly attending church – they were "disinclined to bring any attention to their personal faith and spiritual practices."[59] The researchers described this mismatch between personal identity and outwardly-expressed practices as "unprecedented blurring of boundaries" but also suggested that it represented a "reconfiguration" of what it means to be Christian – where in the past personal faith was almost always publicly expressed and demonstrated, nowadays, this does not appear to be the case.[60]

One explanation for this could be that the British public has become more distrustful of official institutions in general – not just religious ones. Davie noted that alongside declines in membership of religious organizations, the post-war period demonstrated significant declines in membership of other organizations too – political parties, trades unions and even public houses.[61] She argued that declines in church membership and participation should be understood in this broader context, and that in comparison, membership with religious organizations is actually more common than with these other, nonreligious institutions.[62] Though this argument holds little sway with Secularization theorists such as Steve Bruce, who point out that regardless of whether church membership is more common than membership of other organizations it is still declining and now is only engaged with by a tiny minority of the British public,[63] it is helpful for highlighting that it may be the "organized" or "institutional" format of these religions that is contributing to declining affiliation and participation. As official, organized religions instead of simply personal beliefs and practices, negative news and

[57] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain – A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd edn (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), p. 226.
[58] Lois Lee, 'Secular or nonreligious? Investigating and interpreting generic "not religious" categories and populations', *Religion* 44.3 (2014), pp. 466-482 (p. 479).
[59] Mathew Guest et al, *Christianity and the University Experience* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 209.
[60] Ibid., p. 210.
[61] Davie, *Religion in Britain – A Persistent Paradox*, (2015), p. 64.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (2011), p. 82.

events become easily attached to them – abuses of power, cover-ups, hypocrisy and doubling-down on morally conservative teachings such as those condemning homosexuality or limiting women's rights, combined with violent events like those occurring on 9/11, become affiliated with all religious groups regardless of whether they involve them or not. Consequently, many in modern societies perceive religion as a whole as a "toxic brand;"[64] something to distance oneself from even if you personally find the existence of, and interaction with, a god appealing.

However, Guest et al offer another explanation – that this "reconfigured" Christianity where participation in communal practices and public expressions of personal beliefs are not deemed necessary is at least partially caused by the highly pluralistic nature of culture and religion in modern British society.[65]

A possible explanation – Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism – the visible presence, in one society, of multiple religious traditions and worldviews – has for decades been listed as a factor contributing to the patterns of secularization outlined above. This argument was perhaps best articulated by Peter Berger, who stated that "the rise of pluralism plunges religion into a crisis of credibility" because if multiple religions claim to hold Ultimate Truth, but they all profess different things, at least *some* must be wrong.[66] As none can prove their self-proclaimed righteousness nor falsify others', doubt is cast on the truthfulness of all worldviews who make such declarations. This could lead some individuals to reject all notions of religion, but for others, the existence of multiple worldviews with no clear "winner" could lead them to draw certain aspects from more than one, accepting elements that they like and rejecting any they feel uncomfortable with; resulting in the "blurring" demonstrated above. This theory is helpful but cannot explain the current situation fully – the prominence of religious pluralism does not explain why religious or spiritual beliefs tend to be more-common than religious identities or practices, nor why the blurred forms of religion or spirituality that *are* being embraced among the British population now are generally done-so privately.

Woodhead offers further insight here. Her extensive research into the lives and beliefs of British nones led her to conclude that the dramatic changes to our religious landscape that have been outlined so-far in this chapter have been caused by the increased pluralism *and* the increased prevalence and significance of liberal values in British society.[67] In particular, she highlights the

[64] Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority', (2016), p. 258.
[65] Mathew Guest and others, *Christianity and the University Experience* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 33.
[66] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of* Religion (Doubleday, 1967), p. 151.
[67] Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority', (2016); Linda Woodhead, 'The Rise of "No religion": towards an explanation', *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*, 78.3 (2017), pp. 247-262.

growing expectation that individuals here should not only be free to form their own opinions on things including religion and spirituality, but that it is indeed their *duty* to do so, and to allow others to form their own, unique views, too[68] – a position that could be labelled "individualism."

A possible explanation – Liberal Individualism

While she was not the first to draw these connections[69] – and will not be the last – Woodhead's surveys of British "nones" do clearly highlight the prominence and significance of individualistic values within our society. She states that the nonreligious adults she studied "exhibit considerable diversity"[70] in terms of who they are, what they believe, and how they behave, but the one theme that seems to unite them is their allegiance to values of individual liberalism, concisely summed up in the remark that they "dislike being preached at and told what to do; they prefer to make up their own minds."[71] She goes on to conclude that the rapid growth of "nonreligious" identification among the British population does not demonstrate a widespread rejection of religious or spiritual beliefs so much as a rejection of "scriptures, leaders, dogma, orthodoxy, and higher authority in general."[72]

The significance attributed to "individual choice" has also been highlighted in Katz et al's more recent exploration of the attitudes and lifestyles – including but not confined to issues of religion and spirituality – of Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2012). They noted that concerns about respecting others' freedom of choice, and having one's own freedom to exercise choice, featured significantly in participants' expectations of how individuals should interact with each other; most interviewees "want[ed] to be respectful of differences and cultural affiliations, including religious ones but…were clear that they did not want any sort of religion imposed on them."[73] A direct quote from one participant demonstrates this nicely:

> "I think it's ok [to be religious] as long as you don't impose it. Believe what you want."[74]

Interestingly, it appears from this quote that the notion of free choice is not necessarily directed towards individuals wishing to distance themselves from religion – it is not just used to justify the adoption of nonreligious identities and lifestyles – but this same freedom is expected to also apply to those with opposing desires, permitting individuals to embrace and explore religion. Indeed, research exploring the theology and evangelizing strategies of modern-day religious groups, and

[68] Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority' (2016), p. 255.
[69] Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (2011), p. 112.
[70] Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority' (2016), p. 252.
[71] Ibid., p. 251.
[72] Woodhead, 'The Rise of "No religion": towards an explanation' (2017), p. 260.
[73] Roberta Katz and others, *Gen Z explained: the art of living in a digital age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 66.
[74] Ibid., p. 67.

modern people's expression of their religious beliefs shows that they, too, often align themselves around this idea that individual choice should be respected. For example, Guest et al's research with UK university students found that many who described themselves as "Christian" were "averse to evangelism" and demonstrated a "more personal and autonomous" religiosity that often did not include conventional churchgoing.[75] Furthermore, multiple studies have shown that the societal emphasis on individual free choice is also now being reflected in how religious denominations themselves operate and present themselves; for example, by proclaiming the "importance of the individual"[76] and offering personal, subjective experiences[77] over dogmatic and collective religious traditions:[78]

> [M]any Christian congregations in the UK and USA promote themselves less as a focus of local identity or lifelong commitment, and more as a spiritual resource at the disposal of the itinerant or upwardly mobile individual, seeking heightened experience, interpersonal affirmation, or temporary fellowship.[79]

Professor Mathew Guest's recent book, *Neoliberal Religion*, explores this point in depth, providing numerous examples of religious groups operating within this neoliberal framework where individual agency and choice is highly valued, and noting how this contributes to the creation and maintenance of what is widely-termed the "religious marketplace" – individuals are presented with a wide variety of religious and spiritual worldviews and act as consumers, selecting and engaging with only the parts that they find most appealing. In fact, the prevalence and significance of this notion that individuals should be free to make choices for themselves concerning how they live – including in relation to religious matters – is thought to be so powerful in modern western societies like Britain that academics have variously described it as "sovereign" [80] or "sacred."[81]

As for explaining the religious declines demonstrated above, this reverence for individualism and agency in relation to religious matters does not necessarily conflict with the holding of personal religious beliefs, but interrupts the inter-generational transmission of religious identities. Consequently, while Britons are not *necessarily* highly anti-religious or atheistic, they are also not automatically and unconsciously adopting the religious identities and participating in the religious

[75] Guest and others (2013), p. 209.
[76] Linda Woodhead, 'Introduction' in *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* ed. by Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (Routledge, 2012), pp. 1-33 (p. 19).
[77] Mark Cartledge, *Megachurches and social engagement: public theology in practice* (Brill, 2019), p. 156.
[78] Richard Flory and Donald Miller, *Finding Faith: the spiritual quest of the post-boomer generation* (Rutgers University Press, 2008), p. 68.
[79] Guest, 'The Reproduction and Transmission of Religion' (2009), p. 657.
[80] Ibid., p. 656.
[81] Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority' (2016), p. 251.

communities of their parents. Furthermore, if they choose to explore religious or spiritual worldviews they expect to be able to do so on their own terms, and in their own ways – hence the apparent blurring of religion and nonreligion noted above, the limited growth of strict atheism relative to "nonreligion," and the fact that interactions and expectations with religion are, nowadays:

> [M]ore internal than external, more individual than institutional, more experiential than cerebral, more private than public.[82]

Christel Manning's research into the childrearing practices of nonreligious parents is a great example of this shift, highlighting that many parents consciously avoid influencing their children's religious views preferring instead to allow them to make up their own mind. She describes this as acquiescing to the "imperative of personal worldview choice,"[83] and although some evidence indicates that this was not always perfectly enacted – some parents questioned their ability to avoid interfering if they saw their child exploring worldviews that differed from their own – she concludes that it indicates the prominence and influence of the "culture of choice, self-actualization and freedom of expression"[84] within contemporary western societies.

Manning's research was conducted in Australia and although it has not been replicated in a UK context, many other studies have identified inter-generational relationships as influential in determining children's religious identities and beliefs,[85] and some have highlighted that British "nones" are not consciously passing their unbelief in religion down to children in the same way that many "somes" attempt to instil or at least encourage, in their children, certain religious beliefs and identities. For example, Strhan and Shillitoe interviewed British children to explore how they developed nonreligious identities and found many claiming that religion was rarely discussed at home and with family members – to the extent that many of the child participants did not know whether their parents were religious or not.[86] Daniele Hervieu-Leger noted a similar lack of

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[82] Wade Clark Roof, 'God is in the Details: Reflections on Religion's Public Presence in the United States in the Mid-1990s', *Sociology of Religion*, 57.2 (1996), pp. 149-162 (p. 153).
[83] Christel Manning, *Losing our religion. How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising Their Children* (New York University Press, 2016), p. 6.
[84] Christel Manning, 'Gen Z is the least religious generation. Here's why that could be a good thing', *Pacific Standard*, 6 May 2019 <https://psmag.com/ideas/gen-z-is-the-least-religious-generation-heres-why-that-could-be-a-good-thing> [accessed 13 December 2024].
[85] Jonathan Scourfield and others, 'The Intergenerational Transmission of Islam in England and Wales: Evidence from the Citizenship Survey', *Sociology*, 46.1 (2012), pp. 91-108; Vern L. Bengston and others, 'Bringing up nones: Intergenerational influences and cohort trends', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 57.2 (2018), pp. 258-275; D. Sherkat, 'Religious Socialization: sources of influence and influences of agency' in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. By M. Dillon (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 151-163.
[86] Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe, 'The Stickiness of Non-Religion? Intergenerational transmission and the formation of non-religious identities in childhood', *Sociology*, 53.6 (2019), pp. 987-1203 (p. 1099).

intentional transmission of religious traditions in modern French society, arguing that this has led to "cultural amnesia" or "a loss of collective memory" and consequently, religious traditions and identities that were once central in French society no longer hold meaning – the "chain of memory" has been broken.[87] She goes on to argue that this lack of intentional transmission has helped to create the consumer-oriented societies of the modern-day – firm guidance on what to believe and how to live have been replaced by apparently open choice, and parental responsibility has evolved from raising children to hold specific beliefs to raising them to choose for themselves.

However, while Britain became a majority "nonreligious" country only recently, the notion that individuals should have some agency over how they live – including how they interact with the Divine – is not strictly new. This concept features in many New Age movements of the 60s, and can also be found in earlier religious movements such as Calvinism during the Enlightenment period.[88] Hervieu-Leger distinguishes between these forms of individualism and what she terms "modern individualism" which, rather than emphasising individuality in terms of how people relate to God and secure salvation, is more politically motivated and located in relation to the development of democracy, affording each citizen in a society certain rights and freedoms. Despite the association with "modernity," this form of individualism is also not radically new – Hervieu-Leger states that it stems from "political conflicts which have led communities to claim freedom of conscience [and] to promote a community founded upon the free will of each member." Examples of such conflicts can be traced back to the 19th and even 17th centuries, in "reaction to the despotic rule in church and state."[89]

Even arguments that draw connections between these individualistic emphases and religious declines are not groundbreakingly unique or particularly contemporary. Many thinkers who are often nowadays perceived as the "founding fathers" of sociology spent much time exploring how religion featured and contributed to their societies, noting its foundational role in creating and maintaining social order[90] and social bonds between citizens,[91] and explored the possibility that increasing individualism would lead to declining religiosity – or, at least, declining public religiosity:

[87] Guest, 'The Reproduction and Transmission of Religion' (2009), p. 656.
[88] Daniele Hervieu-Leger, 'Individualism, the Validation of Faith, and the Social Nature of Religion in Modernity', in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion* ed. By Richard K. Fenn, Transl. by Michael Davis (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), pp. 161 – 175 (p. 162).
[89] Mark Olssen, 'Ethical liberalism, education and the "new right"', *Journal of Education Policy*, 15.5 (2000), pp. 481-508, (p. 483).
[90] Guest, 'The Reproduction and Transmission of Religion' (2009), p. 652.
[91] Richard Cheetham, 'Collective Worship: A Window into Contemporary Understandings of the Nature of Religious Belief?', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 22.2 (2000), pp. 71-81 (p. 74).

> There is a strong sociological tradition going back to Ferdinand Tonnies and Niebuhr that associates the loosening of traditional, tightly knit bonds of community with the dissipation of social, including religious, values.[92]

Despite the long legacy and rich heritage of these discussions, Woodhead claims that the connections between increased liberalism and the simultaneous decline of Christianity and rise of nonreligion has 'not been sufficiently noted in theories of secularization and religious change,'[93] implying that our understanding of how the two are linked is not yet exhaustive and there is still room for more research and discussion in this area.

My research aims to contribute to this by exploring a site where religion's presence and involvement in public life appears to *infringe* upon individual religious freedoms, rather than protect and promote them: English state education.

A possible exception – Religion in English state-funded education

Despite Christianity's declining prominence and prevalence in England, and the dramatic increase in individuals identifying as "nonreligious," religion – namely Christianity – continues to be intricately intertwined with English state-funded education in ways that appear to pay little heed to pupils,' parents' and school staff's freedoms of choice or personal agency. The four main examples of this – collective worship, RE, school values, and faith-related admissions policies – are outlined below.

Collective worship

All state-funded schools in England are required by law to lead their pupils in 'broadly Christian' worship every day.[94] This was first legislated in the 1944 Education Act as part of a broader attempt to 're-invigorate' Christian values, beliefs and practices across Britain, motivated by concerns over declining church attendance and religious literacy.[95] However, in recognition of the fact that state-funded schools had diverse relationships with religion – some having official religious characters and others not – and in order to be respectful of the various Christian denominations and worldviews present within English society at the time, legislators did not prescribe specific content for school worship. Instead, schools were permitted to determine for themselves, based on their individual context, how to best approach the duty:

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[92] Guest, 'The Reproduction and Transmission of (2009), p. 654.
[93] Woodhead, 'The Rise of "No Religion": Towards an Explanation' (2017), p. 258.
[94] *Education Reform Act 1988*, Part I, 6-7, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/section/8/enacted> [accessed 25/08/24].
[95] Alison Mawhinney, 'The Law on Collective School Worship: The Rationale Then and Now' in *Collective Worship and Religious Observance in Schools*, ed. by Peter Cumper and Alison Mawhinney, (Peter Lang Ltd, 2018), pp. 117-145 (p. 130).

> The extent to which and the ways in which the broad traditions of Christian belief are to be reflected in such acts of collective worship should be appropriate to the family backgrounds of the pupils and their ages and aptitudes.[96]

Consequently, legislation and official guidance are notoriously vague in what this should look like. There are no clear definitions of "worship" – the term should simply "be taken to have its natural and ordinary meaning"[97] – and few clarifications on what constitutes "broadly Christian" content – just that it should 'reflect the broad traditions of Christian belief,'[98] "be concerned with reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power"[99] and "accord a special status to Jesus Christ."[100]

There is likely some variation in how schools interpret and implement this requirement, but nevertheless, the expectation that all state-funded schools – including those without an official religious character – should actively lead pupils in any form of Christian worship is unsurprisingly highly contentious today. Critics argue that the duty is divisive and discriminatory,[101] infringing on pupils' human rights and 'opening the door to evangelism and proselytization'[102] – in other words, infringing on pupils' freedom of belief and preventing or limiting their opportunity to choose if and how to engage with and explore religion. Parents are also legally afforded the right to raise their children how they wish, including in relation to religious matters, and forced school worship could also be argued to infringe on this if the teachings and practices of the school conflict with those that the parent would wish to teach their child – this may partially explain why statistics indicate that large portions of British parents consider the duty to be 'inappropriate,'[103] though we would need further research to confirm this.

Despite these criticisms, many religious groups staunchly support the duty's retention, arguing that the vagueness described above grants schools a significant level of flexibility in how they approach and fulfil it, meaning that pupils should be able to participate in worship sessions without compromising their faith or lack thereof; 'there is no expectation of commitment and the exposure

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[96] Department for Education, *Religious Education and Collective Worship 1/94* (DfE, 1994), p. 22, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/281929/Collective_worship_in_schools.pdf> [accessed 25 August 2024]
[97] Ibid., p. 21.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] 'Collective Worship', Humanists UK, [n.d.] <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/collective-worship/> [accessed 25 August 2024]
[102] 'End collective worship laws', National Secular Society, [n.d.], <https://www.secularism.org.uk/end-compulsory-worship/> [accessed 25 August 2024]
[103] Pippa Allen-Kinross, 'Worship in school assemblies is 'inappropriate', say half of Britons', *Schools Week*, 9 August 2019, <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/worship-in-school-assemblies-is-inappropriate-say-half-of-britons/> [accessed 25 August 2024]

to the range of religious traditions encourages community cohesion.'[104] However, this is not the attitude adopted by all – some religious figures support and actively contribute to calls for it to be abolished or significantly amended.[105] Although multiple attempts have been made to challenge and alter the duty in recent years – during the writing of this thesis, the Education (Assemblies) Bill which aims to release non-faith schools from the 'broadly Christian' aspect of the duty has been introduced to the House of Lords multiple times[106] – no changes appear to be forthcoming. In fact, in 2021, the Minister of State at the Department for Education reaffirmed that the collective worship requirement was still a legal expectation, stating that any school thought to not be complying would be 'investigated.'[107] That Conservative Government made no attempt to change the current system and the current Labour Government has not publicly declared any such intentions either, however, vague threats of "investigations" are unlikely to overturn what appears to be decades of frequent non-compliance.

Though research in this area is limited,[108] that which exists suggests that many schools navigate this contentious duty by simply ignoring it – it is 'more honoured in the breach than in the observance.'[109] In 2004, Ofsted announced that 76% of secondary schools were not fulfilling the obligation for collective worship[110] and a ComRes survey commissioned by the BBC in 2011 reported that 64% of parents surveyed said that their child's school did not do collective worship.[111] Smaller-scale, qualitative studies also appear to reflect this trajectory; Mogra's exploration of trainee teachers' attitudes towards collective worship involved observing assemblies at an English state school where she noted collective worship was entirely omitted from proceedings,[112] and Smith and

[104] Caroline Wyatt, 'Does daily worship count for anything?', *BBC*, 23 December 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35161361> [accessed 06 December 2024]
[105] 'Declaration of Aims', Accord Coalition, (2010) <https://accordcoalition.org.uk/aims/> [accessed 20 December 2024]
[106] 'New bills in Lords to tackle collective worship and illegal faith schools', Humanists UK, (2024) <https://humanists.uk/2024/07/19/new-bills-in-lords-to-tackle-collective-worship-and-illegal-faith-schools/> [accessed 20 December 2024]
[107] 'Maintained Schools: Collective Worship, Question for Department for Education', UK Parliament (2021) <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-03-23/174005> [accessed 25 August 2024]
[108] Cheetham, 'Collective Worship: A Window into Contemporary Understandings of the Nature of Religious Belief?' (2000), p. 71.
[109] Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead, *A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools* (Westminster Faith Debates, 2015), p. 22, <https://www.nasacre.org.uk/file/nasacre/a-new-settlement-for-religion-and-belief-in-schools.pdf> [accessed 6 December 2024]
[110] Staff and agencies, 'Call to drop collective worship', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/apr/21/schools.uk2> [accessed 06 August 2024]
[111] 'State schools 'not providing group worship'', *BBC*, 6 September 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-14794472> [accessed 6 August 2023].
[112] Imran Mogra, 'Perceptions of the value of Collective Worship amongst trainee teachers in England', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 37.2 (2016), pp. 172-185, (p. 172).

Smith's observations of assemblies in four state schools revealed that content tended to focus on the teaching of "virtue ethics" which were sometimes supported by references to religious texts, but these religious elements were not the main focus.[113]

Despite collective worship being a highly contentious requirement, it is not a particularly common focus of academic research; few studies explore if and how it is being done in contemporary English schools, and – to my knowledge – none use large, representative samples of schools that are able to give us detailed overviews of the current situation. Given that this duty appears to limit pupils' freedoms to choose if and how to engage with religion, and parents' freedoms to choose if and how religion is introduced to their children, any study managing to provide some large-scale statistics on this topic might also be able to further our understanding of the social significance of "free personal choice" in relation to religion, thereby shedding light on broader attitudes towards religion in English society.

The second area of school life where religion features, and pupils' "sacred" freedom of choice appears to be infringed upon, is religious education (henceforth RE).

Religious Education

Schools in England that receive funding from the State are legally required to teach RE, along with other subjects. Unlike collective worship which is intended to allow pupils to experience and personally explore religious beliefs and practices, RE was designed as a more objective study of these and therefore, while the two duties are often considered to be related, they are also legally distinct.

RE was first legislated in the 1944 Education Act and reaffirmed in the 1988 Education Reform Act. This latter act introduced a range of significant transformations to the English education system – a key one being the creation of the national curriculum, laying out required topics of study for each academic subject. Interestingly, while the Act stipulated that RE should be taught in all schools it did not introduce a national curriculum for RE; instead, each local authority was responsible for curating a syllabus that reflected the religious landscape in their particular area. However, not all schools were legally required to follow these syllabuses; some faith schools and academies were granted the option of either purchasing a private syllabus or creating their own. Furthermore, all schools are expected, in teaching RE, to "reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions

[113] Graeme Smith and Susannah Smith, 'From values to virtues: an investigation into the ethical content of English primary school assemblies'*, British Journal of Religious Education*, 35.1 (2013), pp. 5-19, (p. 13).

represented in Great Britain"[114] but schools with official religious characters are able to prioritise their own religious tradition and consequently, the content and intent of RE lessons are thought to vary greatly between institutions.[115]

As with collective worship, the RE duty is highly controversial but to a lesser degree and for different reasons. Some take issue with the notion that confessional RE – that which promotes a certain religious tradition over others – is technically permitted in some state-funded faith schools[116] and others voice concerns that in refusing to pin down a set curriculum, children in England do not all have equal opportunities to develop a deep understanding and appreciation for the broad range of beliefs and worldviews present in our multi-faith society.[117] Another consequence of this lack of uniformity in RE content is that it is differentiated from other academic subjects both in terms of organization and significance; the lack of a centralized, "official" curriculum can lead to it being perceived as less important than other subjects.[118] This impression is reinforced by a consistent lack of funding, resources, and teacher training, alongside the subject not being listed within the "core curriculum" or included in the English Baccalaureate.[119] Consequently, despite commonly being publicly described as a valuable addition to children's education – for example, promoting personal development[120] and community cohesion[121] – research indicates that many schools either outright ignore the subject, or at least neglect to give it equal attention and significance with other subjects in the curriculum. For example, in 2020, research by the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) found that over a quarter of 489 diverse primary schools surveyed were spending less than

[114] *Education Reform Act 1988)*, Part I, chapter 1, Section 8 (3), <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/section/8/enacted> [accessed 25 August 2024]
[115] Ofsted, 'Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report', Gov.uk (2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report> [accessed 14 December 2024].
[116] 'Religious Education', Humanists UK [n.d.], <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/school-curriculum/religious-education/> [accessed 29 April 2024].
[117] '21st Century RE for All', National Secular Society [n.d.], <https://www.secularism.org.uk/21st-century-re-for-all/> [accessed 29 April 2024].
[118] Paul Smalley, 'A critical policy analysis of local religious education in England', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 42.3 (2020), pp. 263-274 (p. 264).
[119] L. Philip Barnes, 'An alternative reading of modern religious education in England and Wales', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 30.5, (2009), pp.607-619 (p. 608); Terence Copley, *Teaching Religion: sixty years of religious education in England and Wales*, 2nd edn (University of Exeter Press, 2008), p. 202.
[120] 'About Religious Education (RE) In the UK', NATRE [n.d.] <https://www.natre.org.uk/about-re/#:~:text=Religious%20education%20contributes%20dynamically%20to,it%20means%20to%20be%20human> [accessed 14 December 2024].
[121] Daniel Moulin, 'Religious Education in England After 9/11', *Religious Education*, 107.2 (2012), pp. 158-173, (p.160).

the recommended 5% of curriculum time[122] teaching RE[123]. The situation in English secondary schools appears to be worse; a freedom of information request made by the RE Council about RE-related practices in 2793 English secondary schools found that 28% allocated "no dedicated curriculum time to RE" between 2010-2015,[124] and other studies have highlighted that GCSE-age pupils in particular often miss out on this RE entitlement[125].

One might assume that this reluctance to properly fulfil the RE requirement may be linked to the statistics outlined earlier in this chapter concerning rising levels of nonreligious identification and declining Christian affiliation and practice across contemporary British society. However, failing to fully adhere to RE regulations does not appear to be a radically new phenomenon; in 1995 the Catholic Education Service found that a third of their schools were not allocating the expected 10% of curriculum time for RE[126] and in 1954 the SPCK (Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge) reported that some English secondary schools were omitting RE "altogether in examination years".[127] In fact, the reforms made to the subject in the 1988 were, at least partially, a response to concerns that the requirements outlined in the 1944 Act had "fallen into disuse".[128] The problems with RE's reputation and schools' ability or willingness to invest adequate time and resources into teaching it are clearly long-standing and while they may be influenced by societal trends and attitudes, these cannot be the sole cause. Further research is needed to fully explain the problems at play, and to identify solutions by which RE's profile and quality as an academic subject can be raised in our state-funded schools. However, the present thesis does not aim to do this, it aims to explore how schools' approaches to RE align or interfere with individuals' freedom of choice in relation to religious matters – something that multiple respected sociologists of religion have identified as a "sacred" or "sovereign" value, or a pervasive "culture," within contemporary western societies such as Britain.

While the decision to *not* create a national curriculum for RE is in part motivated by recognition of the variety of religions present within Britain, and a desire among government authorities to avoid

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[122] NATRE, *Levels of Provision of Religious Education in schools where different legal requirements apply* (2017), p. 4. https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/NATRE%20Report%20on%20the%20provision%20for%20RE%20-SWF%20for%20SOTN%202017%20final4%20130917.pdf [accessed 5 December 2024].

[123] Religious Education Council of England and Wales, *The State of the Nation: A report on Religious Education provision within secondary schools in England* (2017), p. 6 <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/State-of-the-Nation-Report-2017.pdf> [accessed November 2024].

[124] Ibid., p. 5.

[125] Ibid., p. 21.

[126] Copley, *Teaching Religion: sixty years of religious education in England and Wales* (2008), p. 181.

[127] Ibid., p. 53.

[128] Ibid., p. 135.

controlling exactly how schools interact with and feature religion, close consideration of RE-related legislation and its critics reveals multiple ways in which this same freedom of choice is *not* always protected for pupils and their parents. For example, as with collective worship, the right to withdraw from RE lessons lies with parents only – pupils cannot choose to excuse themselves – and decisions concerning the content and focus of RE lessons lies only with the school – pupils and parents have no say on these matters. Consequently, pupils' ability to exercise agency over if and how they engage with religion is limited, and if a faith school teaches RE in a way that aims to encourage pupils to adopt certain religious beliefs and identities, their ability to choose or form their *own* religious beliefs and identities, free from interference from others, is also limited. A similar issue applies with parental freedoms too – while they are legally able to withdraw their child from these lessons, many do not wish to do so for fear that their child will feel excluded or singled-out, and that the activities prepared for their child, once withdrawn, will not be of sufficient educational standard to make the withdrawal beneficial.[129] As a result, if parents allow children to remain in RE lessons they cannot determine or influence what the school teaches, or how, and therefore parents lose some control over how their children will encounter and experience religious or spiritual matters.

It might not be the government directly causing these restrictions on personal religious freedoms, but the government allows them; something that arguably challenges the notion of free choice being a sacred value. As the previous paragraphs attest, there exists a sizeable body of academic research and discussion into matters relating to RE, however nothing – to my knowledge – explores this apparent contradiction between society's valuing of free choice in relation to religion, and the limitations placed on these freedoms by school RE. My research aims to plug this gap, while also looking beyond the obvious ways in which religion features in state education – collective worship and RE – to include less-obvious ways such as SMSC[130] and Values Education, and Faith Admissions Policies, to which I will turn next.

SMSC and Values Education

One might assume that schools' main priorities revolve around academic education, but more holistic responsibilities concerning children's broader development into active, positive citizens, have also long been key concerns.[131] The 1988 Education Reform Act made this clear by stating that a "balanced curriculum" was one that:

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[129] 'Collective Worship', Humanists UK, [n.d.] <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/collective-worship/> [accessed 25 August 2024]

[130] This acronym stands for 'Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural' Education, and all state-funded schools in England are required to provide it for all pupils.

[131] Amelia Peterson and others, *Schools with Soul: A new approach to Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education* (Action and Research Centre, 2014), p. 1

> (a) promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental, and physical development of pupils at the school and of society; and
>
> (b) prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities, and experiences of adult life.[132]

In this, pupils' spiritual development was "established as a goal of schooling" [133] and when Ofsted was created in 1992, their inspections included an assessment of if and how schools were adhering to this duty.[134] However, guidance on exactly what "spiritual development" should involve was limited; a thorough definition was only published by Ofsted in 2004. They stated that:

> Spiritual development is the development of the non-material element of a human being which animates and sustains us and, depending on our point of view, either ends or continues in some form when we die. It is about the development of a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, meaning and purpose. It is about the development of a pupil's 'spirit.' Some people may call it the development of a pupil's 'soul;' others as the development of 'personality' or 'character'.[135]

Schools can fulfil this as they see fit. Many do so via various lessons, assemblies, and extra-curricular/pastoral activities, but the selection and promotion of a set list of "school values" – attitudes or behaviours considered to be highly valued – is also often closely connected to this duty.[136] In fact, House of Lords debates about legislating for SMSC in 1996 seem to have had values education of some sort in mind. They described the task of promoting SMSC development as

> …the training of good human beings, purposeful and wise, themselves with a vision of what it is to be human and the kind of society that makes that possible.[137]

<https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/schools-with-soul-appendices.pdf> [accessed 13 December 2024].

[132] *Education Reform Act 1988,* Chapter 1, Section 2.

[133] Peterson and others, *Schools with Soul: A new approach to Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education* (2014), p. 2.

[134] *Education (Schools) Act 1992*, Section 2, < https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/38/section/2/enacted> [accessed 22 December 2024].

[135] Ofsted, *Promoting and evaluating pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development* (Gov.uk, 2004), p. 12, <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/4959/1/Promoting_and_evaluating_pupils'_spiritual,_moral,_social_and_cultural_development_(PDF_format).pdf> [accessed 22 December 2024].

[136] Joy Carroll, Colin Howard and Bridget Knight, *Understanding British Values in Primary Schools,* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), p. 4.

[137] Cited in, Ofsted, *Promoting and evaluating pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development* (2004), p. 6.

This intention was reaffirmed in the 2019 Character Education Framework which states that schools have a duty to prepare students for the "opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life"[138] by "actively promot[ing] good behaviour and positive character traits."[139]

There is no specific legislation stating that schools must select and promote certain values – aside from the Fundamental British Values which will be discussed shortly – but in 2000, Taylor reported that around a quarter of primary and secondary schools in England do just this; their websites included statements which "set out the values the school intends to promote and which it intends to demonstrate through all aspects of life".[140] Furthermore, government guidance states that schools are required to publish a "statement of [their] values and ethos" on their websites,[141] indicating an expectation that schools will have self-selected values, even if this is not legally stipulated.

Clarification concerning how schools should select and promote these values is severely lacking, and consequently, so are clear guidelines regarding if or how religion should feature within schools' values lists and values education programmes. It is therefore possible that many schools may associate their values with religion as an expression of their official religious designation. Moreover, non-faith schools may also draw some connections due to a widespread perception that religions still offer the clearest and most familiar "moral vision"[142] or guidance on how to live a good life[143] in modern society, and historical connections between broader values education and Christian pedagogical philosophies and perceptions of childhood.[144]

Very little research has explored the content of school values lists but two studies that do just this provide some evidence of such religious connections. Peter Hemming's in-depth study of the ethos and values statements of two English state schools – one Catholic and one non-faith – noted that religious values were not only present in the former, but "permeate[d]" the everyday life of that school[145]. While he did not find any overt connections between religion and school values in the

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[138] Department for Education, *Character Education: Framework Guidance*, (Department for Education, 2019), p. 4 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904333/Character_Education_Framework_Guidance.pdf> [accessed 13 December 2024].
[139] Ibid.
[140] J. Mark Halstead and Monica J. Taylor, 'Learning and Teaching about Values: A review of recent research,' *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30.2 (2000), pp.169-202, (p. 176).
[141] 'What maintained schools must publish online', Gov.uk (2024), <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-maintained-schools-must-publish-online#values-and-ethos> [accessed 8 June 2024].
[142] Halstead and Taylor, 'Learning and Teaching about Values: A review of recent research,' (2000), p. 175.
[143] Peter Hemming, *Religion in the Primary School: ethos, diversity, citizenship,* 1st edn (Routledge, 2017), p. 51.
[144] Harry Hendrick, 'Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: an interpretative survey, 1800 to the present,' *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, eds., Allison James and Alan Prout, 2nd Edn (Falmer Press, 2003), pp. 33-60, (p. 43); Hemming, *Religion in the Primary School* (2017), p. 58.
[145] Hemming, *Religion in the primary school* (2017), p. 62.

non-faith school, Carole Vincent's 2018 study claimed that the two *are* often linked in such schools; just implicitly, and perhaps even unintentionally. She claims that the methods non-faith schools use to promote their selected values closely resemble those used by religious groups, thereby creating an atmosphere very similar to that of a "traditional faith community – minus the theology,"[146] and an approach to values education which is "pervaded" by religion[147].

A further example of school values being associated or connected with religion can be found in discussions concerning the future of RE. Given the wide-ranging criticisms of this subject, detailed earlier in this chapter, many scholars, educational professionals, and religious leaders have discussed and recommended various ways by which the current situation could be improved. One such suggestion is to change the name and focus of RE lessons to include reference to "values."[148] It is hoped that this alteration would prevent syllabi from focusing only on popular forms of the so-called six major world religions and thereby promoting narrow definitions of religion, as well as ensuring the subject is able to remain relevant, and therefore interesting, to a wide range of pupils from diverse – including nonreligious – backgrounds.[149] Implicit within this is an assumption that values and religious beliefs or traditions are somehow connected.

There is no official definition of "values" but in an educational setting and context they can be understood as attitudes, characteristics, and behaviours that children are encouraged to demonstrate in their lives – that are considered central to living a good life and being a good person. There are connections or crossovers here with religious beliefs and outlooks; namely, they can both shape how individuals interpret and interact with the world around them, and both can be deeply-held and associated with personal identity. However, where most schools – particularly non-faith schools – are prevented from openly evangelising to pupils or forcing them to adopt certain religious beliefs and identities, there are much fewer limitations around schools' influence over pupils' values. Pupils are often expected to adopt and act in accordance with school values with no right to withdraw protecting those who do not wish to participate as applies to collective worship and RE – not even for parents of pupils. Consequently, if a school's values are associated with religion, pupils' agency with regards to if and how they respond to them is likely to be limited, and parents' freedom to determine if and how their children will interact with and experience religious beliefs and

[146] Carol Vincent, 'Civil virtue and values teaching in a 'post-secular' world', *Theory and Research in Education,* 16.2 (2018), pp.226-243 (p. 243).
[147] Ibid.
[148] Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead, *A New Settlement Revised: Religion and Belief in Schools* (Westminster Faith Debates, 2017), p. 19, <https://d3hgrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/615b4ef7da3cc/content/pages/documents/re-newsetrevised-pdf-2018.pdf> [accessed 6 December 2024].
[149] Ibid.

concepts will also face limitations, challenging the idea that contemporary British society expects individuals to be granted free choice in relation to religious and spiritual matters. Another potential challenge to this comes in the form of schools' commitment to Fundamental British Values.

As well as broadcasting their own values in fulfilment of the SMSC duty, schools are also legally required to "actively promote" the so-called "Fundamental British Values" (FBVs) of Democracy, Rule of law, Individual liberty, and Mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. This obligation was introduced as part of the Coalition Government's anti-extremism legislation in 2015, with the intention of challenging social divisions that were thought to have underpinned multiple violent attacks perpetrated by "home-grown" extremists.[150] Despite one of these FBVs being "individual liberty," many have argued that this duty severely *limits* the freedoms of schools, pupils, and their families as they have no input in identifying values included in this list and no choice but to wholeheartedly adopt them – punishment for apparent non-compliance involves damaging Ofsted ratings[151] and being reported to authorities as at risk of, or initiating, radicalisation.[152] Muslim communities are arguably under the most pressure in these regards given that concerns about radicalisation tend to nowadays involve Islamist extremism. The duty has been criticised for creating an "imaginary binary opposition" between Muslim values and British values[153] that ultimately "allows for the mass surveillance of Muslims and the repression of political views."[154] This context, and the fourth value – Mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs – create a clear link between FBVs and religion and given that these are lists of values that schools are legally required to promote, it is possible that they will influence the chosen school values, creating another avenue by which religion may come to be involved in values education, contravening "sacred" notions of individual freedom and choice in relation to religious matters.

Faith-related admissions criteria

The Equality Act, introduced in 2010, prohibits individuals in Britain from being discriminated against based on a list of "protected characteristics" including their religion or beliefs.[155] However, in certain circumstances religious groups are exempted from this; one such instance is when some schools with an official religious character are oversubscribed. Currently, all state-funded faith schools in

[150] Vincent, 'Civil virtue and values teaching in a 'post-secular' world' (2018), p. 235.
[151] Toney Eaude 'Fundamental British values? Possible implications for children's spirituality,' *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 23.1 (2018), pp. 67-80 (p. 70).
[152] Ibid., p. 72.
[153] Robin Richardson, 'British values and British identity Muddles, mixtures and ways ahead,' *London Review of Education*, 13.2 (2015), pp. 37-48 (p. 45).
[154] Elizabeth Poole, 'Constructing "British Values" Within a Radicalisation Narrative: The reporting of the Trojan Horse affair,' *Journalism Studies*, 19.3 (2016), pp. 376-391 (p. 379).
[155] *Equality Act 2010*, Part 2, Chapter 1, Section 4 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/chapter/1> [accessed 22 December 2024].

England that are *not* maintained by the local authority – mainly voluntary aided schools or academies – can, if more pupils apply for places than they have spaces, consider applicants' religious backgrounds when choosing who to admit.

There are some restrictions to this; for example, schools cannot determine applicants' religious background based on interviews with parents or pupils, they must offer places to all Looked After Children[156] (LAC) regardless of their background, and they must present their oversubscription admissions criteria clearly and in a way that parents can easily understand.[157] Nevertheless, over-subscribed state-funded faith schools can essentially prioritise applicants of specific religious backgrounds over those with no religious background, or who belong to a religious tradition different from that of the school, in the admissions process.

As with the other areas discussed above, schools – and their governing or funding bodies – can exercise this ability in various ways. While religious denominations may have some stipulations regarding how pupils' religious background is to be assessed – see Blackburn Dioceses' guidance on this topic for its CofE schools[158] and the different expectations held by the Catholic Education Service in relation to its schools[159] – there is still space for institutions to tailor procedures to their specific contexts and preferences. For example, applicants usually must either prove that they have participated in a certain type of religious practice – such as church attendance – regularly for a set length of time, or that they are official members of a certain religious denomination – for example, by having been baptised into a Christian Church – in order to be admitted under a school's faith-related admissions criteria, but the specifics of how individuals can meet these criteria – *how* regularly they have to participate and whether this is preferable to proof of baptism or not – can vary between institutions. In fact, one common criticism of this current system is that the lack of uniformity can lead to increased confusion for parents completing their children's applications.[160]

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[156] Looked After Children are those in the care of a local authority, either voluntarily through agreement with their parents or through a court order.

[157] Department for Education, *School Admissions Code,* (Department for Education, 2021), p. 16, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60ebfeb08fa8f50c76838685/School_admissions_code_2021.pdf> [accessed 19 June 2024]; Robert Long, Nerys Robets and Alpesh Maisuria, *Faith Schools: FAQs* (House of Commons Library, 2024), pp. 6-8 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06972/SN06972.pdf> [accessed 19 June 2024].

[158] Blackburn Diocesan Board of Education, *Diocesan Guidance For Admissions in September 2022: Voluntary Aided Schools and Academies*, (Blackburn Diocesan Board of Education, 2022), <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/DIOCESAN-GUIDANCE-ON-ADMISSIONS-2022.pdf> [accessed 19 June 2024].

[159] 'Admissions – Certificate of Catholic Practice,' Catholic Education Service [n.d.] <https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/guidance-for-schools/admissions> [accessed 19 June 2024].

[160] Anne West, Audrey Hind and Hazel Pennell, 'School admissions and 'selection' in comprehensive schools: policy and practice,' *Oxford Review of Education*, 30.3 (2004), pp. 347-369 (p. 361); Rebecca Allen and Anne

A reasonable amount of academic literature on this topic exists – some exploring official legislation and guidance surrounding schools' admissions processes, [161] and others focusing on how these are implemented and how parents perceive and experience them[162] – but nothing yet offers a detailed picture of if and how English state schools who are *able* to select pupils by their religious background, take advantage of this ability.

The Fair Admissions Campaign has perhaps come closest to doing this, mapping the oversubscription admissions policies of all English state secondary schools and noting, among other things, whether they consider applicants' religious background and what proportion of children are offered places based on these criteria – i.e., how important applicants' religious backgrounds are in influencing whether a child is offered a place or not. They claim that 16% of English state-funded secondary schools "religiously select" - that is, offer places to children based on their religious backgrounds. This amounts to "72% of all places at faith secondaries – or 13% of places at all secondaries – being subject to religious admissions criteria." They go on to estimate that "17% of places at primaries are similarly religiously selected, or 1.2 million primary and secondary places across England," but without comparative research conducted in the primary state sector, these figures cannot be confirmed.[163]

This controversial system is closely connected to market values which were introduced to English state education in the 1980s, and which have been reinforced by successive governments ever since. The Conservative government's 1988 Education Reform Act attempted to raise school standards by

West, 'Religious schools in London: school admissions, religious composition and selectivity', *Oxford Review of Education*, 35.4 (2009), pp. 471-494, (p. 489).

[161] John Coldron, 'Admissions to English primary and secondary schools,' *Matching in Practice Workshops* (2013) http://shura.shu.ac.uk/8212/3/Coldon_English_admissions.pdf [accessed 19/06/24]; Anne West, Audrey Hind and Hazel Pennell, 'School admissions and 'selection' in comprehensive schools: policy and practice,' *Oxford Review of Education*, 30.3 (2004), pp. 347-369 (p. 361); 'How admission arrangements work at different types of school', Fair Admissions Campaign [n.d.] < https://fairadmissions.org.uk/why-is-this-an-issue/the-law-on-admissions/> [accessed 19 June 2024]; Patrick White and others, 'Regional and Local Differences in Admission Arrangements for Schools,' *Oxford Review of Education*, 27.3 (2001), pp. 317-337; Simon Burgess, Ellen Greaves and Anna Vignoles, 'School choice in England: evidence from national administrative data,' *Oxford Review of Education*, 45.5 (2019), pp. 690-710; Anne West and others, 'Secondary school admissions in England 2001 to 2009: changing legislation, policy and practice,' *Oxford Review of Education*, 37.1 (2011), pp. 1-20.

[162] Simon Burgess and others, 'What Parents Want: School preferences and school choice,' (Centre for Market and Public Organisation, 2009) <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cmpo/migrated/documents/wp222.pdf> [accessed 19 June 2024]; Mairi Levitt and Linda Woodhead, 'Choosing a faith school in Leicester: admissions criteria, diversity and choice,' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 42.2 (2020), pp. 224-241; Simon Burgess and others, *School Places: A Fair Choice?* (Sutton Trust, 2020), <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/School-Places.pdf> [accessed 19 June 2024].

[163] 'Map of English secondary schools by religious and socio-economic selection', Fair Admissions Campaign [n.d.] <https://fairadmissions.org.uk/map/> [accessed 19 June 2024].

granting parents the opportunity to declare which school(s) in the local area they would prefer their child to attend – parents are likely to prefer better schools, schools' funding became partially dependent on the number of pupils on roll, so schools needed to maintain high standards to attract lots of applicants and secure maximum funding open to them. This may at first glance seem like a positive move, however there are some well-known drawbacks. For example, socio-economically underprivileged families may find it harder to qualify for the faith-related criteria than their more privileged counterparts due to lack of reliable transport or the unsociable working hours that often accompany low-paid jobs, both of which make regular participation in religious practices difficult or indeed impossible. It is also likely that lower educational attainment and limited social capital – both more-commonly characteristics of socio-economically disadvantaged families than advantaged counterparts – could prevent some parents from understanding the systems in place and being able to "jump through the hoops" required to qualify for faith-related admissions criteria. Critics have argued that this leads to religious and social segregation, negatively impacting efforts to promote community cohesion and future prospects of children from underprivileged backgrounds[164], but also, if faith-related admissions criteria *are* more difficult for underprivileged families to meet, this regime ironically *limits* parental choice, at least for some groups, instead of enhancing it. There are also indications that this system limits specifically *religious* freedoms too – of both parents and pupils.

The ability for faith schools to grant places to applicants based on religious background is often justified by the fact that these schools are created with the intention of serving a particular religious community, or of contributing to the religious upbringing desired by parents within certain faith communities. Therefore, in being able to consider applicants' religion when oversubscribed, these schools can make sure that their target religious community benefit from the school's resources rather than being crowded out by non-religious, or other religious, applicants, and that the school's religious character can be fully "reflected" in their regular activities and operations.[165] Many may take issue with this, arguing that such schools are state-funded and should, therefore, aim to serve all in the local community not just a specific part of it.[166] These assertions become especially fraught when faith schools with such admissions policies are the highest-rated – and therefore most desirable[167] – schools in a local area. In these contexts, parents who want to secure the best possible

[164] 'Faith school admissions found to be socio-economically exclusive', Fair Admissions Campaign (2016) <https://fairadmissions.org.uk/faith-school-admissions-found-to-be-socio-economically-exclusive/> [accessed 19 June 2024]; Burgess and others, *School Places: A Fair Choice?* (2020), pp. 7-8.
[165] Long and others, *Faith Schools: FAQs* (2024), pp. 6-8..
[166] 'Ten reasons why we should object to religious selection by schools', Fair Admissions Campaign, [n.d.], <https://fairadmissions.org.uk/why-is-this-an-issue/> [accessed 19 June 2024].
[167] Levitt and Woodhead, 'Choosing a faith school in Leicester: admissions criteria, diversity and choice' (2020), p. 234.

education for their children may feel compelled to go against their personal convictions, joining certain religious communities and participating in specific religious practices, regularly, in order to guarantee a place at these schools for their child. This *is* a choice, but many parents may not consider it such depending on the strength of their determination to avoid the alternative institutions. That this is permitted and protected within official legislation, and implemented by apparently substantial numbers of English state-funded faith schools – albeit with some vocal critics – poses a challenge to the afore-mentioned claim that contemporary British society highly values individual agency and freedom of choice in relation to religious matters. Furthermore, not only are parents' religious activities and entanglements arguably shaped by faith-related admissions criteria, but those of their children are arguably even more constrained by this system.

Legislation permitting faith-related admissions criteria was introduced under the guise of increasing parental choice but made no attempts to protect or even recognise children's agency or ability to form their own preferences. Consequently, parents seeking access to oversubscribed faith schools may lead their children to feel that they have been forced to engage with religion – for example in having to regularly attend church services – by their parents, and then, if successful, forced to regularly encounter and engage with a certain type of religious outlook and tradition while at said school; in other words, they may feel deprived of the freedom to decide if and how they will explore and engage with religion or religious beliefs. Moreover, this would be completely in-line with government legislation and guidance on the topic. Though it never explicitly states that parents or schools should limit pupils' religious freedoms in this way, it does not attempt to prevent this from happening. In fact, the complete lack of reference to children's individual freedoms and their likely infringement in this admissions process raises serious questions about whether children's religious freedoms are truly legally protected.

The FACTs of faith in English schools

I have provided here brief overviews of the four very complex and, among certain groups highly contested, ways in which religion features in English state schools, and the extent to which these are legally expected or allowed to engage with religion within their regular activities. There are three main points to draw from this: first, that all state schools – regardless of whether they possess an official religious character or not – are expected and allowed to feature religious or spiritual beliefs and practices at various points in their operations. Second, our knowledge of whether and how they fulfil these requirements is limited due to official guidance for schools being vague and a lack of detailed academic research mapping out current practices. Third, analysis of literature that *does* exist suggests that concerns for pupils' and parents' freedoms of choice in relation to religion are

limited – if not directly contravened – by schools' approaches to these requirements, seemingly contradicting the previously proclaimed "sacred" or "sovereign" quality of such freedoms.

My research aims to explore these apparent contradictions with a view to not only shedding light on how English state schools perceive and engage with religion, but how broader English society does this too.

Schools are created by and for the societies in which they exist – they are funded by the state, run by adult citizens, and part of their purpose is to form pupils into positive, active members of said society. Therefore, though they are expected to adhere to legal requirements and government expectations they must also act within the expectations and preferences of wider society; an obligation made even more necessary by the marketized nature of the education system which forces schools to compete for parental attention and affection. Consequently, the way in which schools approach issues such as the inclusion of religion in regular activities at least partially reflects the attitudes of those in wider society as to what is appropriate and not. In fact, some scholars have described schools as "microcosms" [168] of the society that surrounds them, not because they perfectly replicate it, but because they encapsulate and transmit its dominant norms, values, and ideals. Within their unique institutional frameworks, schools serve as mechanisms for "culture perpetuating itself," [169] or as "avenues through which cultural ideas and ideals become internalised and anchored to a young person's framing of the world"[170]. It is in this context that I approach schools in my research – not as isolated institutions, but as lenses through which to examine how contemporary British society envisions the role of religion in the public sphere.

This is a broad aim and so while my dataset can be analysed in line with many different foci, I have decided to focus on the extent to which it reflects the social significance of "free choice" and personal agency in relation to religion in modern England.

[168] Julia Ipgrave, 'Conversations Between the Religious and Secular in English Schools', *Religious Education*, 107.1 (2012), pp. 30-48 (P. 47).
[169] Graeme Nixon, David Smith and Jo Fraser-Pearce, 'Irreligious Educators? An Empirical Study of the Academic Qualifications, (A)theistic Positionality, and Religious Beliefs of Religious Education Teachers in England and Scotland', *Religions*, 12.184 (2021), pp. 1-21.
[170] Lewis Wedlock, 'Inspecting and Influencing the Microcosm – A case study of inner city high school spaces in Bristol', *Buckingham Journal of Education*, 4.1 (2023), pp. 43-49 (p. 43).

My research questions can be summarised as:

1. How does religion feature in the operations and activities of English state-funded schools – according to their websites?
2. What does this indicate about broader societal attitudes towards religion; specifically, the value supposedly placed on notions of "free individual choice" in relation to religious matters?

The next chapter will provide a detailed overview of my methodology, but in short, I used the websites of a nationally representative sample of English state schools to collect information on how they claimed to be approaching collective worship, religious education, school values and, where relevant, involving faith-related criteria in oversubscription admissions policies. This generated a wealth of rich data with which I not only mapped out some of the diverse ways in which religion appears to feature in English state-funded schooling, but also explored if and how notions of free individual choice were being promoted or restricted and what this demonstrates about societal attitudes towards religion in England.

My key findings fit the acronym "FACT," and, after outlining my methodology, each letter will be the focus of a separate chapter.

In the third chapter of this thesis, "'F' is for Free Choice", I will show that when discussing collective worship or RE many school websites explicitly stated their commitment to protecting and promoting pupils' *freedom of choice* with regards to personal religious or spiritual beliefs and identities. However, most schools did *not* make such statements – particularly those with official religious characters – and such statements were also almost completely absent from website presentations of school values and faith-related admissions criteria. This is despite multiple academics attesting that individual choice is considered highly important in relation to matters of religion and personal values in wider society, and fundamentally underpinning the marketisation of English education which led to faith schools being able to consider pupils' religious backgrounds when offering places. I will argue that these findings appear to both support and contradict the common perception that religion in contemporary English society is treated as highly privatised and individualised, and that free personal choice in this respect is a "sacred" value, ultimately concluding that these concepts are complex, nuanced, and not perceived in the same way, or with the same level of significance and desirability, by all segments of the English population. Given this complexity, I also suggest that it may be necessary to look beyond schools' explicit statements concerning pupils' choice, to see if and how they demonstrated commitment to this value in other, more subtle ways.

This is exactly what the fourth chapter, "'A' is for Ambiguity," and the fifth chapter, "'C' is for Contrasting Approaches," do. The former will show that the four foci I studied – collective worship, RE, school values, and faith-related admissions criteria – were often presented as ambiguously religious *and* nonreligious. I will argue that this offers parents and pupils the opportunity to inject their own interpretations of school activities, ultimately enabling the school to avoid being seen as imposing certain beliefs or worldviews on pupils without having to overtly state their commitment to values of ethical liberalism, while also fulfilling their legal religious obligations. The latter chapter will take a slightly different route, demonstrating that schools' approaches to the four foci mentioned above were often highly diverse – different institutions in my samples tended to adopt and describe highly contrasting methods for involving or engaging with religion. This indicates that not only are schools concerned with encouraging and enabling pupils to form their *own* religious beliefs and identities, but schools also expect to be able to exercise this right for themselves; they expect to be able to choose *how* they involve religion in the school day and activities, thereby emphasising the significance of this apparently largely unspoken value within schools but also in the wider society around them. Together, these chapters will argue that while schools' commitment to respecting and protecting individual freedoms in relation to religion are not always explicitly stated, they *are* often implicitly indicated.

Finally, the sixth chapter, "'T' is for Tacit Restrictions," highlights that even if schools widely but subtly demonstrate the sacred quality attributed to values of free personal choice and religious agency, this does not explain why all do not state their intentions in this respect clearly, nor why most still appear to simultaneously contradict this. I will outline the multiple ways, highlighted in my dataset and existing research, that pupils', parents' and even the schools' abilities to choose if and how to engage with religion appear to be infringed upon in educational settings. I will suggest that while at first glance, these findings indicate that free choice is simultaneously both protected *and* restricted in state school engagements with religion, on closer inspection these limitations could actually further demonstrate schools' – and by extension wider society's – deep-seated respect for individual religious freedoms; it is only by imposing limits to freedom of choice and religious agency, while in a school setting, that authorities can ensure that everyone's freedoms are respected and able to be expressed to equal extents without one group benefiting dramatically more than others. Therefore, the findings from this last chapter almost paradoxically evidence schools' – and wider society's – overall commitment to these neoliberal values of individual agency and choice. This chapter ends with discussion of some final thoughts and recommendations for future research. They also demonstrate the complex interlacing of individualism *and* collectivism in schools' engagements with religion – neither one nor the other rules how religion is featured in school settings, but instead

both are simultaneously influential and reflect the complex reality of implementing individual freedoms in real life and the complicated way in which religion and nonreligion co-exist and blur in wider society.

Before exploring these findings and arguments, however, it is important to detail the methods that I employed to generate them. This is the focus of the next chapter.

2. Methodology

To recap, the key questions underpinning my doctoral research are:

1. How does religion feature in the operations and activities of English state-funded schools – according to their websites?
2. What does this indicate about broader societal attitudes towards religion; specifically, the value supposedly placed on notions of "free individual choice" in relation to religious matters?

Details of the methods used to conduct this research will be provided in this chapter, but first I will offer some information as to the theoretical framework and research paradigms that underpin these.

Theoretical framework and research approach

Research methods are often split into two categories based on whether they aim to measure and provide broad analyses of numerical data (quantitative methods), or describe and understand specific experiences via language-based data (qualitative methods).[171] They are often associated with two opposing ontological or epistemological paradigms – positivism and interpretivism. The former takes the view that the social world exists objectively and can be studied, and that "knowledge" can only be gained by empirically experiencing or observing something[172]. Proponents of this viewpoint often conduct research with a view to discovering natural or universal "laws" or "rules" that explain a specific phenomenon – in Hacking's words, they tend to try to understand the "one real world"[173] – and often find that quantitative methods suit this purpose.[174] On the other hand, interpretivists understand the social world to be more "personal and humanly created" and believe that knowledge can be gained not from objectively experiencing or observing phenomena – because as humans we cannot separate ourselves from the social world in order to study it – but from understanding individuals' experiences and interpretations of this world[175]. This paradigm tends to lend itself to qualitative methods which, rather than hoping to draw out universal "laws" or "truths," can help identify "unique and particular cases."[176]

[171] Nicholas Walliman, *Social Research Methods* (SAGE publications Ltd, 2006), p. 36.
[172] Michael J. Crotty, *Foundations of Social Research: meaning and perspective in the research process* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 1998), p. 67.
[173] Ian Hacking, *Scientific Revolutions* (Oxford University Press,1981), pp. 1-2.
[174] Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (Routledge, 2018), p.6.
[175] Michael J. Crotty, *Foundations of Social Research: meaning and perspective in the research process* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 1998), p. 67.
[176] Cohen, Manion and Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (2018), p.6.

However, these strict binaries are also often challenged. Many academics hold that positivism and interpretivism – and by extension quantitative and qualitative methods – are not mutually exclusive,[177] and in fact, some argue that combining both in a "mixed methods" approach can be a highly effective way of rigorously studying phenomena from many different angles.[178]

Aspects of positivist *and* interpretivist paradigms are evident in the questions around which my doctoral research is based. While the first aims to be descriptive, it is also an attempt to identify trends to aid our understanding of what is happening in England's state-funded schools. It calls for an objective mapping out exercise – taking what institutions say about each area of school life where religion features and, without casting judgement or interpreting how this is experienced by children and teachers, identifying and measuring trends. There are clearly positivist undertones to this first question and as will be demonstrated below, the methods that I employed to analyse schools' approaches to engaging with religion consequently had significant quantitative elements to them.

The second research question listed above builds on a more clearly interpretivist research paradigm, aiming to use the textual data generated in response to the first question as a lens through which to view potential societal attitudes towards religion and its inclusion in the public sphere. While the first question demands analysis of textual data that is as objective as possible – reporting only the trends that are evident – this second question requires exploring the various and nuanced meanings and motivations *behind* the textual content posted on school websites. It does not aim to produce facts or truths but insights into how English citizens – to whom these websites are speaking and by whom they are created – view their social world. The methods employed to respond to this question were largely qualitative in nature as will be detailed below. Before that, however; a note on objectivity.

While complete objectivity is often revered as the ideal environment for scientific experiments – influence from the researcher's subjective opinions or experiences can limit the validity of findings and conclusions – it is also widely understood to be an impossibility in social research.[179] Humans cannot completely withdraw themselves from the social world around them, and in fact must draw upon their own experiences, to some extent, in order to be able to engage with and interpret others' experiences of their social world. Consequently, while I aimed to design a research method that would objectively explore how schools claim to feature religion in response to my first research question, I do not pretend to have fully succeeded in eliminating all subjectivity from this.

[177] Cohen, Manion and Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (2018), p.3.
[178] Walliman, *Social Research Methods* (2006) p. 41.
[179] Cohen, Manion and Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (2018), p. 25.

As an individual who was educated in English state schools – both faith and non-faith institutions – I have first-hand experience of these institutions' attempts to promote values, teach RE, lead collective worship, and implement faith-related admissions policies. While on one hand this aids my ability to understand how state schools operate and how approaches to the four focal points identified in my research likely play out, it is also reasonable to expect that my personal experiences will impact how I interpret information posted on school websites. For example, the secondary school I attended had a strong Christian ethos and collective worship sessions sometimes consisted of whole-school Eucharist assemblies. The RE teachers who led these had the expertise and resources to make such assemblies enjoyable and meaningful – even to non-Christians; they successfully created an atmosphere conducive to personal reflection and serious contemplation of life's big questions. These positive memories could colour how I interpret my dataset – where websites in my samples mention whole-school Eucharists or similar activities I might presume that these sessions were conducted with the same level of effort and expertise as those that I attended, and that they were received similarly positively by students. These assumptions would be unfounded and could reduce the validity of any conclusions I drew as a result. If it is impossible to completely eradicate any such possibilities, the next-best option is to limit the influence of any subjective assumptions, and to be aware of their existence. My research was designed with this goal in mind; when answering the first of my research questions, I made sure that any information collected and analysed centred on schools' *own words* stated explicitly in relation to either school worship, school values, RE lessons or school admissions policies; for example, schools were grouped according to the specific religious practices that *they* claimed to do in collective worship, or the exact values that *they* claimed to promote. While this still involves some interpretation on my part – for example, in deciding what counts as a "religious practice" – opening space for subjectivity, I ensured that any such groupings followed similar practices to those in existing literature and did so with a consistent aim of revealing what *schools* were claiming to do, not what I thought about this or how this might be received and experienced by pupils. In this way, though I could not hope to conduct a completely objective mapping exercise of schools' engagements with religion, I attempted to limit the presence and influence of *my* words and instead to group, measure, and highlight schools' own, independently-chosen language.

The second question requires a greater openness to conjecture but I made sure that any findings were grounded in existing academic literature – not just on my experiences or expectations of how individuals in England view and treat matters of religion or spirituality – thereby limiting the extent to which unconscious subjectivity could invalidate findings or conclusions here, too.

A final point to cover before turning to the specifics of my research design is the research approach underpinning this. Deductive research approaches are often associated with qualitative methods, and aim to test a specific theory or hypothesis. In contrast, inductive research approaches aim to *generate* the theories through conducting the research. The latter approach is often helpful where there has been little prior research in a given area – generating a solid theory or hypothesis to test in these scenarios can be difficult. There have been plenty of academic studies into collective worship and religious education in English schools, and a smaller but not insignificant number exploring school values and faith admissions policies. However, to my knowledge none use nationally representative samples of state schools to map approaches to religion in *all* of these areas, and furthermore, none use this data to shed light on broader societal attitudes towards religion – most focus on influencing policy and practice instead and so, although my research utilises a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods and frameworks I opted for an inductive research approach with specific research questions, but no hypotheses or theories to test. The formation of these questions is explained in the next section – my first question was composed in the first iteration of my website analysis method and the second in my third iteration. Both are relatively broad-scoping. This was an intentional decision, partly due to the lack of pre-existing research in this area identifying specific trends or themes for me to analyse, but also because many scholars recommend allowing for flexibility in a research design – allowing it to "emerge during the research process"[180] as opposed to being rigidly set in place beforehand. The thinking here is that researchers should be prepared to adapt their study in line with changes in knowledge or circumstances – advice that was certainly relevant for me when the global Covid-19 pandemic forced a firm halt to my original research design, as I will show below.

Research design - overview

In summary – a detailed explanation of my methods is provided below – I answered my research questions by collecting information pertaining to collective worship, RE, school values and faith-related admissions criteria from websites of a nationally representative sample of English state schools, plus two booster samples of faith and non-faith state schools.

I used Microsoft Excel to store, organise and partially analyse this data. Excel's "pivot table" function was particularly useful, being able to calculate how common different approaches to religious engagement were across the sample; for example, what proportion of English state schools called their gatherings "collective worship" as opposed to using the vague term, "assembly." Where a more

[180] Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (SAGE Publications, 1998), p. 33.

detailed qualitative analysis was necessary, for example to highlight narratives or assumptions underpinning the schools' language in relation to areas of their curriculum where religion was involved, or to identify the most cited school values across the whole sample, I imported the data into Nvivo software and analysed it either using word-frequency searches or highlighting common themes by attaching codes.

However, while explaining *what* I did is important, so too is explaining *why* I did it this way – why I formulated these exact questions and why I identified this research design as the best way to answer them. Ideally, a PhD student's research questions and design are carefully constructed over the first few months, perhaps even the first year, of study and all avenues are considered before the most appropriate method is identified and built upon. This was not the case for me and my research. I spent the first five months of my PhD journey carefully constructing research questions and tailoring a creative research design that proved undoable due to the nation-wide restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. My research had to be significantly adapted multiple times as the unprecedented situation continually changed and the originally promised "three-month lockdown" lasted for the best part of a year. Consequently, the study discussed in this thesis is very different from my original research plan and yet, because changes to my research aims and methods occurred gradually, my final design is intricately connected and indebted to my original one. There was no point at which I suddenly gave up on the research I originally intended to do and began crafting something completely different; rather, my research evolved multiple times in response to the developing situation. To give a full account of my methods and justifications for their selection, I need to acknowledge and explain these connections. Having trialled various formats, I have decided that the best way to do this is to chronologically outline how the final research design emerged from my original one.

Research design - development

Original design: October 2019 – March 2020

My original research design intended to build on existing research into children's experiences of collective worship[181] as well as research into the inter-generational transmission of beliefs[182] and the so-called "stickiness" of nonreligious viewpoints[183] – the tendency for nonreligious worldviews to be passed to younger generations more successfully than religious worldviews. I identified the collective worship requirement placed on state schools as an occasion where children of nonreligious families are explicitly encouraged to engage with religious views and practices, and was interested in how the children and their parents experienced and reacted to this.

This initial research design consisted of semi-structured interviews with nonreligious pupils of English state schools, along with one of their parents, about their experiences of and attitudes towards school worship. I created worksheets for younger participants to complete to make the interview format more accessible for those who might have difficulty engaging with direct questioning, and hoped that by interviewing parent-child couples simultaneously I could encourage open discussion between them on this topic. I decided that I would recruit participants from the City of Lancaster partly because this was easily accessible to me, but also because Lancaster has a diverse range of state schools and its citizens have a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. I hoped that this diversity would provide insights into if and how different circumstances influenced encounters with school collective worship.

I began my PhD in the Autumn of 2019 and received ethical approval for this research design in March of 2020. Unfortunately, England entered the first of several national lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic just a few weeks later.

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[181] Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe, ''Just leave it blank' non-religious children and their negotiation of prayer in school', *Religion*, 50.4 (2020), pp.615-635; *Collective Worship and Religious Observance in Schools* ed. By Peter Cumper and Alison Mawhinney (Peter Lang Ltd, 2018); Richard Cheetham, 'Collective Worship: A Window into Contemporary Understandings of the Nature of Religious Belief?', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 22.2 (2000), pp. 71-81; Peter Hemming, ''No offence to God but I don't believe in Him': religion, schooling and children's rights', *Ethnography and Education*, 13.2 (2018), pp. 154-171; Julian Stern and Rachael Shillitoe, 'Prayer spaces in schools: a subversion of policy implementation?', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 40.2 (2019), pp. 228-245.

[182] Jonathan Scourfield and others, 'The Intergenerational Transmission of Islam in England and Wales: Evidence from the Citizenship Survey', *Sociology*, 46.1 (2012), pp. 91-108; Vern L. Bengston and others, 'Bringing up nones: Intergenerational influences and cohort trends', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 57.2 (2018), pp. 258-275.

[183] Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe, 'The Stickiness of Non-Religion? Intergenerational transmission and the formation of non-religious identities in childhood', *Sociology*, 53.6 (2019)

First iteration of school website analysis: March 2020

On the 23rd March 2020, then Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that schools in England would close to most children as part of national restrictions introduced to curb the spread of the Coronavirus. I decided against adapting my interviews to an online format largely due to concerns that the worksheets and discussion format I had designed would not be as effective remotely, but also because I anticipated difficulty in recruiting families to participate at such a stressful time. The Government stated that restrictions would lift in just three weeks and so I resolved to postpone interviews until then.

In the meantime, news coverage of schools' attempts to educate pupils remotely and casual phone conversations with my sister – a primary school teacher of over 10 years – brought to my attention the fact that most English state schools have websites that act as important sources of information for parents of current and prospective pupils. These websites featured significantly in many schools' remote learning systems, being the place where pupils gained access to lesson content and parents received updates from teachers about the ongoing situation. However, they were not specially created in response to the coronavirus lockdown; they had been a common feature of English state schooling since at least 2014 when the Department for Education published a list of information that local-authority-maintained schools were required to make available to parents online.[184]

Publishing school policies and procedures online makes this information easily accessible to everyone outside the institution – parents and inspectors, for example – and therefore while official guidance does not state *why* schools are expected to have their own websites, it appears that this sharing of information is a key element of their intended purpose. However, given the marketized nature of education in contemporary England – where schools must compete with each other to attract pupils – websites are also widely understood to function as part of their advertising strategies. As Karimi and Khawaja put it, they are not just "informational repositories"[185], but also "key representations of institutional identity…mirroring [schools'] values and activities"[186]. Furthermore, their study which analysed school websites and then conducted interviews with

[184] 'What maintained schools must publish online', Department for Education (2022) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-maintained-schools-must-publish-online#full-publication-update-history> [accessed 23 June 2024].
A similar list was published in 2016 for non-maintained schools – 'What academies, free schools and colleges must or should publish online', Department for Education, (2022) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-academies-free-schools-and-colleges-should-publish-online> [accessed 23 June 2024].
[185] Hengameh Karimi and Sarwar Khawaja, 'Leadership in the digital age: Examining school websites as a window into educational practices', *International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies*, 8.1 (2025), pp. 2544-2553, p. 2545.
[186] Ibid.

teachers from these institutions to assess the leadership models being used noted a consistency in the information provided online and the everyday practice in the school – websites were "effective in communicating the fundamental leadership models and cultural values"[187]. Consequently, while there are some limitations to studying the information provided on school websites – explored below – there is also a strong indication that the information provided online is carefully curated by schools. It offers insight not only into their values and everyday practices, but also into the image they aim to project, thereby mirroring broader societal norms and expectations.

With this in mind, I briefly explored the websites of schools local to me and noted that most contained a wealth of detailed information on a variety of topics, including, for example, their individual approaches to collective worship, and I realised that collecting this information from the websites of schools in Lancaster could provide valuable context to children's self-reported experiences. Furthermore, I quickly realised that this could also provide a unique overview of how schools in and around the city approached and presented this highly controversial requirement – information that is not currently publicly available.

Altered research aims

Though still intending to focus mainly on interviews, the addition of this website analysis slightly altered my research aims and questions. As well as exploring nonreligious pupils' and parents' experiences of and responses to collective worship, I was now also intending to outline Lancastrian schools' self-reported approaches to the requirement.

I was aware that there were limitations to sourcing this information from school websites; namely that there was no way of proving that the information posted there was accurate. However, Karimi and Khawaja recently found that websites accurately reflected the leadership models implemented in the schools they studied,[188] and, even if I opted to interview teachers or observe worship sessions in person, the same criticisms could be levelled – there would be no way of proving that the teachers were being truthful or that the session I observed reflected normal practice. Furthermore, schools are not *required* to post information about their approach to collective worship online, so if a school was not fully complying with this responsibility it is likely they would simply omit it from the website rather than lie about it. More importantly, I realised that what schools *claimed* to be doing was still valuable regardless of how accurately it reflected their actions because it could shed light on wider societal attitudes towards religion in schools; the things that schools chose to emphasise or gloss over reveals what they think parents might be happy to hear and what schools anticipate will be

[187] Ibid., p. 2552.
[188] Ibid.

received negatively. As a result, I began to explore how best to collect and analyse this data from school websites.

Selecting a sample

Designing my website analysis method was difficult because very few studies had attempted to use school websites for this purpose, and those that had did not offer detailed explanations of their methodologies[189].

The most detailed explanation I could find was in Kahan and McKenzie's study of how physical education and physical activity features on Californian schools' websites.[190] Their first step was sourcing an up-to-date list of all schools in California, from which they selected their sample of schools to study. They also collected contextual data from each school in their sample such as religious character and pupils' socio-economic backgrounds, to enable comparison of how different types of schools featured physical activity on their websites. The process of data collection was conducted manually by reading through all pages of selected schools' websites and making note of how and where physical education was mentioned. They did not explain how they stored or analysed the data they collected but these basic details gave me a starting point for designing my own website analysis methods.

I found an online database hosted by the UK Government and featuring National Statistics' data[191] which listed all schools in England and Wales and featured detailed filters allowing anyone to compile a list of specific types of school – for example, all state-funded schools in a specific city. This database is publicly available and included detailed contextual information about each school listed on it and a link to their official website.

I searched this database for all the state-funded schools – excluding special schools and pupil referral units – in Lancaster and used the thirty-three schools listed as my sample. I excluded special schools and pupil referral units because I was not expecting to interview any children from such schools and was less familiar with how they operated in comparison with mainstream schools, however they are also legally required to offer collective worship and future research exploring if and how they approach this mandate would be interesting.

[189] Derek McGhee and Shaoying Zhang, 'Nurturing resilient future citizens through value consistency vs. the retreat from multiculturalism and securitisation in the promotion of British values in schools in the UK', *Citizenship Studies*, 21.8 (2017), pp. 937-950.
[190] David Kahan and Thomas McKenzie, 'School Websites: A Physical Education and Physical Activity Content Analysis', *Journal of School Health*, 90.1 (2019), pp. 47-55.
[191] 'Search for schools, colleges, multi-academy trusts and sponsors', Gov.uk [n.d.] <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/> [accessed 26 September 2024].

In order to make it possible to compare the collective worship approaches taken by different types of school, I also collected demographic information about schools from this database.

Data collection

Again, existing studies utilising school websites as sources of data were not forthcoming with details on exactly *how* they collected their data. Both McGhee and Zhang, and Kahan and McKenzie appeared to manually search each website to find relevant information but did not detail how. I considered using web scraping software which would extract information from specific web pages automatically[192], but while exploring websites of schools local to me I noted that many featured collective worship policies in pdf format that had to be downloaded to be read and I was concerned that scraping software would miss these valuable documents. I decided instead to manually collect information by personally reading through the web-pages of each school in my sample and looking for mentions of collective worship. Although more time-consuming than using automated software, this meant that I developed a close knowledge of my dataset which was hugely beneficial during the analysis stage.

Data storage

Existing studies were also not clear on how they stored and organised their website data. I decided to input it to Microsoft Excel for several reasons.

Excel is normally associated with numerical data but multiple studies have highlighted its potential for storage and analysis of textual data too[193]. It has been noted for its ability to efficiently organise and identify trends within large quantities of textual data while retaining connections between various elements of the dataset, allowing for nuanced and detailed analysis. Scholars have praised Excel's capabilities in relation to organising and analysing interview and focus-group transcripts, but as I was already proficient in using Excel thanks to a previous job, I was confident that it would also work for the data I would collect from school websites.

Figure 1.1 demonstrates how I formatted my spreadsheet in this first iteration of the study.

[192] Katharine Jarmul and Richard Lawson, *Python Web Scraping*, 2nd Edn, (Packt, 2017).
[193] Solveig Osborg Ose, 'Using Excel and Word to Structure Qualitative Data', *Journal of Applied Social Science*, 10.2 (2016), pp. 147-162; Ronan T. Bree and Gerry Gallagher, 'Using Microsoft Excel to code and thematically analyse qualitative data: a simple, cost-effective approach', *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 8.2 (2016), pp. 2811-2819; Jose A. Amozurrutia and Chaime Marcuello Servos, 'Excel spreadsheet as a tool for social narrative analysis', *Quality and Quantity,* 45.4 (2011), pp. 953-967; Daniel Z. Meyer and Leanne M. Avery, 'Excel as a Qualitative data analysis tool', *Field Methods*, 21.1 (2009), pp. 91-112.

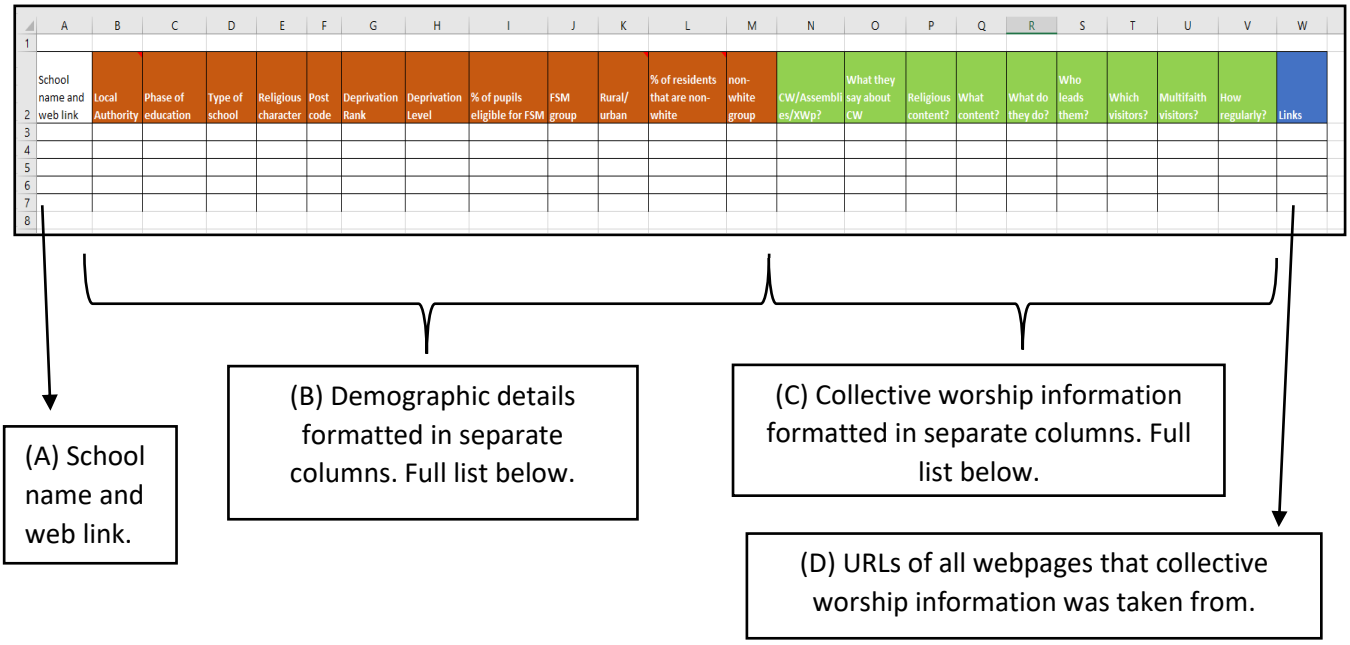

Figure 1.1 – Format and structure of the first iteration of my spreadsheet database.

Each school in my sample was allocated to a separate row (Point A).

Reading extensively around the topic of collective worship in schools gave me a clear understanding of the key elements making up a school worship session and the topics that academics and stakeholders were most interested in or concerned about. Using this knowledge, I created a list of details that I wanted to collect from school websites in order to provide detailed insights into their approaches to collective worship – if they had one (Point C). I then supplemented this with a list of demographic details that would be helpful to have about each school in my sample – for example, what phase of education they are in, their religious character, and their most recent Ofsted rating (Point B). This was shaped by what information was freely available on the government-hosted database described above, as well as by the factors often discussed or compared in academic literature on collective worship. A full list of the details collected in my final spreadsheet is available in Appendix 1.

I intended to analyse this data using Excel's pivot table function – more detail below – and knew that this would require a high level of uniformity in the text inputted to each column. Copying and pasting information directly from websites would lead to similar approaches being worded differently and consequently not being grouped together by the pivot table tool. To avoid this, I created lists of possible responses for each column and used the school website to inform which response to input into individual columns for each school. For example, I was interested in who was

leading collective worship sessions and so I allocated a column to this topic and created a list of potential responses that I expected to see on school websites; "SLT (senior leadership team)," "teachers," "visitors," "pupils." After reading through each school website, I inputted the relevant responses to this column from this list. Response lists were informed by academic literature on school collective worship but I expected to alter them as I collected data; adding extra options where a website mentioned something that I had not prepared for. For example, I noted that some schools mentioned that gatherings were led by the school chaplain – an option that was not covered in my pre-generated list of possible responses, so added this as an option.

In the interest of transparency, I also included a column on the far right of the spreadsheet containing links to all the webpages that information was drawn **from** (Point D of Figure 1.1). I did this to ensure that I, or anyone viewing the spreadsheet, could check the source material to confirm the data presented in the spreadsheet is accurate and had not been misrepresented or accidentally placed in the wrong row.

Data analysis

The data collection and analysis stages of this research were closely connected. Not only was the format of my spreadsheet informed by my intention to analyse it using Microsoft Excel's pivot table function, but the act of splitting key elements of worship into separate columns and choosing the correct response for each school, in each column, from a pre-constructed list of possible options, arguably amounts to coding the website data as it was collected – or perhaps, collecting codes rather than raw data.

Coding is a common form of qualitative data analysis which involves "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes and accounts for each piece of data"[194]. This helps organise large chunks of text and highlights common or significant themes for researchers. It is not uncommon for researchers dealing with qualitative data and working from a grounded theory approach to code their data during the data collection phase, but this normally consists of collecting part of the data – for example doing some interviews – then applying codes to highlight common or significant themes, and then conducting more interviews; often with a view to further exploring these themes[195]. My method differs from this in that I read school websites, identified relevant information and rather than recording this in full and *then* applying codes, I only recorded the relevant code that represented what they had said in my database. This was mainly motivated by time concerns – I thought that I only had three weeks to collect and analyse the data before my

[194] Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd edn (SAGE Publications, 2014), p. 112.
[195] Osborg Ose, 'Using Excel and Word to Structure Qualitative Data' (2016).

focus would switch back to my interviews – but this decision was further cemented by the realisation that school websites tended to have lots of information about collective worship and if this was not stored in a carefully structured way, specific elements such as the session's name, or how regularly they occurred, would be difficult to locate.

While I did not use any specific Excel tools to code the website data, some scholarly articles promote the use of Excel for this very function[196]; even as an alternative to more complex Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)[197]. The main Excel tool that I *did* intend to incorporate into my analysis was the Pivot Table function.

Pivot tables allow users to easily "summarise and cross-tabulate…large and detailed datasets" and have been described as "one of Excel's most powerful and underutilised features." [198] This tool made it possible to quickly and easily calculate not only how many of each response were inputted into each column, but also to cross-examine what types of schools were associated with different types of response – a method that Johnson calls "Qualitative Pivoting"[199].

I knew that detailed qualitative analysis of school website data would be time-consuming and I would likely need to gain access to and learn how to use a type of CAQDAS, further prolonging the process. As we were being reassured that this first lockdown would be lifted in three weeks' time, I did not think that I had time to do this, and did not think that it would be necessary alongside the detailed interviews that I was still hoping to conduct. From my previous extensive experience of using Excel, I knew that analysing the frequency of certain codes would be a much quicker form of analysis, and could provide something that we currently lack; reliable statistics outlining the various approaches schools claim to undertake in response to the collective worship requirement. Even if this was only drawn from schools in Lancaster, I knew that this method of analysis would provide a valuable contribution to current understandings of school-based collective worship, as well as also contextualising children's experiences that would be highlighted in my proposed interviews.

Unfortunately, I did not get around to data analysis with this first iteration of my website analysis due to significant changes in the Covid situation, however, this method eventually became a

[196] Bree and Gallagher, 'Using Microsoft Excel to code and thematically analyse qualitative data: a simple, cost-effective approach' (2016); Amozurrutia and Marcuello Servos, 'Excel spreadsheet as a tool for social narrative analysis', (2011); Meyer and Avery, 'Excel as a Qualitative data analysis tool', (2009).
[197] Osborg Ose, 'Using Excel and Word to Structure Qualitative Data' (2016), p. 148.
[198] Victor Grech, 'WASP (Write a Scientific Paper) using Excel – 2: Pivot tables', *Early Human Development,* 117 (2018), pp. 104-109 (p. 104).
[199] Jeff S. Johnson, 'Qualitative sales research: an exposition of grounded theory', *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 35.3 (2014), pp. 262-273, (p. 270).

significant part of my analytical process in later iterations of this project and is explained in full below.

Second iteration: April – May 2020

When the lockdown order was extended, rather than lifted, in April 2020, I was forced to reassess my research focus and methodology.

At this point, I was even more reluctant to adapt interviews to an online format than when restrictions were first announced, as any children who agreed to take part would now be being asked to discuss worship sessions that they had not attended for over a month. I was concerned that this would reduce the validity of any findings and conclusions drawn. I decided to postpone my interviews again until they could be conducted as originally planned, however I knew that this would reduce the amount of time I had to conduct and analyse them and I would therefore likely not be able to do as many as I had first hoped. To compensate for this, and to ensure that I was using my time during the national lockdown efficiently, I decided to expand the scale and scope of the website analysis portion of my research.

<u>Expanding the scope of the website analysis</u>

While reading literature related to school collective worship for the original research project I had planned, I became aware that religion could feature heavily in elements of school life beyond simply collective worship; particularly in the teaching of Religious Education, in values education – or Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural education (SMSC) – and in the oversubscription policies of schools with religious characters.

Furthermore, while collecting information from school websites in the first iteration of my website analysis method I noted that many schools also offered details about these other areas. Just as with collective worship, we currently lack data drawn from nationally representative samples of state schools shedding light on how they promote SMSC development and if/how religious criteria are included in their oversubscription policies related to pupil admissions and though research into the content and structure of RE lessons is more plentiful, it is far from exhaustive. When the national lockdown was extended and I realised that my website analysis would need to constitute a larger portion of my research than initially intended, I decided to expand the *scope* of my research to include these other areas, and the *scale* of this project to include a much larger and more diverse sample of schools. I planned to expand my interviews in the same way, to explore nonreligious children's experiences of and responses to these three extra areas of school life, alongside collective worship. I hoped that in doing so I could contribute something unique and valuable to discussions

about the complex and contentious relationship between religion more broadly and English state education – shedding light on what schools claim to be doing and how this is received and experienced by nonreligious pupils and their families.

Data collection and storage

The methods for collecting and storing data were carried over from my first iteration of website analysis. I manually scoured school websites to find the relevant information and inputted the corresponding answer into a carefully constructed Microsoft Excel spreadsheet as per Figure 1.2 below. The only alteration was the addition of three extra sections to the original spreadsheet format – one for RE-related data, one for admissions-related data and another for SMSC-related data; specifically details about each school's self-selected "school values." Reasons for this focus are given below.

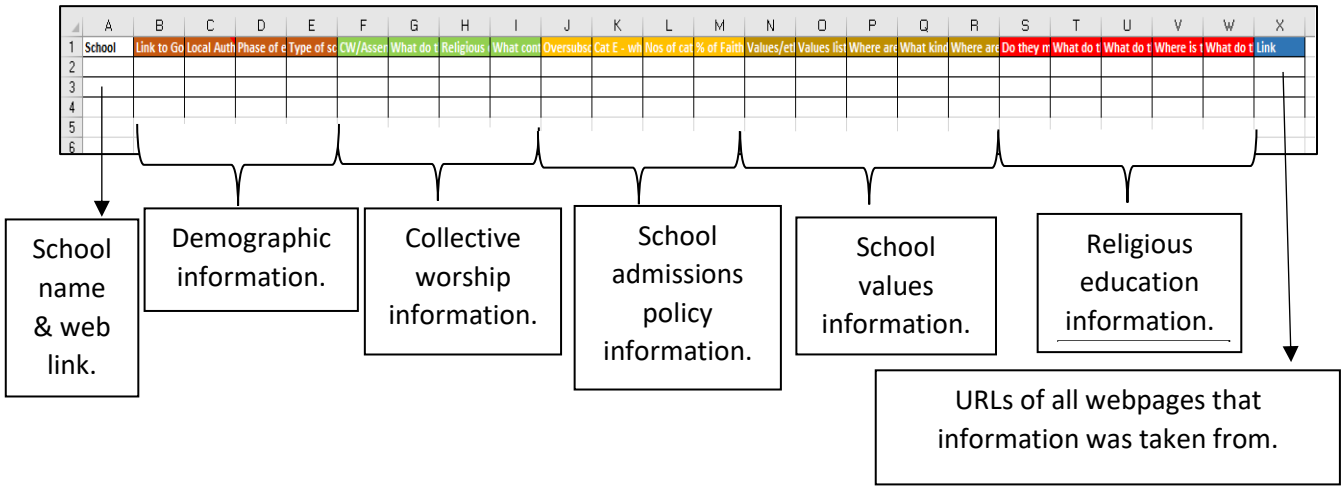

Figure 1.2 – Format and structure of the second iteration of my spreadsheet database.

As in the first iteration of this method, I used existing literature to identify salient elements of each topic and allocated each of these to a separate column. Each school was allocated to a separate row and I used the information posted on their websites to input the relevant responses – based on a pre-created list of possible answers, itself drawn from existing literature and added to throughout data collection – into each column. This ensured that it was easy to find specific information for each school within this now comprehensive spreadsheet, but also ensured that it could be quantitatively analysed via Excel's "pivot table" function.

I decided to focus on school values as opposed to conducting a broader analysis of schools' approaches to SMSC development because, while websites tend to offer a wealth of information on all four focal areas, SMSC-related information tended to be more diffuse throughout the website,

invoked in relation to different academic subjects in different schools. For example, some mentioned it in relation to PSHE or Citizenship lessons, while others described how each academic subject contributed to some aspect of SMSC development. While having a thorough understanding of how English state schools approach and fulfil their SMSC obligations would be a valuable contribution to our understanding of how schools feature or engage with religion, I did not feel able to collect data and conduct a detailed analysis of such a large and multi-faceted issue within the timeframe of my PhD – especially being the sole researcher on this project. I decided to narrow my focus down to one aspect of SMSC that is readily discussed and clearly displayed on school websites, has the potential to be connected to religion or religious practices in some way, and is also increasingly becoming the focus of scholarly attention – school values. There is a small but growing body of academic literature that discusses school values or values education separately from more general SMSC development, showing that this topic is deemed significant enough to be explored on its own.[200] Most explore goings-on in a small number of schools in England – often five or fewer – but none use a nationally representative sample of English state schools to map schools' self-selected values, so providing this through my research would offer a significant contribution to existing literature. I also envisioned this data being able to shed light on the values appreciated by wider British society as schools are tasked with moulding pupils into good citizens of this society and the values that they choose to instil in pupils therefore reflect those of said society.

To balance out this large expansion to my spreadsheet, I also spent time at this point reassessing the information being collected in relation to collective worship to reduce the scope of this section. During the first iteration of my website analysis, I noticed that some columns were often difficult to find answers to on school websites, or the information available on websites did not, on initial inspection, appear to reveal particularly interesting trends, so I decided to remove these from the spreadsheet. For example, one column was concerned with how schools were conducting collective worship during the lockdown restrictions – I was interested in if and how they were adapting their usual practices to fit an online, or socially distanced, format – but almost no schools provided these details online. Perhaps they were, understandably, not attempting to do collective worship during this time, or maybe they simply had not updated their websites with this information. It was impossible to know which was true and therefore I knew I would not be able to draw any firm or

[200] Marvin W. Berkowitz, 'What works in values education', *International Journal of Educational Research*, 50.3 (2011), pp. 153-158; Mark J. Halstead and Monica J. Taylor, 'Learning and Teaching about Values: a review of recent research', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30.2 (2000), pp. 169-202; Carol Vincent, 'Civic Virtue and Values Teaching in a 'post-secular' world', *Theory and Research in Education*, 16.2 (2018), pp. 226-243.

valid conclusions from the data that I *was* able to collect on this topic, so ultimately removed it from my spreadsheet.

Sampling

Overall, the website analysis portion of my research underwent significant expansion during this second iteration but not only in relation to the topics covered; the sample of schools involved also grew significantly and became intentionally more diverse in terms of phase of education, religious character, and geographical location. As there are currently no statistics shedding light on how English state schools claim to be approaching their multiple religious responsibilities, I knew that my research would be more valuable if its findings could be generalised beyond the specific sample that I had used, so endeavoured to collect website information pertaining to religion from four schools in each local authority in England – one "non-faith" primary, one "non-faith" secondary, one religious primary and one religious secondary. However, shortly into the analysis phase of this second iteration news of further lockdowns caused me to re-think and dramatically restructure my research once again. The next section of this chapter details the ultimate research design that underpins this thesis.

Third and final iteration: November 2020

When Covid-19 cases began rising again at the end of October 2020 making the re-introduction of national restrictions increasingly likely, it became clear that I would not be able to conduct my planned interviews in the time allotted for me to complete my PhD. Even if I could, restrictions had disrupted schools for so long by this point that children were unlikely to be able to accurately recall their experiences of collective worship, RE, and values education as they had existed before the national lockdowns. I therefore decided to make school website analysis the sole focus of my research and to reframe my research questions from exploring how pupils and parents experience these aspects of school life, to focusing solely on schools' self-described approaches to them. From this I formed my first research question:

1. How does religion feature in the operations and activities of English state-funded schools – according to their websites?

To ensure that I would have enough data from this method to write a whole thesis I expanded the sample of school websites once more; this time, making it representative of all English state-funded schools.

The decision to focus on England and not incorporate institutions in other parts of the UK was largely motivated by the fact that education is a devolved matter here; schools in England, Wales, Scotland

and Northern Ireland all follow different legislation concerning engagement with religion thereby complicating any attempt to study them in tandem. While it would be fascinating to explore how each country does religion separately, it would have been too large an undertaking for me to attempt to do so in one research project, as a lone researcher.

Expanding the sample

Three factors must be considered when calculating the ideal sample size for a given project: the size of the target population, the desired confidence level, and the margin of error[201].

In 2020, when I was designing this final iteration of my website analysis methodology, the online government database[202] stated that there were 20,240 state-funded schools – excluding nurseries, special schools and pupil referral units – open in England. This was the target population. While some studies differ, a confidence level of 95% and 4% margin of error are generally considered strong enough to ensure that any findings highlighted from a smaller sample can be generalised to, and be understood as reflective of, the larger target population.[203]

Confidence levels "establish the possible error in a study that uses a sample of a whole population"[204] and the margin of error shows how far findings may vary in reality. To say that a sample size has a confidence level of 95% and a 4% margin of error means that there is a 95% chance that, were the study to be repeated, the findings would fall within 4 percentage points of the ones reported in the initial study[205].

Using the Survey Monkey's sample size calculator[206], I determined that I would need a sample of 583 English state schools for it to hold a 95% confidence level and a 4% margin of error. This is a much larger sample size than in my previous iterations but as I had tried-and-tested data collection and storage methods, and I had been granted a four-month funding extension, I felt confident that I could adapt to this expanded sample. However, calculating how large a sample should be is not enough to ensure that it will be representative of the target population; it must also closely mirror that target population in terms of the proportions of different groups within it.[207] For example,

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[201] Aamir Omair, 'Sample size estimation and sampling techniques for selecting a representative sample', *Journal of Health Specialities*, 2.4 (2014), pp. 142-147, (p. 143).
[202] 'Get Information about Schools', Gov.uk, [n.d.] <https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Search?SelectedTab=Establishments> [accessed 23 June 2024].
[203] Douglas Altman and others, *Statistics with Confidence: Confidence Intervals and Statistical Guidelines* (John Wiley & Sons, 2000), p. 4.
[204] Peter C. Bruce, *Introductory Statistics and Analytics: A resampling perspective* (Wiley, 2015), p. 125.
[205] Ibid., p. 126.
[206] 'Sample size calculator', Survey Monkey, [n.d.] <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/mp/sample-size-calculator/> [accessed 31 October 2024].
[207] Arlene Fink, *How to Sample in Surveys*, 2nd edn (SAGE, 2002), p. 2.

around 1/3 of all state schools have official religious characters and around 2/3 do not[208], therefore, for my findings to be considered representative of all English state schools, they should be drawn from a sample of state schools with similar proportions of faith and non-faith schools to the larger target population. There are two generally accepted techniques for ensuring this – probability sampling and nonprobability sampling. The latter involves the researcher choosing which participants (or schools) to recruit based on their characteristics and manually ensuring that their sample reflects the characteristics of the target population.[209] The former usually takes the form of random selection where participants (or schools) are chosen completely randomly – each person or school in the target population has an equal chance of being selected – thereby eliminating bias.[210]

After seeking advice from statistician, Professor Bernard Silverman, I concluded that due to the vast diversity within English state schools and the fact that this research is being conducted by myself alone, it would have been too difficult and time consuming to manually ensure that each type of English state school that exists was proportionately represented in my sample. I therefore opted for a probability sampling method and randomly selected my sample.

The first step in conducting such a sampling technique is to compile a list of all the "eligible units" that make up your target population.[211] This I did by applying the filters listed in Table 1.1 to the previously mentioned online Government database.[212]

[208] Robert Long, Nerys Roberts, Alpesh Maisuria, *Faith Schools: FAQs* (House of Commons Library, 2024), p. 5. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06972/SN06972.pdf> [accessed 23 June 2024
[209] Fink, *How to Sample in Surveys*, (2002), p. 10.
[210] Ibid., p. 9.
[211] Ibid., p. 10.
[212] 'Get Information about Schools', Gov.uk, [n.d.] <https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Search?SelectedTab=Establishments> [accessed 23 June 2024].

Filter	Elements selected
Establishment Type	Academies, Free schools, Local Authority Maintained Schools
Status	Open, open but proposed to close, proposed to open
Phase of Education	All-through, Middle deemed primary/secondary, primary, Secondary
Local Authority	All English ones – 152 in total.[213]
Religious Character	All

Table 1.1 – Filters applied to the Government database to generate my main sample of schools, used in the final iteration of my research designs.

This generated a list of all the state-funded schools, located in England, that were operating at that time – excluding special schools and pupil referral units. I then allocated each school a number based on their position within this list – the first one was "number 1", the second "number 2" and the last one was "number 20,240". I then used an online random number generator[214] to randomly select 583 different numbers between 1 and 20,240. The schools that corresponded with these randomly generated numbers were selected to be part of my sample. On the rare occasion that a selected school did not have a working website I randomly selected another to take its place using the same method.

The first section of columns in my spreadsheet (brown columns in Figure 1.2) were concerned with collecting demographic information about each individual school. Having analysed this, I can confirm that the 583 randomly selected schools are highly diverse and the proportions of different types of schools within it closely reflects those within the target population, as Table 1.2 demonstrates.

[213] 'FOI emails for Local Education Authorities', FOI Directory, [n.d.] <http://www.foi.directory/local-education-authorities/> [accessed 04 October 2024].
[214] 'Random Number Generator/Picker' [n.d.] <https://andrew.hedges.name/experiments/random/> [accessed 04 October 2024].

Demographic characteristic	Proportion of all English state schools (2019)[215]	Proportion of schools in my main sample
Primary schools	82.9%	82%
Secondary schools	17.1%	17%
Local authority-maintained schools	59%	56.9%
Academies[216]	41%	41.5%[217]
Faith schools	33.6%	27%
Non-faith schools	66.4%	73%
Church of England	22.6%	22.3%
Roman Catholic	9.7%	4.1%
Pupils eligible for Free School Meals[218]	17.3% of pupils in England 2019/20	18% - average percentage listed by schools.[219]

Table 1.2 – Demographic characteristics of English state-funded schools alongside those of state schools in my main sample.

While there are no nationwide statistics revealing the average Ofsted rating, deprivation level or level of ethnic diversity for English state schools, the demographic section of my spreadsheet reveals that my sample is diverse in these areas, as well as diverse in terms of the geographic location of schools.

As well as mapping out national trends, I knew that being able to compare the approaches taken by different types of schools would provide more nuanced and detailed insights into the complex and highly contested relationship between religion and English education. Unfortunately, as Table 1.2 shows, randomly selecting schools created a sample where different types of school were not equally represented. For example, I have a much larger sample of primary schools than secondary schools, and so cannot fairly compare the trends prevalent in both groups; it is possible that were I

[215] Robert Long and Shadi Danechi, *Faith Schools in England: FAQs*, (House of Commons Library, 2019), p. 21 <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/34765/1/SN06972.pdf> [accessed 23 December 2023].
[216] There are no figures for the proportion of non-maintained schools in England – Academies + Free Schools.
[217] The proportion of "non-maintained" schools (Academies + Free Schools) in my sample is 43.1%, thereby adding up to 100% with maintained schools.
[218] 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', Gov.uk, [n.d.] <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2019-20> [accessed 23 June 2024].
[219] This information was only available as a percentage of a school's whole population; not a specific number of pupils eligible. 18% was the average percentage listed by schools in my sample on the gov.uk "Get Information about Schools" database.

to have more secondary schools, the trends revealed would be different than those evident from my small sample.

In such situations, researchers can add "booster samples" to their overall sample, which create large enough groups of specific datasets to allow fairer comparison with others. Ideally, I would have created nationally representative booster samples of all school "types" to enable fair comparison between them – for example, all state primary schools and state secondary schools, and all local-authority maintained schools and non-maintained schools – but I knew that this would be too large an undertaking for me to do alone. Instead, I settled for creating booster samples of faith and non-faith schools because these are most likely of all school "types" to adopt differing approaches to legally mandated engagements with religion. Furthermore, the legal obligations placed on non-faith schools to engage with religion are the source of much contention, especially among humanists and secularists[220] - more-so than in relation to any other type of school - and therefore shedding light on if and how these schools navigate the legal requirements will be a valuable contribution to these tense and persistent debates.

Using the Survey Monkey "sample size calculator," I determined that my booster samples needed to consist of 570 randomly selected faith schools, and 575 randomly selected non-faith schools. However, data collection and analysis of my Main Sample proved to be incredibly time consuming, and I knew that I would not be able to replicate this methodology with over 1000 extra schools while keeping within the time limitations of a PhD. So, rather than creating completely unique samples of faith and non-faith schools I looked to my Main Sample which consisted of 159 faith schools and 424 non-faith schools and used these as the foundations of my booster samples. I copied these into two separate spreadsheets and randomly selected an additional 411 faith schools and 151 non-faith schools to reach the required sample sizes of 570 and 575 schools respectively.

My sampling method for these additional schools was almost identical to that used for my Main Sample. I used the same online government database but this time generated two lists – one of all state-funded faith schools in England and the other of all state-funded non-faith schools in England. The filters used to generate these lists were identical to those in the table 1.1, except for the "religious character" option. For the list of faith schools, I selected all options except "Does not apply", "None" or "Not recorded", and I did the opposite to generate the list of all non-faith schools.

[220] 'Schools and education', Humanists UK, [n.d.] <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/> [accessed 23 June 2024]; 'Secular education', National Secular Society, [n.d.] <https://www.secularism.org.uk/education/> [accessed 23 June 2024].

I allocated all schools a number based on their position in the list and then used a random number generator to randomly select 411 schools from the list of state-funded faith schools, and 151 from the list of state-funded non-faith schools. If any of the numbers generated corresponded to a school that was already part of my Main Sample, I simply ignored it and randomly generated another number corresponding with a different institution to avoid duplication within my booster samples.

I created separate spreadsheets for both booster samples using the same format as for the main sample – demonstrated in Figure 1.2. The only exception was that I did not include the school admissions section in the booster sample of non-faith schools as they are not legally allowed to involve religious criteria in their oversubscription policies, so this section of my research was irrelevant to them.

Expanding the scope

I decided to keep the data collection, storage, and analysis methods from the previous iterations of my website analysis as these had proved themselves to be viable ways of sourcing and organising the relevant data, and of quickly and easily calculating how many schools chose different approaches to engaging with or featuring religion in their daily operations. However, now that this website analysis was the sole focus of my research and would be based on nationally representative samples of schools, I realised that there was also potential to shed light on broader societal attitudes towards religion through detailed exploration of this comprehensive dataset – especially if I added a qualitative element to my analytical methods. I also knew, though, that to add yet another component to an already ambitious research project risked overloading myself; societal attitudes towards religion are complex and varied and given the size of dataset I was hoping to generate, it would be impossible for me to explore and explain all aspects of these in-depth and therefore I would need to identify a focus for this broader analysis.

I knew that academic literature often highlighted the significance, in contemporary British society, of personal agency and free choice in relation to religious and spiritual matters, but in preparing for and conducting previous iterations of this study I also became aware of the many ways in which schools' interactions with religion appeared to challenge or contradict this. Furthermore, multiple cases questioning the appropriateness of these apparent infringements had made British headlines in recent years[221] and so it seemed that focusing on this aspect of societal perceptions of and

[221] Harriet Sherwood, 'Parents launch court action over Christian school assemblies', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/29/parents-launch-court-action-over-christian-school-assemblies> [accessed 26 June 2024]; Sally Weale, 'High court upholds top London school's ban on prayer rituals', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/apr/16/london-school-katharine-birbalsingh-prayer-rituals-ban-not-unlawful-high-court> [accessed 26 June 2024].

interactions with religion would be relevant and interesting in academic circles and beyond. Any conclusions drawn from my research on this topic would be strengthened if supported by interview data, but given the large and varied sample of schools that I would draw them from, would still hold weight on their own until such a time as interviews can be conducted in a future study. I still wanted to collect as much information from school websites as possible, and did not want this to be solely focused on discourses or narratives of choice as a broader range of information could be used for future research into other aspects of religion's involvement in British education. So, rather than adding this focus to my first research question, I created another:

2. What does this indicate about broader societal attitudes towards religion; specifically, the value supposedly placed on notions of "free individual choice" in relation to religious matters?

Details of both quantitative and qualitative elements of my analytical methods, which enable me to answer both of my research questions, are outlined next

The method of data collection and storage designed during the second iteration of my research essentially consisted of mentally coding information available on schools' websites and recording the relevant code in the correct spreadsheet column for each individual school. This was great for quantitatively analysing how many and which schools adopted different approaches, but to incorporate a qualitative analysis I needed to collect the exact language and wording used on school websites. I also wanted to retain the spreadsheet format as it had worked previously and would allow me to compare the narrative trends across different demographics.

To do this I added a column to each of the four main sections of my spreadsheet, and for each school in my sample, I copied and pasted everything that their website mentioned in relation to the relevant topic. So, in the collective worship section there was a column for everything that a school mentioned about collective worship – including their full worship policy if this was provided. The same was added for the admissions, school values and RE sections. Not only would I be able to import these columns into CAQDAS for detailed qualitative analysis, but recording this information also had the benefit of providing evidence for the answers inputted into each of the other columns. For example, if I wanted to check whether one school really did have a mixture of teachers, pupils *and* visitors leading collective worship sessions, I could check this qualitative column where everything that their website had mentioned will be stored. This is important because although I had previously been recording the exact pages that information was taken from, I came to realise that schools update their websites and so those links might break in the near future or the information posted there might be altered, which would make fact-checking difficult if not impossible.

Data analysis

My two main research questions required different analytical approaches – one more quantitative in nature and the other more qualitative.

Quantitative analysis – collective worship, RE, and admissions sections

My first research question called for a large-scale overview of how English state schools claim to approach collective worship, RE, faith admissions criteria (where relevant) and school values. As this was, to my knowledge, the first academic study to attempt such a thing on a national scale, I had no prior literature to build upon and therefore no indications as to how to conduct this part of my analysis. When designing the first iteration of my website analysis, I decided to use Microsoft Excel's pivot table function as I was already familiar with this having used it extensively for analysing data in a previous job. Although I did not complete analysis for this first iteration, I began this process during the second iteration and from this learned that it worked, so when it came to designing the third and final website analysis, I did not alter it.

The specific method was as follows:

Creating the Pivot Table

Once I had completed the process of data collection, I ensured that my spreadsheet was formatted as a table. I then clicked the "pivot table" button which can be found under the "insert" tab at the top of the screen, and after ensuring that the whole spreadsheet was highlighted, I clicked "ok." This opened a separate work page into which my pivot table appeared.

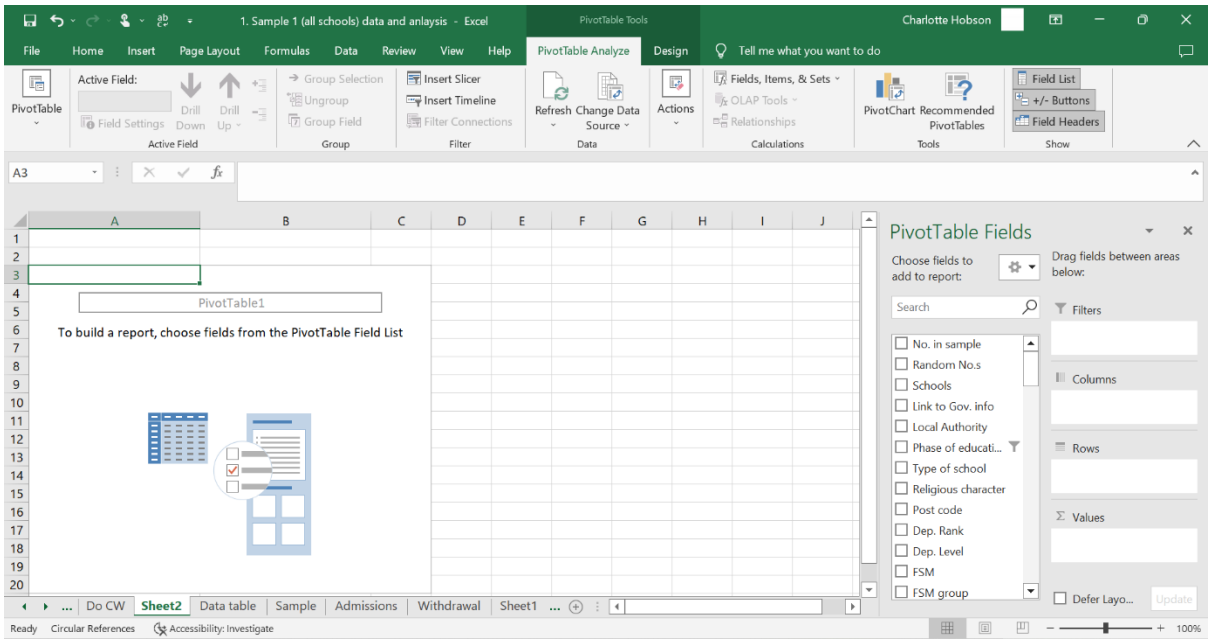


Figure 1.3 – Screenshot of Microsoft Excel's pivot table function.

Counting responses

Figure 1.3 is a screenshot of the initial Pivot Table screen. Each column from my data table appeared as a separate "field" in a list on the right side of this new page, and by this are boxes where "fields" can be dragged to create a table consisting of specific information from various parts of my complex spreadsheet. These are "filters", "columns", "rows" and "values".

For example, dragging the "phase of education" field into the "Row" box and also into the "Value" box creates a table where all the different responses inputted to this column in the spreadsheet are displayed in separate rows, and the total number of times each response features in the spreadsheet is calculated next to this.

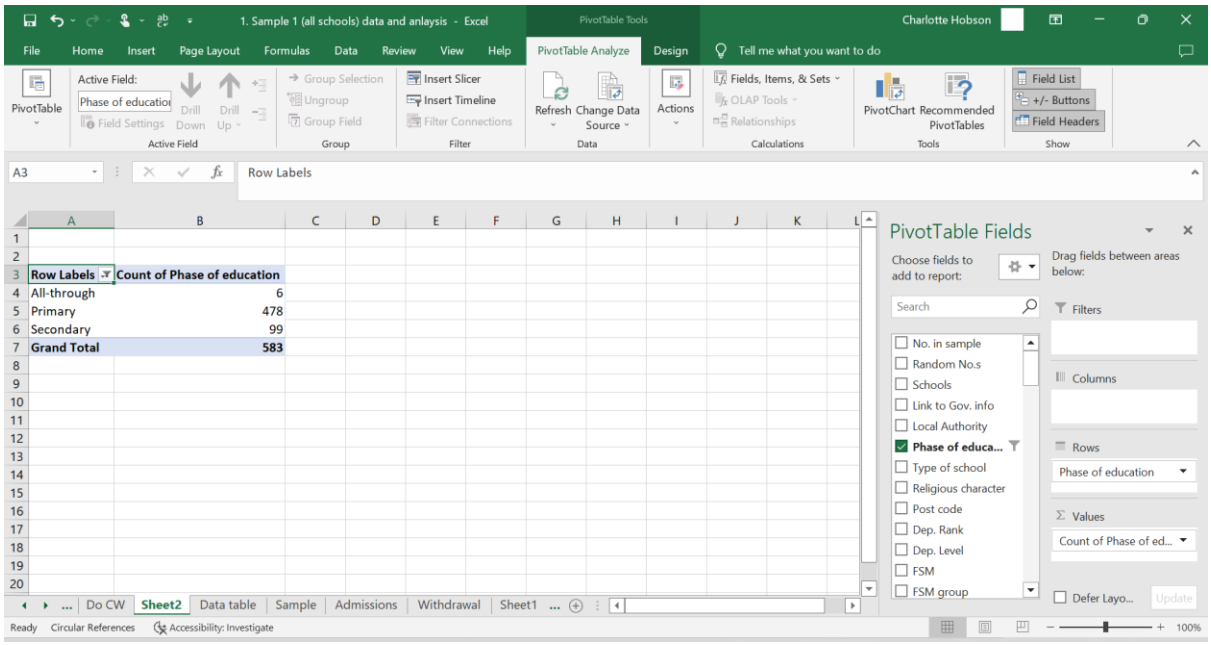


Figure 1.4 – Screenshot of Microsoft Excel's pivot table function in use during analysis of my dataset.

As Figure 1.4 shows with my "phase of education" example, the grand total of answers found in this column of my spreadsheet is 583 – one for each school in my main sample. These are grouped into three – "primary", "secondary" and "all-through" schools. If any school had a different response – for example, an incorrect spelling, it would show here as a separate row and be counted separately - hence why it was important that all responses be uniform and why I decided to input codes rather than raw text.

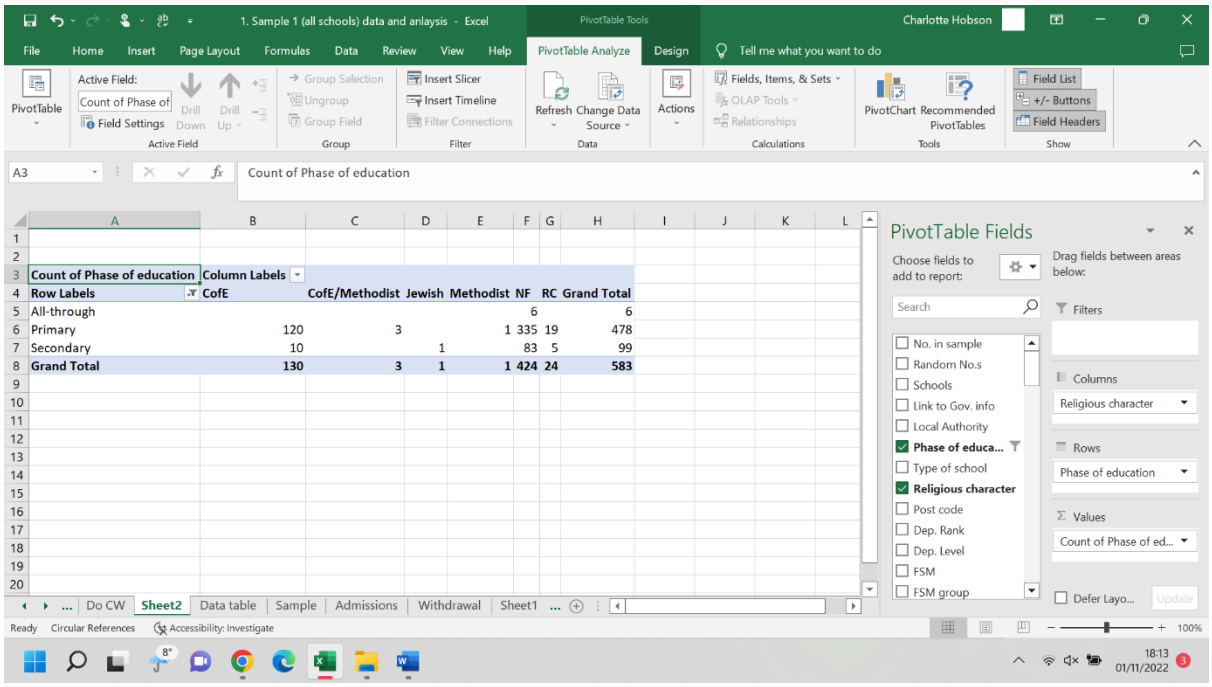
Storing and calculating percentages

Once I had generated a table I would copy and paste it into a separate page in this spreadsheet in order to store it. I then calculated the percentage of schools aligning with each response and generated graphs to represent these trends more clearly. Some of these have been inserted to this thesis in relevant chapters.

I did this for every column – except those containing the large chunks of qualitative data – in my spreadsheet, and each was stored in a separate worksheet in the spreadsheet.

Cross-comparison

As well as calculating the proportion of overall responses, the pivot table function also allows detailed cross-comparison of responses given by different types of schools. For example, going back to our pivot table generated from the "phase of education" field, if we dragged the "religious character" field into the "column" box, this shows how many schools with each religious character inputted each response to the "phase of education" column. As Figure 1.5 shows, 83 non-faith schools in my main sample were secondary schools compared to only 10 CofE schools and only 5 Roman Catholic schools.



Count of Phase of education	Column Labels						
Row Labels	CofE	CofE/Methodist	Jewish	Methodist	NF	RC	Grand Total
All-through					6		6
Primary	120	3		1 335	19		478
Secondary	10		1	83	5		99
Grand Total	130	3	1	1 424	24		583

Figure 1.5 – A second screenshot of Microsoft Excel's pivot table in use during analysis of my dataset.

This ability to cross-compare various elements of the spreadsheet, regardless of where they are situated, is what makes the pivot table so valuable for the purposes of this study.

For each column in my spreadsheet – detailed in full in Appendix 1 – I first generated a table showing the proportions of different responses given throughout the sample, and then cross-

compared the responses given by different types of school, by inputting each of the "demographic" columns to the "column" box in turn. I then copied and pasted the generated table into the relevant worksheet page, calculated percentages of each response and generated graphs where helpful. Manually analysing my data like this was time-consuming but allowed me to develop a detailed understanding of my dataset through which I was able to identify trends. I also used this method to calculate the proportion of each demographic group within my main sample – to confirm that my main sample reflected the characteristics of the target sample – and applied the same method to both my faith and non-faith booster samples. However, I had to design a different method for the columns containing larger chunks of textual data such as the collect-all columns for everything a school mentions about a certain topic, but also for the column collecting lists of school values.

Quantitative Analysis – school values lists

Some columns in the school values section of my spreadsheet were formatted similarly to those described in other sections above – having read around schools' lists of values, I inputted the relevant code or response to the spreadsheet column, drawn from a pre-generated list of potential responses. For example, I wanted to calculate how many schools linked their values lists with the infamous list of Fundamental British Values (FBVs), so one column asked if schools did this or not, and I inputted "yes" or "no" depending on the information provided online. However, I also wanted to explore if and how religion was being invoked in relation to these lists, which necessitated analysing the content of values lists. To do this, I created a column in the values section of my spreadsheet where each schools' values list would be inputted. Due to a wide diversity in the length and content of schools' values lists, Excel's Pivot Table function would not have been an efficient or time-sensitive way of identifying how many times each value was listed. Instead, I turned to qualitative analysis software, Nvivo, which allows researchers to import data directly from Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and to use its functions to identify trends within many chunks of textual data. There are lots of types of Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) that are generally highly rated among academics[222] but my decision to use Nvivo instead of any other was largely motivated by the fact that I had already worked with it briefly in a previous job – however I still needed to undergo full training to get to grips with its capabilities and explore how to best use it to suit my purposes.

To identify the most common values in schools' lists of values, I imported this column along with the demographic information for each school into Nvivo and conducted a "word frequency" query on

[222] M. L. Jones, 'Using software to analyse qualitative data', *Malaysian Journal of Qualitative Research*, 1.1 (2007), pp. 64-76.

this data. Including the demographic details meant that I could explore the types of school that tended to opt for specific values. I specified that this query should identify the 100 most common words, containing three or more letters – to help exclude common connecting words, prepositions or pronouns such as “by”, “we” and “I” – and to group results with the same “stem” together – for example “respect” and “respecting” would be counted as two examples of the same word. I ensured that this applied only to the “school values list” column of the imported spreadsheet and then edited the ”Stop Words List” to include words with three or more letters that might appear in values lists but are not values such as “and”, “like” and “they”. This ensured that the query would only count words that schools intend to list as values and not any filler text around them. After running this query I saved the findings to the project in Nvivo and downloaded them into Microsoft Excel for safe storage. Having identified the most common values, I then used the pivot table method described above to identify which types of schools tended to be associated with which of the ten most common values. I did this by creating a pivot table of the whole spreadsheet and then putting the “school values list” field into the “filter” box, and searching for all schools in the dataset that list these specific values. Filtering for one value at a time, I was able to calculate how many schools listed these values and what proportion of the whole sample, and each demographic detail, listed them, to identify trends in the types of school that were most likely to mention them. These figures were inputted into a separate work page for storage.

This was insightful but as the word frequency query only highlighted single words, it is difficult to understand what exactly schools mean when they list it as a value. To gain more insight into what schools meant with these words, I turned back to the Nvivo word frequency query and clicked on each of the top ten most commonly-cited words – only the top ten because of time limitations – which provided a list of every instance where that word is mentioned within my dataset. For example, the word “respect” is vague and could indicate many things, but when I looked at the context of each mentioning in Nvivo, many indicated what they intended to direct respect towards – “respect for the environment,” for example, or “respect for teachers”. Once identified, a code can be applied to each mention to indicate what it is directed towards. I did this for each mention of the top ten most commonly-cited values in Nvivo.

When I decided to include a more detailed qualitative analysis to my project, aiming to explore the narratives and discourses present in *how* schools described their engagements with religion, it made sense to turn to Nvivo once again.

Qualitative Analysis – all sections

My second research question explored not only *what* schools were saying they were doing, but *how* they were explaining or justifying this to readers of their website – presumably parents of current or prospective pupils. This required a more qualitative approach using larger chunks of textual data from the "collect-all" columns in each section of my spreadsheet.

Some studies describe how they used Excel to manually code interview transcripts – either using the spreadsheet format to distinguish between data and the relevant codes, or by using conditional-formatting tools to colour code chunks of text that mentioned certain themes.[223] However, I thought this would over-complicate my already comprehensive spreadsheet, so I turned to more commonplace methods of analysing large chunks of textual data – CAQDAS.

I imported the long-form columns – those into which I had copied and pasted everything that each school said about collective worship, RE, school admissions oversubscription criteria and school values – into Nvivo in separate workbooks, along with demographic information for each school. This way I could identify if there were trends in the phrases or narratives used by certain types of school – for example, primary schools versus secondary schools. If this was the sole focus of my research – which, given the amount of data collected from school websites, it probably could have been – I would have spent time manually reading through each entry and coding common phrases or words using a grounded theory approach. As it was only one portion of my already ambitious project, I utilised Nvivo's "most common words" search function to pinpoint the language that was most popular in relation to English state schools' descriptions of their engagements with religion – similar to my methods for identifying the most commonly-cited school values. As each of the four foci was inputted into a separate Nvivo workbook, I was able to identify the most common words used in relation to each topic. As with the school values query, I ensured that these ones ignored common, connecting words such as "and", "the" and "it" and to group words with the same stem. I also set the query to identify the 100 most common words and to ignore words with less than three letters.

Once the most common words had been listed, I was able to click on each one and Nvivo would generate a list of all the instances that it was used within my dataset. I then coded each instance of a word based on its immediate context on the school website and was able to cross-compare the language used by different types of school.

For example, the word "own" was commonly used in relation to schools' discussions of collective worship. It was sometimes used in phrases intending to reassure parents that "during worship, children are encouraged to develop their *own* beliefs" and at others times to state that "during

[223] Bree and Gallagher, 'Using Microsoft Excel to code and thematically analyse qualitative data: a simple, cost-effective approach' (2016), p. 2814.

worship sessions, children are encouraged to say their *own* prayers." These two phrases clearly have different meanings and were therefore coded separately – one as emphasising individual beliefs and the other as encouraging independent religious practices. Due to time restraints, I limited this coding practice to the top 10 most common words. Then, I used the pivot table function in Microsoft Excel, to filter through schools in my samples and to quantify the proportion of each school type that featured the ten most frequently cited words as discovered by Nvivo's word frequency query, in relation to each of my four foci. The findings were stored in a separate worksheet in my spreadsheet, just like all the other findings from my pivot table analyses.

There is much scope for conducting a more detailed qualitative analysis of school website data – perhaps even the data that I collected – in a future project. This version was kept brief due to time limitations. Nevertheless, this basic analysis was enough to highlight common assumptions and narratives present within school's presentations of their relationship with religion, and, by extension, to infer the wider societal attitudes towards religion underpinning these. It therefore not only adds a sociological dimension to my research making it applicable beyond England's educational community, but also provides a firm foundation to be built upon by future research.

The rest of this thesis presents and discusses the findings drawn from this final iteration of my research design, specifically highlighting but also challenging the value that contemporary English society places on the notion of individual "free choice," especially in relation to matters of religious belief and identity.

Structural Overview

When planning the structure of this thesis it initially seemed obvious that, as I had four distinct research foci – collective worship, RE, school values, and faith-related admissions criteria – with their own detailed datasets to explore, I should discuss and analyse the findings from each in separate chapters. After spending some time drafting these chapters, however, I realised that instead of constructing a thesis, I had created four stand-alone articles that were interesting but lacked a clear line of argument; the points I wished to make about the significance of "free choice" in relation to schools' engagements with religion were being repeated in each chapter, but also as it was more difficult to compare findings across each focus, my discussions also lacked depth. Consequently, I have decided to structure each chapter around a certain aspect of my overall argument, and to bring in evidence from each of the four segments of my dataset when relevant. My key findings fit the acronym "FACT" and each letter will be the focus of a separate chapter – collectively outlining the "FACTs" of religion's involvement in English state education, and exploring the implications these have for our understanding of the importance of "free choice", in broader English society, in relation

to matters of religion or spirituality. Overviews of the categories of information collected and stored in my Excel databases can be found in Appendix 1 of this thesis.

3. 'F' is for Free Choice

The first of my two research questions – "How does religion feature in the operations and activities of English state-funded schools – according to their websites?" – shaped the information that I collected from school websites; this question is broad and therefore so was the information that I collected[224]. From this, I was able to create a comprehensive database from which large-scale trends concerning religion's involvement in English education could be identified. However, the considerable size of this database also presents the – arguably positive – problem of holding more information than one doctoral thesis can explore in sufficient depth.

The second of my research questions – "What does this indicate about broader societal attitudes towards religion; specifically, the value supposedly placed on notions of "free individual choice" in relation to religious matters?" – solves this by providing a clear focus for my analysis. The dataset I have compiled can be explored from different angles and with different foci in the future, but the rest of this thesis will centre on if and how schools' self-described approaches to engaging with religion involve respect for individual religious freedoms.

This first "findings" chapter explores schools' explicit declarations on this topic – how many institutions openly declare intentions to respect and encourage pupils' freedom of choice in relation to religious matters, and how they do this, in discussing areas of school life involving religion. I first became aware of these "choice statements", as I have termed them, during the data collection phase of my research and they seemed the best place to begin exploring if and how notions of choice were invoked in schools' engagements with religion.

To explore the prevalence of "choice statements" in my sample I imported all the textual data that I had collected from school websites into the analysis software, Nvivo, compiled a list of terms that schools were likely to use when discussing children's "free choice," and conducted a word frequency query for each of these terms across all of the data in each of my four foci. The terms were: "choice", "choose", "free", "freedom", "own", "personal", "individual." This identified all instances that each term was used in my dataset, and by clicking on each instance I could view the context in which the term was used – the surrounding sentences – which enabled me to determine whether the school in question was, with this statement, explicitly declaring their commitment to protecting children's "free choice" with regards to their personal religious beliefs and identities. I discarded any instances where these terms were *not* being used in this way. I then calculated how many school websites in each of my samples were making such claims, and whether there were any trends in how

[224] See Appendix 1 for an overview of all the information I collected from school websites and inputted into my spreadsheets.

this was done or by whom. My findings are outlined below in relation to each of my four research foci.

In response to my first research question, I will show that notions of free individual choice are presented as underpinning some – but not all – schools' approaches to collective worship and RE. While some websites stated a commitment to protecting and promoting pupils' ability to form their *own* religious beliefs and to choose how to express these in collective worship and/or RE, many did not and a tiny minority – usually faith schools – overtly stated opposing intentions, hoping to instil or encourage certain beliefs and identities in their pupils. Similar declarations were rarely openly stated in relation to school values or faith-related admissions policies, even when religion appeared to feature centrally in these.

Turning to the second research question, I will explore the possibility that these findings challenge the idea that free individual choice is "sacred" or "sovereign" in relation to religious matters in contemporary English society. However, I will ultimately argue that they more clearly show this notion of choice to be highly complex and nuanced; invoked in different ways, and to differing extents, in different circumstances and by different segments of the population.

Consequently, the way that these notions are implicated in schools' engagements with religion may also be complex, so I will propose that we need to look beyond such explicit statements or declarations and explore if there are other, more subtle, ways that they are implicated in schools' engagements with religion.

Collective Worship – findings

My main sample of schools consists of 583 institutions. 576 of these mentioned, on their websites, that they regularly held some form of "school gathering" – a term I use to collectively refer to school assemblies and collective worship sessions as I found that these were often discussed together and were not always easily distinguishable from each other. 392 of *these* overtly indicated that religion featured, in some way, in these gatherings.

Of these 392 schools, 37% included explicit "choice statements" on their websites – that is, overt declarations of their intention to protect and promote pupils' freedom of choice, in relation to religious matters, during these sessions. 56.4% did not include such statements and 6.6% did, but contradicted them by also indicating that pupils' agency was limited in this respect (represented in the 'yes and no' column below).

Choice Statements

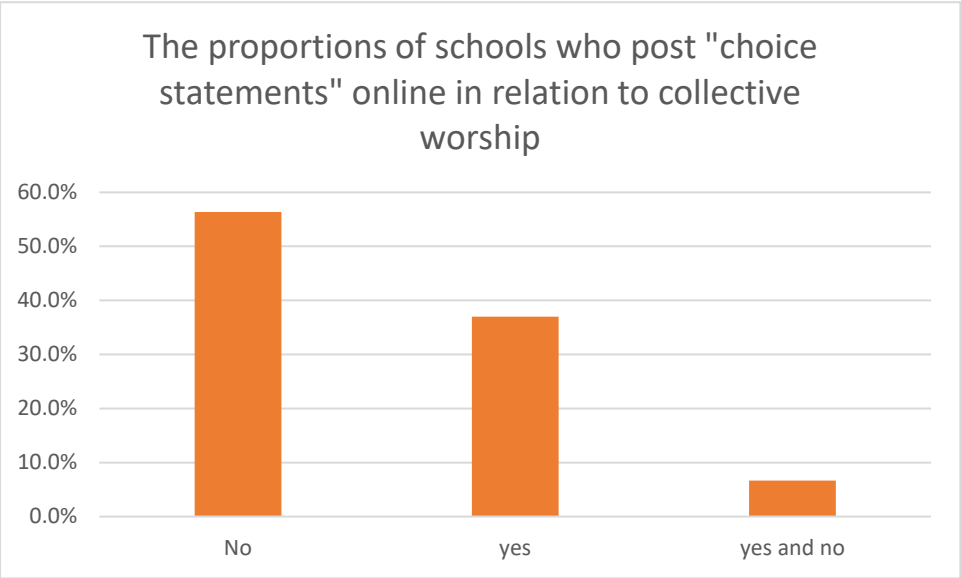


Figure 3.1 – The proportion of school websites in my main sample, who claimed to conduct gatherings with religious content, and published "choice statements" in relation to this.

"Choice Statements" generally reflected two themes – first that pupils had freedom over their own beliefs and would not be indoctrinated or converted during these sessions, and second, that pupils had some say over if and how they participated in school worship activities. 60.7% of schools with "choice statements" in relation to collective worship fit in this first group, making declarations like:

> "We wish to reassure parents that our lessons and assemblies are not designed to convert pupils or urge particular beliefs but to promote understanding and respect for a wide variety of faiths and approaches."
>
> "Worship is an integral part of the school day as it provides an opportunity for staff and students to come together as a school community to worship God and explore their individual beliefs and concerns in a spirit of care and respect for the views of all."
>
> "Weekly collective worship, allows the children to explore moral questions and current affairs, giving them a platform to voice their own ideas and opinions."

14.5% of schools with "choice statements" in relation to collective worship fit in the second group, stating things like:

> "Aims:…The children will participate enthusiastically, willingly and freely."

> "An atmosphere that can be described as reflective, contemplative or meditative allows those present to reflect on matters of importance and encourages a free response including prayer."
>
> "Prayer is a vital part of our worship. It is introduced with a form of words that invites but does not coerce pupils to participate. Our prayers are addressed to God. Pupils who prefer not to pray are encouraged to use these times to reflect on the important messages shared in our worship."

Others (24.1% of schools with choice statements in relation to collective worship) blended both themes together giving pupils agency over their private attitudes *and* public actions:

> "It is the task of collective worship to provide a setting in which the integrity of those present is not compromised but in which everyone finds something positive for themselves."
>
> "[We aim] to guide pupils towards an understanding of their own inner spiritual lives, and to enable those pupils who want to worship God to do so."

Choice statements of either kind were more common in faith schools than non-faith schools. 42.3% of institutions in my faith school booster sample, who claimed to include religious content in their gatherings, indicated that pupils' individual freedoms or religious agency would be respected and protected in these sessions while only 25.4% of non-faith schools, who appeared to involve religious content in their gatherings, made similar statements online.

The significance of pupil choice in wider society

This apparent reverence for pupils' religious agency and freedom of choice is also evidenced in previous academic studies into school worship in Britain. For example, the "fundamental conclusion" of Cheetham's study of collective worship in 11 English state schools was that the themes pervading school worship were essentially underpinned by perceptions of religion as "an individually chosen, private, practical guide to living."[225] Similarly, Shillitoe and Strhan noted that where nonreligious children encountered prayer while at school in England, these activities – including collective worship – were commonly "inflected with a particular sense of liberal individualism, with children free to participate in prayer as they liked and a sense that everyone should be afforded this right."[226] This is also demonstrated in Stern and Shillitoe's study of Prayer Spaces[227] in schools – their

[225] Richard Cheetham, 'Collective Worship: A Window into Contemporary Understandings of the Nature of Religious Belief?', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 22.2 (2000), pp. 71-81 (p. 9).
[226] Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe, ''Just leave it blank' non-religious children and their negotiation of prayer in school', *Religion*, 50.4 (2020), pp.615-635 (p. 622).
[227] 'About Us', Prayer Spaces in Schools, [n.d.] <https://prayerspacesinschools.com/> [accessed 8 April 2024].

interviews with teachers who implemented this initiative noted concerted efforts to avoid "forcing Christianity" on pupils and highlighted a tendency for the Spaces to be adapted in line with "values akin to liberal individualism in the sense that it is the individual's rights that should be considered and catered for, whilst also considering the wider needs of the group."[228] Stern and Shillitoe described this re-branding as "subversive obedience" because it is, ironically, in undermining the overtly and solely Christian aims of Prayer Spaces that schools feel able to implement the initiative. My findings suggest that this phrase may also be applicable to schools' approaches to collective worship more broadly.

Nowadays, the collective worship duty is not intended to be an evangelising tool but it was originally introduced with the aim of "re-Christianiz[ing]" society after World War II, in response to concerns that the British public were becoming less familiar and engaged with the faith.[229] Moreover, as the title suggests, it was meant to be a *collective* experience shared by the whole school population. In choosing to create sessions where children are *not* encouraged to adopt Christian beliefs and are *not* forced to participate, collectively, in Christian practices, schools appear to be ignoring – or subverting – these original intentions yet ultimately obeying the basic request that schools expose children to, and allow them to explore, religious beliefs and practices during school gatherings. In fact, instances where schools have *not* acted to prevent violations of pupils' religious freedoms and agency during gatherings have resulted in high-profile objections.[230]

There are many criticisms levelled at the collective worship duty as it currently stands, and while we cannot be sure of the motivations underpinning this apparent subversive obedience, my findings combined with those of previous studies suggest that the duty's potential to infringe on pupils' religious freedoms – both in relation to personal beliefs and practices – is a key concern among English state schools. If schools are truly reflective of the wider society – their actions reflect the concerns and preferences of the British public whom they serve – this also implies that many in broader English society hold these same concerns and attribute significance to notions of free choice and agency in relation to religious or spiritual matters.

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[228] Julian Stern and Rachael Shillitoe, 'Prayer spaces in schools: a subversion of policy implementation?', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 40.2 (2019), pp. 228-245 (p. 11).
[229] Alison Mawhinney, 'The Law on Collective Worship: the rationale then and now', in *Collective Worship and Religious Observance in Schools*, ed. By Peter Cumper and Alison Mawhinney (Peter Lang Ltd, 2018), pp. 117 – 147 (p. 130).
[230] Harriet Sherwood, 'Parents launch court action over Christian school assemblies', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/29/parents-launch-court-action-over-christian-school-assemblies> [accessed 24 June 2024].

Consequently, these findings could be used to support claims made previously by multiple academics pertaining to the "sacred" or "sovereign" nature of these notions. However, on closer inspection, my findings simultaneously appear to challenge these very assertions. While 37% of schools in my main sample, who appeared to include religious content in their gatherings, explicitly stated their intentions to align activities with neoliberal values of free choice and personal agency, many more (56.4%) did not. This does not fit with the image of a society where the ability to form one's own religious beliefs and determine the extent of one's own participation in religious practices is considered the most important priority when engaging with, or a non-negotiable element of interactions with, religion.

We would have to ask individual teachers to be sure of their individual opinions regarding the significance of pupils' religious freedoms, and if or how these inform their approaches to religious elements of school life, but we can glean some interesting insights about schools who do *not* include "choice statements" online, from my dataset. For example, only small proportions of these schools openly discuss their intention to influence pupils' religious beliefs or compel them to participate in religious practices; the majority do not state a position on this topic either way.

A minority of schools that did not include "choice statements" in relation to collective worship clearly described evangelistic intentions on their websites – twelve schools from my main sample (3.9% of those who claim to involve religious content in their gatherings). They hoped to instil specific beliefs and religious identities in pupils during collective worship:

> "Children are involved in daily acts of collective worship that may be class based, phase based or as part of the whole school community. The children attend Mass frequently and participate in other short services in the classroom or in the church. These are considered central to our distinctive Catholic ethos and the school's responsibility to help to initiate children into the Catholic faith tradition."
>
> "Through Collective Worship, symbols around the school and classroom practice we help them to learn about the loving God who made them and Jesus whose example they can follow."
>
> "We will continue to foster and deepen the children's personal relationship with God our Father daily in prayer. We do this by helping them become aware of God's Presence in their lives and of His love for them by leading them to respond to Him in a manner suited to their age."

These all appeared on the websites of faith schools, however even among my faith booster sample, they were not overwhelmingly common. Only 88 schools (25.5%) from my booster sample of faith schools, whose gatherings appeared to involve religious content, also declared intentions to shape pupils' religious beliefs during these sessions. While no non-faith schools made any equivalent statements regarding pupils' personal religious beliefs, one (0.4% of schools in my non-faith school booster sample, who claimed to involve religion in gatherings) intimated that pupils' ability to choose if and how to engage with religious elements of these sessions would be limited:

> "We ask them to be quiet and thoughtful, to listen carefully to the teachings, and to participate fully in prayer and hymns."

Instead, it was much more common across all my samples for schools to not state a position either way – to not declare their intention to respect *or* repress pupils' religious freedoms of choice.

Of the 54.8% of schools in my main sample who did *not* explicitly declare an intention to protect pupils' religious freedoms during collective worship, over 90% of these did *not* clearly state evangelising intentions either. As for my booster samples, 78.1% of faith schools and 100% of non-faith schools, who claimed to involve religion in gatherings but did not include choice statements, also did *not* declare evangelistic intent for these sessions; they simply outlined the content and scope of worship sessions with no comment on children's freedom of choice or religious agency. For example;

> "There is a statutory requirement for children to take part in an act of collective worship each day. Our policy ensures that the children have time to reflect and think during the school day. Our assembly themes are very varied and call on a variety of stories from the major world religions as well as stories with moral messages. The majority of stories are founded in the Christian traditions and beliefs."

This paints a rather complicated picture – my findings neither wholly support nor wholly contradict the idea that individual choice and agency is important in, or even central to, conceptions of religion and spirituality in modern English society. Similar findings become apparent in analysing school website descriptions of religious education (RE), too.

Religious Education – findings

Choice Statements

541 schools (92.8%) from my main sample claimed, on their websites, to include RE in their curriculum, but only 448 (77% of my main sample) provided information about this subject that could be inputted into my dataset and analysed. These figures varied slightly in my faith and non-

faith booster samples - 557 (97%) of the former and 523 (91%) of the latter mentioned, online, that they taught RE to pupils, and 492 (85.5%) of the former and 420 (73%) of the latter provided information about this subject.

It is interesting to note that many more school websites claimed to teach RE than claimed to involve religious content in school gatherings in ways that may constitute collective worship. My analysis also found that it was much more common for schools to publish "choice statements" in relation to RE than collective worship.

Using the same methods detailed above – inputting data into Nvivo, conducting a word frequency query, and then manually highlighting relevant schools – I explored the prevalence of "choice statements" in the information that school websites provided about RE. I can reveal that 71.9% of schools from my main sample who claim to teach RE, and provide information about this online, use words such as "own", "personal", "choice", "choose", "freedom", "free", "personal", "individual" to emphasise that RE lessons are not intended to infringe upon pupils' religious freedoms – specifically, their perceived ability to form their *own* religious or spiritual beliefs, opinions and identities. This is a significant increase from the 37% of schools who made similar statements in discussing school worship sessions.

Some examples include:

> "[RE] seeks to equip students not just to articulate their own responses to ultimate questions of spiritual truth but also to discover the basis of these responses. It also asks students to develop their own insights by engaging critically with responses different from their own and to come to a rational understanding of the similarities and difference between various positions. Through this critical engagement, students will be acquiring the skills to clarify and refine their own spiritual commitments."

> "Our students learn to think for themselves about their view of the world they live in. Alongside this, students have the opportunity to learn about and from other people's views, opinions and faiths."

> "At [redacted] R.E. is taught in line with the statutory requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage and National Curriculum. We follow the Bromley RE syllabus which encourages children to explore and express their own responses and personal beliefs."

> "[Redacted] aims to give students an insight into moral and ethical questions. They are encouraged to look at things from different perspectives, including religious ones, so that they are able to form and express their own opinions."

In total, 107 schools in my main sample published "choice statements" in relation to *both* collective worship and RE however, many only published these declarations in relation to *one* of these religious requirements; 215 schools in my main sample *only* provided such statements when discussing RE, and 53 *only* provided these statements when discussing collective worship.

The excerpts quoted above closely resemble many of those published in relation to collective worship, however there is one key difference; while many of the latter declare schools' concerns to protect pupils' agency over if and how they participated in these sessions, none did this in relation to RE. Where pupil choice was discussed here, the focus was solely on the adoption or formation of personal beliefs and identities.

This may be due to RE's status as an academic subject – ideally, children will study all aspects of the given curriculum in order that each pupil can be fairly assessed at the end of the year, so teachers are less able to offer pupils agency in this respect – but it could also be rooted in differences between the legislated requirements for both duties.

Official government guidance describes the aims of collective worship as:

> …to provide the opportunity for pupils to worship God, to consider spiritual and moral issues and to explore their own beliefs; to encourage participation and response, whether through active involvement in the presentation of worship or through listening to and joining in the worship offered; and to develop community spirit, promote a common ethos and shared values, and reinforce positive attitudes.[231]

In contrast, this same document states that RE is intended:

> …to develop pupils' knowledge, understanding and awareness of Christianity, as the predominant religion in Great Britain, and the other principal religions represented in the country; to encourage respect for those holding different beliefs; and to help promote pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural and mental development.[232]

[231] Department for Education, *Religious Education and Collective Worship: circular number 1/94* (1994), p.20 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/281929/Collective_worship_in_schools.pdf> [accessed 24 June 2024].
[232] Ibid., p. 12.

Consequently, while RE and collective worship are often considered to be related activities – for example, in the publication of the afore-mentioned guidance document which focuses on both in-depth – the aims and expectations attributed to each are different. Collective worship is framed as an opportunity for pupils to participate in expressions of religious belief whereas RE is intended to be an objective study *of* religions. In fact, previous research indicates that many schools adopt "phenomenological" approaches to teaching RE, where pupils are expected to "bracket out" their own value judgements or "suspend their own beliefs" while learning about salient parts of world religions.[233] If no religious practices are taking place in RE lessons, then there is no need to say that pupils can choose to not participate in these.

However, this apparent preference for objectivity in RE is also interesting for two other reasons. First, if legislation clearly expects RE to teach pupils about *others'* beliefs as opposed to shaping their personal views it is significant that so many schools feel the need to outline this online – many more than mention it in relation to collective worship where children will be engaging in religious practices and could perhaps more easily be persuaded to adopt certain beliefs. This could indicate a lack of understanding concerning the two requirements – parents are unaware that RE is not intended to influence pupils' personal beliefs, so this needs to be stated explicitly – or a particular sensitivity around the inclusion of religion in the public sphere, specifically in educational settings, so much so that schools feel a need to emphasise this to parents despite pupils' religious freedoms not technically being threatened by the RE requirements.

Second, the tendency for schools in my main sample to indicate that pupils would be able to explore and form their *own* beliefs or opinions on religious and spiritual matters during RE lessons does not completely fit with the characterisation quoted above, that many schools adopt approaches to RE which require pupils to "bracket out" or "suspen[d]" their own beliefs.[234] On the contrary, it appears that many schools, though not intending to shape pupils' views in a particular direction through these lessons, expect that introspective reflection will occur during or as a response to them. Consequently, the boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity appear to be blurred in the conducting of RE. This will be more fully explored in the next chapter, but while we would need further research with teachers and school leaders to be sure of how and why this is the case, it is possible that it has roots in the societal significance placed on notions of individual choice in relation to religious matters.

[233] Lynn Revell, 'Religious Education in England', *Numen*, 55.2-3 (2008), pp. 218-240 (p. 227).
[234] Ibid.

It is generally accepted that school websites are a key element of institutions' outward communication – a platform where parents of prospective pupils can get to know the school's aims, ethos, and operations, potentially influencing them to list the school as a preference or not, and where Ofsted inspectors can get a feel of the institution they are about to inspect, providing evidence of good practice or highlighting areas of potential concern.[235] I noted earlier in this thesis that my analysis of school website content does not necessarily reveal anything about what schools *are* doing – how they *actually* interact with and present religion – but instead, how schools want to *present* these aspects of their lives. In order to attract parents to apply for places at their institution, schools need to portray themselves in a way that will be received positively by said parents, and if schools hope to impress Ofsted, they must indicate that they fulfil their educational obligations in ways that will be perceived positively by inspectors. Consequently, the prevalence of assurances that RE will not attempt to shape pupils' personal beliefs but that it *will* provide space for them to explore and form these independently – as demonstrated in my dataset – indicates that such introspection is widely considered important; a valuable, perhaps even "sacred", element of this subject.

However, if 71.9% of schools, who offered details about how they teach RE, published "choice statements", that leaves 28.1% of schools who also provided information on this topic, that did not – a fact that simultaneously challenges such assertions about the "sacredness" of free choice in relation to religion in wider Britain.

As with website descriptions of collective worship, very few schools in my main sample who did not publish "choice statements" in relation to RE declared that they intended to shape pupils' religious beliefs or identities through these sessions. Only three institutions from my main sample did this, presenting RE lessons as vehicles through which the school's faith could be passed to children:

> "Throughout the key stages students study a variety of topics that enables them to develop their understanding of the Catholic faith and recognise the seeds of truth in other faith traditions. They gain understanding of what it means to be 'People of God' and the importance of faith in action."
>
> "[Through RE] We aim to enable children to understand how Jesus guides us through our lives."

[235] 'School inspection handbook', Ofsted (2024), paragraph 106 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/school-inspection-handbook-for-september-2023> [accessed 22 December 2024].

> "As a Catholic school, 10% of our teaching and learning time is dedicated to learning about our faith as well as the other world religions. Religion lessons and opportunities for prayer and worship are used to help the children understand their uniqueness and their role within God's family."

These all came from the websites of faith schools, but even among my faith school booster sample, such statements were far from the norm – only 10.7% of schools in this sample who claimed to teach RE and did *not* provide choice statements in relation to the subject, indicated that RE lessons were hoped to instil certain beliefs in pupils.

Instead, most schools in both my main sample, and my faith-booster sample, who did *not* include "choice statements" in relation to RE, did *not* comment on their position regarding pupils' religious freedoms, or personal agency, in describing their approach to teaching this subject. This is true of 97.6% of schools in my main sample without RE-related "choice statements", 89.3% of schools in my faith-booster sample, who also lacked such statements. These schools offered information about RE content and lesson time, but gave no indications that pupils would be encouraged to form their own views regarding such matters, or that they would be given opportunity to choose if and how to experience and respond to these lessons. For example:

> "Our Religious Education policy reflects the Derbyshire Agreed Syllabus 2014-2019 and gives our children an understanding of a wide range of faiths and what it means to believe."

> "Religious Education is taught in the school in accordance with the agreed syllabus adopted by the London Borough of Havering. The content of the syllabus reflects the fact that the religious traditions in this country are in the main Christian. Account is taken however, of the teaching and practices of other religions including Jewish and Islamic faiths. The content is not based on the teaching of any particular Christian denomination. A copy of the agreed syllabus is available for inspection."

> "Our RE teaching takes account of the Walsall Agreed Syllabus. It presents opportunities for children to study the major faiths represented across the UK and the World. It provides for the development of a growing awareness of belonging to a larger community and also a deepening approach to issues arising from experiences of life."

So far, these findings have confusing implications for the consensus, often promoted among sociologists of religion, that individual choice, freedom, and agency are central to contemporary British society's perceptions of and engagements with religion. On one hand my database suggests that many schools present their approaches to religious elements of school life as prioritising

individual experiences and expressions of religion, and respecting pupils' religious or spiritual agency, thereby indicating that these neoliberal notions of individualistic or privatised religiosity are prevalent and highly valued by significant portions of the British public. Yet, on the other hand it also highlights instances where these concerns are directly contravened, and many more instances of them not appearing to be acknowledged at all.

Perhaps, instead of either wholeheartedly supporting or challenging these claims, my findings here demonstrate the complexity and nuance of this matter. The variations in if and how schools declare their intentions to protect and promote pupils' religious freedom of choice show that notions of individual agency in relation to religious or spiritual issues are not prioritised to the same extent, or in the same way, by all institutions or in all circumstances. If schools are reflective of the norms and ideals of wider society, this suggests that religious agency and free choice is similarly complex and variegated among the wider British population. This complexity is further demonstrated by the fact that some schools in my samples provided choice statements in relation to RE but not collective worship and vice versa, indicating that although official legislation connects the two duties, many schools approach them in very different ways and the notion of free individual choice is considered relevant in each to varying degrees, and for different reasons.

The picture becomes even more confusing when we explore school websites' discourse on faith-related admissions policies where it becomes clear that the religious freedoms of pupils and parents are often not acknowledged or prioritised equally.

Faith-related admissions criteria – findings

The Conservative Government introduced considerable reforms to the English education system with the 1988 Education Reform Act. This included an overhaul of school admissions processes which was presented as aiming to improve "parental choice."[236] Many aspects of these reforms are still in place today – for example, parents are still expected to declare which schools in their local area they would prefer their child to attend, rather than simply being allocated a place at the nearest institution. However, while these amendments did in theory improve parents' control over their children's education, another key motivation behind their introduction was the improvement of educational standards; it was assumed that most parents would want to send their children to the best schools and so, under this system, institutions would have to maintain high standards to attract pupils and the related government funding. Consequently, the endurance of this marketized structure in English education is not necessarily proof that notions of individual agency and choice

[236] Anne West, Eleanor Barham and Audrey Hind, 'Secondary school admissions in England 2001 to 2008: changing legislation, policy and practice', *Oxford Review of Education*, 37.1 (2011), pp.1-20 (p. 3).

are socially significant in modern Britain, but, the specific permission for faith schools, when oversubscribed, to consider applicants' religious backgrounds when determining whom to offer places – introduced as part of these broader educational reforms – could be.

Parents in the UK have legal rights and freedoms in relation to how they raise their children and if and how religion features in this; schedule 1, part II, Article 2, of the 1998 Human Rights Act notes that the State "shall respect the right of parents to ensure [that] education and teaching [of their children is] in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions"[237] and paragraph 2 of Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that "Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents…to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right [to freedom of thought conscience and religion] in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child."[238] The introduction of faith-related admissions criteria, in some state-funded faith schools, effectively reserves places at such schools for demonstrably religious families and thereby boosts religious parents' ability to choose how their children's religious and spiritual views and identities should be nurtured. Consequently, it stems directly from, and is indicative of, a common conception that individual agency and choice in relation to religious matters is highly significant.[239]

My faith-school booster sample consists of 575 randomly selected, state-funded faith schools in England. My dataset shows that 348 of these included faith-related criteria in their oversubscription admissions policies as of 2020/21, when I collected this information from their websites. This amounts to 61% of faith schools in this nationally representative sample. A more detailed exploration of *how* they do this is included in the next few chapters, but this figure alone could indicate that at least for these schools, notions of individual choice in relation to religious matters – parents' ability to control the religious elements of their children's upbringing – are considered highly important; perhaps even "sacred" given that they are implemented in the face of much vocal criticism.[240] However, these same admissions procedures simultaneously overlook and infringe on *pupils'* religious agency – their ability to determine if and how they interact with religion, what forms of religion or spirituality they encounter, and how this will feature in their education. Consequently,

[237] *Human Rights Act 1998,* Schedule 1, Part II, Article 2 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1/part/II/chapter/2#:~:text=No%20person%20shall%20be%20denied,own%20religious%20and%20philosophical%20convictions.> [accessed 22 December 2024].
[238] 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', United Nations, [n.d], <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> [accessed 22 December 2024].
[239] Burgess, Greaves and Vignoles, *School Places: A Fair Choice?* (2020), p. 2.
[240] 'Personal testimonies and media reports of religious discrimination in admissions', Fair Admissions Campaign [n.d.] <https://fairadmissions.org.uk/why-is-this-an-issue/case-studies/> [accessed 22 December 2024].

it indicates that while notions of religious choice may be significant to some in modern Britain, they are expected to apply differently to different demographic groups – in this case, parents' religious agency is apparently prioritized over that of their children.

Although no national survey of faith-related admissions criteria has been conducted on English state schools, it is generally thought that the factors most commonly considered by schools as evidence of an applicant's religious connections are whether they have been formally inducted into a religious group – for example, via baptism – or whether they have regularly participated in religious practices – for example, attending church services – for a set length of time.[241] Analysis of my dataset supports these assumptions.

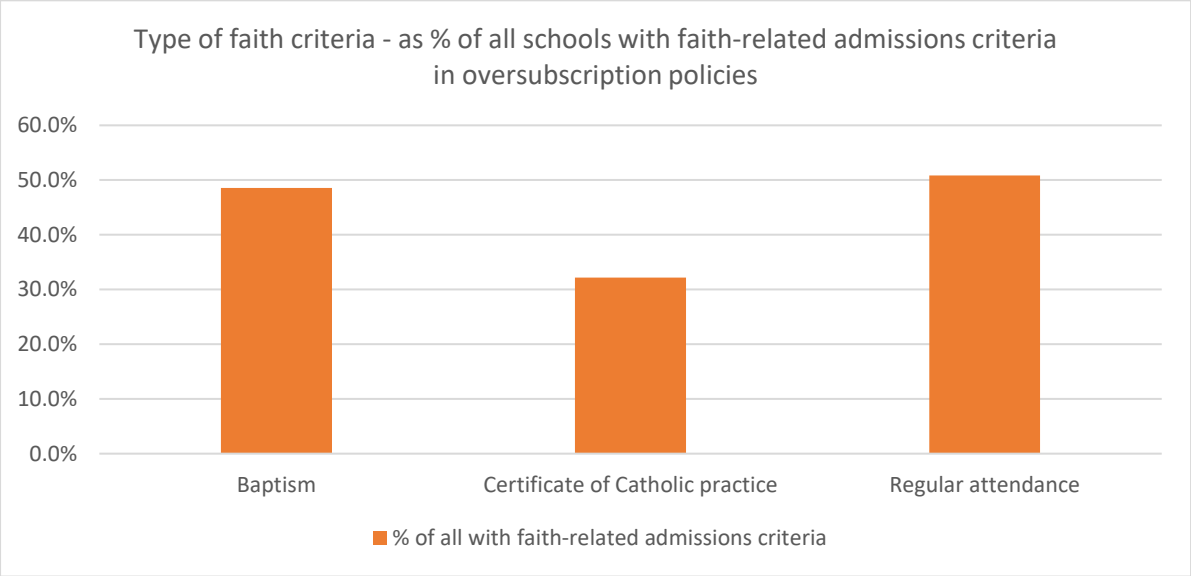

Figure 3.2: The most common types of faith-related criteria considered by English state schools – as percentages of all schools in my faith booster sample with faith-related criteria in oversubscription policies.

As Figure 3.2 shows, all schools in my faith school booster sample who included faith-related criteria in their oversubscription admissions policies listed either "baptism," "regular attendance at religious services," and/or the "Certificate of Catholic Practice" as the faith-related criterion/a that they considered when allocating places to applicants; all factors that the pupil applicants themselves likely have little to no influence over. In the vast majority of cases, it will be parents or guardians deciding if their children will attend church regularly, be baptised, or meet the requirements for the Certificate of Catholic Practice, and parents or guardians who facilitate these activities or milestones.

[241] Humanists UK, *Religion in Schools: a guide for non-religious parents and young people in England* (Humanists UK, 2023) <https://humanists.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023-14-04-GH-guide-for-non-religious-parents-Eng-V2-web.pdf> [accessed 22 December 2024].

It is also the parents or guardians who formally submit school preferences to the local authority – children may be asked for their opinion, but the forms must be completed by their parents.

Multiple academic studies show that children do not necessarily just passively adopt the religious beliefs and identities of those around them – including their parents – but instead, many are 'actively involved in the negotiation of the competing influences in the construction of their religious identities'.[242] They are "social actors in their own right, capable of actively constructing and determining their own social lives."[243] However, my dataset combined with other existing studies in this area show that many schools' oversubscription admissions policies do not even acknowledge that pupils may have the capacity for such agency, let alone try to promote or protect it. This creates an interesting contradiction with the many "choice statements" that these same schools publish in relation to collective worship and RE.

194 schools from my faith booster sample, who included faith-related admissions criteria in their policies, also published "choice statements" in relation to their version of collective worship and 146 who implemented faith-related admissions criteria published "choice statements" in discussing RE. These institutions are consequently giving mixed signals regarding their attitudes towards pupils' religious freedoms of choice – appearing to acknowledge and respect pupils' freedoms in some circumstances while also directly infringing on and ignoring them in their admissions procedures. Furthermore, subsequent chapters of this thesis will show that many more schools indicate respect for pupils' religious agency in ways other than explicit "choice statements", so it is possible that even when institutions with faith-related admissions criteria do *not* publish "choice statements" in relation to RE or school worship, their approaches to pupils' religious agency are still confusing and perhaps contradictory, prioritizing pupils' rights in some aspects of school life but in others, neglecting them in favour of aligning activities with parents' perceived rights.

This apparent tension between parents' and pupils' religious freedoms of choice is not particularly unique or surprising as there are always tensions between the rights and freedoms of different segments of the population – no single demographic group can ever have completely unlimited rights and often, limits are imposed on each group by *other* such demographic groups exercising *their* respective rights. Take the protections granted in the 2010 Equality Act for example, conflicts between religious individuals' rights to freedom of conscience and belief and homosexual

[242] Peter Hopkins, Elizabeth Olson, Rachel Pain and Giselle Vincett, 'Mapping Intergenerationalities: the formation of youthful religiosities', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 36.2 (2011), pp. 314-327 (pp. 322-325).

[243] Allison Prout and Alan James, 'A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems' in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, eds., Allison James and Alan Prout, (Falmer Press, 1997), pp. 7-32.

individuals' rights to be free from discrimination based on their sexuality are well-documented;[244] in exercising their individual rights, both groups can infringe on the other's freedoms. When this occurs, there is no set hierarchy of rights to determine who should be able to exercise their rights even if they infringe on others, instead, when tensions arise these are considered and resolved on a case-by-case basis – in fact, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has previously described their work as a "constant search" for "balance between the fundamental rights of each individual."[245] The limits placed upon religious freedoms in English educational settings will be explored in the final chapter of this thesis, but I mention this here because it highlights another layer of complexity in how notions of individual choice are invoked in relation to religious and spiritual matters both in schools and, by extension, in wider British society. Not only do institutions claim to promote and protect religious agency in different ways, and to different extents in different circumstances, but they also appear to approach this differently in relation to different population groups – prioritizing some over others, or granting some groups freedoms that infringe on those of others. Moreover, given the fluid nature of individual rights – the lack of a hierarchy stipulating that certain groups' rights should always be prioritized above certain other groups – even this trend is not simple. Further analysis of my dataset and existing research on faith-related admissions policies in English state-funded schools suggests that parents' religious rights are not *always* successfully protected in the admissions process, and they do not *always* appear to be considered more important than those of pupils; there is also nuance and variation here.

The practice of allowing faith schools to allocate places to children based on their religious background is highly criticised for, among other things, significantly diminishing the options available to socio-economically deprived families who are less likely to be able to understand complicated admissions policies and meet the requirements of faith-related criteria.[246] Therefore, even if schools wish to protect parental freedoms via these admissions procedures, it is possible that many are not successful in achieving this. Additionally, attempts to encourage pupils to explore their *own* beliefs during collective worship and RE sessions – which this chapter has so-far suggested are relatively commonplace among English state-funded schools – could also be argued to, albeit unintentionally, undermine or limit parents' control over their children's religious experiences and views.

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[244] 'Lee (Respondent) v Ashers Baking Company Ltd and others (Appellants) (Northern Ireland)', UK Supreme Court (2017) <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2017-0020.html> [accessed 22 December 2024].
[245] Chassagnou and Others v France Applications Nos 25088/94, 28331/95 and 28443/95, Merits, 29 April 1999, at para 113 – cited in Stijn Smet, 'On the Existence and Nature of Conflicts between Human Rights at the European Court of Human Rights' *Human Rights Law Review,* 17 (2017), pp. 499-521, (p.501).
[246] West, Anne, Audrey Hind and Hazel Pennell, 'School admissions and 'selection' in comprehensive schools: policy and practice,' *Oxford Review of Education*, 30.3 (2004), pp. 347-369 (p. 348).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, though many schools openly stated their desire to protect pupils' agency in collective worship and RE – the "choice statements" discussed previously in this chapter – no schools in any of my samples published any equivalent declarations in relation to parental religious freedoms when explaining their admissions policies, even where controversial faith-related admissions criteria were included in these. Consequently, legislation concerning faith-related admissions criteria may have roots in notions that parents should have freedom to decide how their children will be raised, and how religion will feature in this, but none of the school websites I analysed overtly mentioned this or used it to explain or justify their inclusion of faith-related admissions criteria; in fact, I found that schools generally did not offer any explanations or justifications of their oversubscription policies at all. We cannot draw firm conclusions about schools' attitudes towards parental freedoms from this – the lack of "choice statements" does not prove that they do not take parents' religious freedoms seriously, for example – but it is interesting that schools choose not to openly declare their position here when many do make such declarations regarding *pupils'* religious freedoms; especially if notions of individual choice are so important in relation to religious matters, for many in wider British society.

Consequently, while the presence of "choice statements" on many English state schools' websites indicates that notions of individual freedoms and religious agency are perceived as important for significant proportions of institutions and, by extension, British society, they do not provide overwhelming evidence that this ability to choose or determine one's own religious beliefs and identity is either "sacred" or "sovereign". Instead, the main conclusion that we can draw so far concerns the complexity and nuance that surrounds these notions. Many schools do not overtly declare a commitment to protecting pupils' religious freedoms and some explicitly state opposing intentions either in stating that they want to shape pupils' personal beliefs during collective worship or RE sessions, or in implementing faith-related admissions policies that fail to acknowledge or grant authority to children's religious agency. However, neither do they emphasise intentions to promote and respect *parents'* freedoms of choice – their rights to decide if and how to involve religion in their children's upbringing. Schools do not openly declare this as a concern or motivating factor behind their chosen policies, and in framing worship and RE sessions as nurturing *pupils'* religious agency and freedom to form their own views, they are arguably indicating that parents do not have ultimate control on this area of pupils' lives.

The final section of this chapter will turn to the fourth of my research foci – school values. The notion that individuals should be free to choose their own religious beliefs and identities could be described as a "value" for many in modern British society. There is no agreed-upon definition of a "value", but J. M. Halstead offers a helpful exposition, suggesting that values are:

> "Principles, fundamental convictions, ideals, standards or life stances which act as general guides to behaviour, or as points of reference in decision making or the evaluation of beliefs or action and which are closely connected to personal integrity and personal identity".[247]

If free individual choice *is* an important value in contemporary British society, we might expect it to be featured in schools' self-selected lists of values; however my analysis of this segment of my dataset reveals that this is overwhelmingly not the case. Most schools do not indicate that pupils will have space to exercise their religious freedoms in relation to religious school values, and notions of individuality and choice are rarely listed as core school values in and of themselves.

School values – findings

My dataset demonstrates that pupils' religious agency is rarely associated with school values on institutions' websites. This is largely because most schools in my samples, including faith schools, did not associate their values lists with religion or spirituality in any way.

560 of the 583 schools in my main sample provided lists of their self-selected school values online. Despite the historical connections between religion and values education outlined in the introductory chapter of this thesis, only 5% of these schools included explicitly religious values – those directly referring to a religious tradition, religious teachings, or acts of holding and practising religious beliefs – in their lists of values. These are featured in Table 3.1. Trends pertaining to the types of schools listing these will be explored in more detail in the fifth chapter of this thesis, "'C' is for Contrasting Approaches," but the focus of this chapter is on if and how notions of free choice and

Explicitly religious value	Percent of websites in my main sample that list these as a School Value
Faith	2.4%
Love of God/Agape	0.7%
Koinoia	0.7%
Following Jesus	0.5%
Creation	0.2%
Religious integrity	0.2%
Holiness	0.2%
Prophetic	0.2%
Motivated by Christ	0.2%
Believe	0.2%
Witness	0.2%
Fruit of the spirit	0.2%
Good works	0.2%

Table 3.1 – Explicitly religious values as listed in schools' values lists, and the percentage of schools in my main sample, who provide values lists online, and include these in them

[247] J. M Halstead, 'Values and Values Education in Schools,' in *Values in Education and Education in Values*, eds., J. Mark Halstead and Monica J. Taylor, (Falmer, 1995), pp. 3-14 (p. 5).

religious agency are implicated in school values discourse. Analysis of my dataset shows that any such implications were rare.

Just over half (53%) of the small number of schools in my main sample, who included explicitly religious values in their list, also indicated in the discourse surrounding these lists that children's individuality or independence was important to them. Some examples of this are:

> "Christian values are embodied in all that we do and we encourage individual choice and responsibility."
>
> "We are a friendly, happy, Catholic school, where everyone is valued for their individuality and special gifts."
>
> "With Christ at the centre, children are at the heart of every decision we make to ensure that they are happy, independent and confident."

But none, including the above quoted schools, declared pupils would be able to exercise this independence and agency to decide how to respond to the school's list of values, including any explicitly religious ones. Using the same Nvivo word query technique described earlier in this chapter, I noted a distinct lack of "choice statements" declaring schools' commitment to enabling pupils to form their *own* values or their *own responses* to the values that the school was promoting. Instead, all websites give the impression that school values are expected to be wholeheartedly adopted and adhered to, by all pupils.

It is worth noting here that this sample of schools with explicitly religious values is very small, and it is possible that some institutions not included in my samples *do* include explicitly religious values in their lists *and* publish "choice statements" of some form, stating their commitment to protecting pupils' agency over how they respond to these. However, my analysis also highlighted two other ways in which school values can be associated with religion, which increase the sample size significantly and still, none of these associated "choice statements" with their values lists.

The first of these two ways is via the label attributed to schools' lists – for example, schools presenting their lists as "Christian values" or "gospel values" instead of simply "school values". The second is by referencing religious teachings or prohibitions to justify their selection – for example, stating that the school's values are supported by specific Bible verses. 14% of schools from the 561 in my main sample who offered values lists online associated them with religion via the first way, and 6% via the second. In doing so, these schools referenced religion in their values lists despite their actual values not themselves being explicitly religious. If we group together all schools from my main sample whose values are associated with religion via any of these three ways – explicitly

religious values, religious labels or religious justifications – this amounts to 142 schools. Textual analysis of these lists and surrounding discourse shows that none of these published "choice statements" declaring any concerns about protecting pupils' religious agency here.

Many (38%) indicated that pupils would be encouraged to adopt the school's religious values – an approach that directly challenges any suggestions that religion, in modern British society, is widely treated as a private and highly individualised aspect of our identities, or that personal free choice in relation to it is a "sacred value." Some examples include:

> "We are committed to providing an education of the highest quality within the context of Christian belief and practice. We encourage an understanding of the meaning and significance of faith, and promote Christian values through the experience we offer to all our pupils."
>
> "The school is guided by our adherence to the teachings, educational ideas and policies of the Rebbe and aims to instil in the pupils Chabad-Lubavitch Chassidic values and ideals."
>
> "Our curriculum and ethos instil the Gospel values in our children, teaching them to be kind, caring, forgiving and respectful young people."
>
> "Our ultimate aim is to enable our children to be good citizens here and in the kingdom of God, to sow seeds based on Christ's commandments 'to love God and love one another', providing an education that will help equip them for life, giving values which will shape their growth and development as human beings long after they leave."
>
> "We want all of our children to leave our school with the highest levels of achievement of which they are capable, feeling confident in themselves and their abilities and with Christian values that enable them to live amicably with others and make a contribution to society."

In fact, "choice statements" were rare in relation to *all* school values lists that my research collected, regardless of whether they were associated with religion or not – it is not only religious values that pupils have limited agency over whether and how they respond to them, but *all* school values.

Only 26% of schools in my main sample, that provided values lists online mentioned that they recognised pupils' individuality or aimed to develop their independence and celebrate their uniqueness in the discourse surrounding these lists. For example:

> "Children are challenged and encouraged to consider their own values and beliefs through our school motto of 'Aspire, Believe, Achieve … to be the best that we can be'."

> "We see value in investing in the creation of a positive culture in our school, so that students are in a safe environment where choices and freedoms are encouraged. At [redacted] we believe that valuing choice and freedom in daily school life will foster a value for individual liberty as the students embark upon their adult lives."

A small minority of others (2.5% of schools in my main sample that provided values lists) claimed that pupils were involved in the process of creating the school's values list:

> "We believe in 6 core values which underpin all that we do at school. These values were created by the staff, children, governors, parents and local community of [redacted] and we take care to embed them into all areas of our learning at all times. Our core values are: Success, Perseverance, Ambition, Respect, Creativity and Independence."

However, these schools also often stated that these values, which were partially selected by children, were then expected to be adopted by all subsequent pupils, thereby both acknowledging children's agency in identifying positive values and overriding this at the same time. For example:

> "At [redacted] our values are at the heart of all that we do. Together, children, parents, staff and the wider community have chosen the values which are the most important to us. As a school, we have a commitment to ensuring that all children leave [redacted] with six core values which will help shape them as excellent citizens and the role models of the future."

More commonly – 73.6% of schools in my main sample, who provided values lists online – schools indicated that pupils were expected to adopt or follow the values outlined by the school, with little to no freedom to challenge or question this expectation:

> "These are the values that we strive to instil in all of the pupils that attend [redacted] Primary."

> "Each half term we focus one of the values and its characteristics and apply it in our lives - in the classroom, in the playground and at home."

In fact, many schools mentioned their values lists in behaviour policies to outline the parameters of acceptable behaviour and highlight desirable characteristics or attitudes that pupils should strive for. Consequently, school values became associated with discipline and not only are children expected to adopt them, but they are rewarded for acting in accordance with them and punished for not.

> "- A maximum of 1 Dojo will be awarded at once and these will be awarded for demonstrating one of our Core values:
>
> • Aspiration

• Challenge

• Courage

• Kindness

• Resilience"

A more detailed example is provided by another school in their Behaviour Management Policy which clearly indicates that the school's list of values are expected to be treated similarly to school rules:

> "Our values underpin our expectations of all aspects of the behaviour of young people and adults… Good behaviour in school is central to a good education, as stressed in the current guidance from the Department of Education."

Students are then expected to sign an agreement;

> "I, as a student at [redacted], will support the values and ethos of the school, as set out in the Behaviour Policy and in our agreed Code of Conduct, 'Our Learning Community'."

Finally, if individual choice and religious agency is considered so important in wider society, and if this is replicated in schools, we might expect to see this reflected in the values that they list. However, my dataset shows that very few schools chose to promote values relating to individuality or independent choice as is demonstrated in Table 3.2.

Free choice–related values	**Percent of websites in my main sample listing school values relating to individuality/choice**
Making choices	0.9%
Freedom	1.6%
Personal development	0.7%
Personal responsibility	0.5%
Individuality	4.5%
Individual liberty	1.8%
Liberty	0.4%

Table 3.2– Individualistic values as listed in schools' values lists, and the percentage of schools in my main sample who provide values lists online, and include these in them.

As with previous sections of this chapter, these findings could suggest that individual choice is not as "sacred" or "sovereign" in contemporary British society as has previously been claimed. However, it is also important to acknowledge the context in which schools are operating.

Schools have a responsibility to ensure that pupils develop into positive future citizens and part of this involves ensuring that they develop values and views that will ensure this. Consequently, just as they cannot let pupils attend and engage in RE lessons however, they wish if they want to keep order and achieve attainment targets, neither can they allow pupils free rein over the values – attitudes and behaviours – they develop and demonstrate, if they wish to ensure good behaviour for the benefit of the school community but also to fulfil citizenship duties. Clearly, schools have a range of responsibilities to keep and protecting or promoting pupils' religious freedoms, or even their broader independence and agency, cannot always be top priority.

There is also an interesting discussion to be had, based on the findings presented here, about the differences in society's perceptions and treatment of personal religious beliefs and personal values. It seems that children are more often granted agency concerning their personal religious beliefs than they are with their personal values even if these are connected subtly or overtly with religious beliefs and worldviews. This is despite the fact that much discourse surrounding personal values in wider society indicates that these are widely perceived as private and individually-formed, similarly to personal religious beliefs. For example, typing "my values" into Google generates thousands of results offering quizzes and tests to help individuals "discover" their personal values;[248] not trying to tell anybody what their values *should* be. It is therefore striking that schools appear to invoke such different narratives in relation to each of these matters - the school websites that I analysed tended to be concerned with highlighting their commitment to preserving pupils' free choice in relation to religion, but more willing to indicate that they consciously attempted to shape children's personal values.

In one way, this emphasises that notions of choice are indeed considered important in relation to religious matters because they are clearly *not* central in approaches to values education. In recent years, talk of "values" has been increasingly introduced to RE and collective worship. Rather than these solely focusing on *religious* teachings and experiences, some have suggested[249] – and the

[248] 'What Are Your Values?' Mindtools [n.d.] <https://www.mindtools.com/a5eygum/what-are-your-values> [accessed 22 December 2024].
[249] Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead, *A New Settlement Revised: Religion and Belief in Schools* (Westminster Faith Debates, 2017), p. 19, <https://d3hgrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/615b4ef7da3cc/content/pages/documents/re-newsetrevised-pdf-2018.pdf> [accessed 6 December 2024].

Welsh government recently implemented something similar[250] – that they should also teach and generate discussion about broader personal values. It will be interesting to see how this apparent distinction in the centrality of individuality and free choice, in relation to religious matters and personal values, will develop as more institutions join this trend.

Discussion – broadening the research focus

In summary, some schools in my main sample clearly stated that where religion was involved in school life, pupils' agency regarding their personal beliefs and identities, and if and how they participated in religious practices, would not be infringed upon. However, many did not – and some even stated opposing intentions; openly seeking to influence pupils' religious beliefs and identities, or expecting them to participate in collective religious practices fully and unquestioningly. Further complicating matters, despite faith-related oversubscription admissions policies being rooted in desires to improve parental "choice" and freedoms regarding how they raise and educate their children, none of the websites that I studied made any mention of if or how these policies were intended to promote or protect pupils' religious freedoms – likely because in practice, they do not – and even though parental freedoms of choice were central in the introduction of this legislation, schools did not explicitly state a desire to promote or protect these, either. Finally, "choice statements" were also absent from descriptions of school values, and neoliberal values emphasising the significance of the individual were not commonly listed in lists of school values either.

Has the importance of religious free choice been over-stated?

If schools are indeed reflective of wider society's prominent concerns and attitudes, one could argue that because most schools in my samples did not explicitly declare a commitment to protecting pupils' religious freedoms in relation to any areas of school life where religion features (or is likely to feature) the notion of "free choice" as a "sacred" or "sovereign" value in relation to religious matters in modern, English society, is over-stated. However, to do so would be over-simplifying the matter.

According to philosopher Edwin Hartman, there are many reasons why individuals' actions may not completely align with their personal values. He states that:

> "Most of us cannot state our values and their implications in a coherent and airtight way; hence unanswerable questions arise about whether we really hold this or that

[250] 'Religion, Values and Ethics replaces 'Religious Education' under Curriculum for Wales', Welsh Government (2022) <https://educationwales.blog.gov.wales/2022/07/19/religion-values-and-ethics-replaces-religious-education-under-curriculum-for-wales/> [accessed 22 December 2024].

> value…nobody is completely rational, we cannot always know whether a failure to act on a value is a failure of rationality, an absence of the value in question, or a simple lapse".[251]

Organisations – including schools – often have more clearly-curated values, but they are still run by humans and they operate in circumstances where multiple complex factors usually influence actions. Schools have lots of decisions to make regarding what they publish online, for those who choose to publish "choice statements" declaring their commitment to protecting and promoting pupils' religious agency, this could be argued to be underpinned by this neoliberal value placed on individual choice. However, many other factors will be involved in these decisions – legal requirements outlining what must be included online, stipulations made by their overarching Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) or local authority that must be adhered to, the expected interests and preferences of parents to whom the websites are directed, and resource limitations pertaining to the creation and curation of the website space. Consequently, if schools do not make "choice statements" declaring their commitment to protecting pupils' religious agency, this is not definitive proof that this is not an important value for them, or indeed for wider British society; it is entirely possible that attention was more focused on other factors.

Finally, it is also possible that the notion of protecting individual freedoms of choice in relation to religious matters is *so* important that it is taken for granted and schools do not deem it necessary to declare their position on it because it is widely-assumed that it will be respected. For example, schools also did not feel the need to state that their RE lessons would not be promoting extremist religious beliefs or inducting children into terrorist gangs – this much is assumed to be understood without needing to be spelled-out – and perhaps it is the same with the notion of preserving pupils' free agency and choice in relation to personal religious beliefs and practices.

We would need to interview school leaders and teachers to fully understand how these – and other – factors influence the ways that pupils' religious agency is acknowledged and respected in school activities. However, my findings neither appear to completely support, nor completely falsify suggestions that "free choice" in this respect is highly important, even "sacred", within broader English society; they highlight that this notion is highly complex and nuanced, prioritised and expressed differently in different situations and by different segments of the population. To state that it is a sacred value in English society is not to state that every citizen holds it to be equally important, or embodies it in exactly the same way but that the majority perceive it to be highly

[251] Edwin Hartman, *Conceptual Foundations of Organization Theory* (Ballinger, 1988), p. 75.

important or non-negotiable. I still might be able to do this based on my dataset; just not by looking for and counting overt declarations on school websites – by looking for more subtle connections.

When I started analysing my dataset I was not solely looking for evidence of liberal individualistic values in schools' self-described approaches to religion. My first research question is broad and as a result, I collected a wide range of information from school websites and analysed it to identify broad themes present within their discussions of religious elements of school life. The next chapters will show that two of the most common trends that I noted in this analysis could, on closer reflection, subtly demonstrate schools' commitment to preserving and promoting pupils' religious agency and freedom of choice despite not openly stating that this is the case.

4. 'A' is for Ambiguity

The previous chapter revealed that explicit declarations of schools' commitment to liberal and individualistic values are less common, in websites' descriptions of religious elements of school life, than one might initially expect given the generally-accepted notion that modern British society considers free individual choice to be highly important – even "sacred" – in relation to religious matters. However, rather than conclude that my dataset challenges these assertions, the next two chapters will explore two more common trends demonstrated by schools in my samples which appear to implicitly indicate schools' commitment to values of individual liberalism, at least in relation to religious matters. The first of these trends, outlined in this present chapter, is ambiguity; websites in my dataset were often unclear about the religious content and intent of certain aspects of school life.

Considering the increasing prevalence of nonreligious identification[252] and the declining levels of Christian belief and practice among the British public,[253] as well as the tensions over if and how religion should feature in English state schooling[254] and the competitive marketization of these institutions,[255] one might expect schools to provide clear overviews of exactly how and when pupils will encounter and explore religious beliefs, practices, and traditions at their institution. Alternatively, as legislation does not prescribe specific approaches for schools to follow when fulfilling religious requirements, and given that enforcement of these requirements does not always appear to be high on government or inspectoral agendas,[256] one might expect schools to present all aspects of school life as completely secular, severing any overt connections with religion in an attempt to appeal to Britain's apparently nonreligious majority. However, analysis of my dataset indicates that most English state schools do not take either path; their descriptions of collective

[252] J. Curtice and others, *British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report* (NatCen, 2019), p. 4 <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39363/bsa_36.pdf> [accessed 12 March 2024].
[253] 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021', Office for National Statistics (2022) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021> [accessed 11 March 2024].
[254] 'Schools and education' Humanists UK, [n.d.] <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/> [accessed 25 August 2024]; 'Declaration of Aims', Accord Coalition, (2010) <https://accordcoalition.org.uk/aims/> [accessed 25 August 2024]; 'Secular education', National Secular Society, [n.d.] <https://www.secularism.org.uk/education/> [accessed 25 August 2024].
[255] Stuart Maclure, *Education Re-formed: A Guide to the Education Reform Act*, 3rd edn, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1992).
[256] Peter Cumper and Julia Ipgrave, 'Collective Worship in England' in *Collective Worship and Religious Observance in Schools*, ed. by Peter Cumper and Alison Mawhinney, (Peter Lang Ltd, 2018), pp. 17-42 (p. 24); Religious Education Council of England and Wales, *The State of the Nation: A report on Religious Education provision within secondary schools in England* (RE Council of England and Wales, 2017), p. 5. <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/State-of-the-Nation-Report-2017.pdf> [accessed 28 November 2024].

worship, RE, and school values often lack clarity regarding if and how religion features in these elements of school life and in the school's broader identity and mission. This ambiguity results in English state schools presenting these activities, and themselves, as both religious *and* nonreligious – neither clearly nor wholly one or the other.

After providing evidence for these claims in this chapter, I will suggest that this tendency towards ambiguity reflects the extent to which religion and nonreligion are commonly "blurred" in contemporary British society; something that is often highlighted by those studying both phenomena in contemporary western societies.[257] I will also suggest that it reflects a widespread desire for inclusivity – or at least, the appearance of inclusivity – in relation to religious or spiritual aspects of school life, which, I will argue, is likely underpinned by individualistic perceptions of faith and belief. The desire to be inclusive of all religious backgrounds as opposed to promoting one particular view indicates that schools are, or present themselves as, respecting individuals' religious autonomy, their right or ability to form their *own* religious – or nonreligious – views and identities. Therefore, I will propose that although the previous chapter showed schools often not *explicitly* declaring their commitment to preserving pupils' religious agency and free choice, many more appear to *implicitly* indicate such commitment instead, thereby supporting, instead of challenging, claims that neo-liberal notions of free individual choice are widely considered highly important – perhaps even "sacred" – in modern British society.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity, defined as 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions' is a literary device that can bestow a text with rich layers of meaning.[258] Sometimes – for example in legal documents – ambiguity surrounding the intended meaning and scope of a text is not desirable, however in other instances it can be a positive attribute. Many celebrated authors intentionally instil ambiguity within their stanzas or plot-lines and invite readers to explore the various possible meanings and messages within their literary works. Readers take up this invitation with gusto because it is enjoyable, but also because the freedom to add one's own interpretation to a piece of writing allows it to maintain relevance and significance for highly diverse audiences spanning cultures and time periods alike.

The term 'ambiguity' can also be applied outside of literature to describe situations that lack clarity – for example, an election without a clear winner could be said to have an 'ambiguous' result – as well

[257] Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 19; Linda Woodhead, 'Intensified Religious Pluralism and De-differentiation: the British Example', *Society*, 53 (2016), pp. 41-46 (p. 43).
[258] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd edn (Penguin, 1961), p. 19.

as individuals or organisations whose identity, intentions and/or practices are only vaguely defined. Julian Stern utilises the term in relation to English schools, claiming that they are ambiguous entities because:

> They are broadened families, but are not families; they teach subjects, but are not fully engaged with the technical or professional communities of those subjects; and they are learning communities bound together by personal relations, but personal relationships amongst members of the community are necessarily professionally restricted.[259]

Rather than being problematic, Stern suggests that this ambiguity is the "source of the school's very richness"[260] as through these complex and perhaps contradicting aims and identities, schools can respond to many different situations and meet a wide range of needs. Although he does not comment on if or how this ambiguity relates to how *religion* features in school life, analysis of my dataset revealed that school websites often appear to present their interactions with religion as ambiguous both in terms of the content involved, and the intended outcomes.

To demonstrate this, I will discuss each of my four research foci in turn, starting with collective worship. My analysis of school websites shows that in both the labels attributed to these sessions, and in the descriptions of content covered and activities occurring within them, school websites tend to employ language which appears to obscure if, how, and how significantly, religion features in these gatherings. Consequently, it is often unclear whether these sessions are intended to be interpreted as religious or secular events.

Collective worship – findings

The Methodology chapter of this thesis noted that while collecting data, I had difficulty identifying if and where school websites discussed collective worship because many did not use this exact phrase – even in relation to school gatherings which seemed to include traditional forms of worship such as saying prayers and singing hymns; instead, these sessions were often simply called "assemblies." I resolved to collect all information published online pertaining to any form of school gathering outside of ordinary classroom academics and to assess if and how these constituted "collective worship", based on the content and activities described as occurring within them, during the analysis phase of my research. I did not realise it at the time but this was the first indication that school websites were often not presenting clear-cut overviews of if and how religion features in their regular activities.

[259] Julian Stern, *Schools and Religions: imagining the real*, (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2008), p. 36.
[260] Ibid., p. 34.

Labels and focus

576 school websites from my main sample indicated that school 'gatherings' of some sort occurred relatively regularly. 2/3s of these indicated that their 'gatherings' involved or concerned religion in some way – specifics are outlined below. Figure 4.1 shows that 33.7% of these called their gatherings 'collective worship,' 24.5% referred to them simply as 'assemblies' and 41.8% used both labels interchangeably or, at least, in close proximity. Consequently, the centrality and significance of religion within these gatherings is, from the very outset, ambiguous.

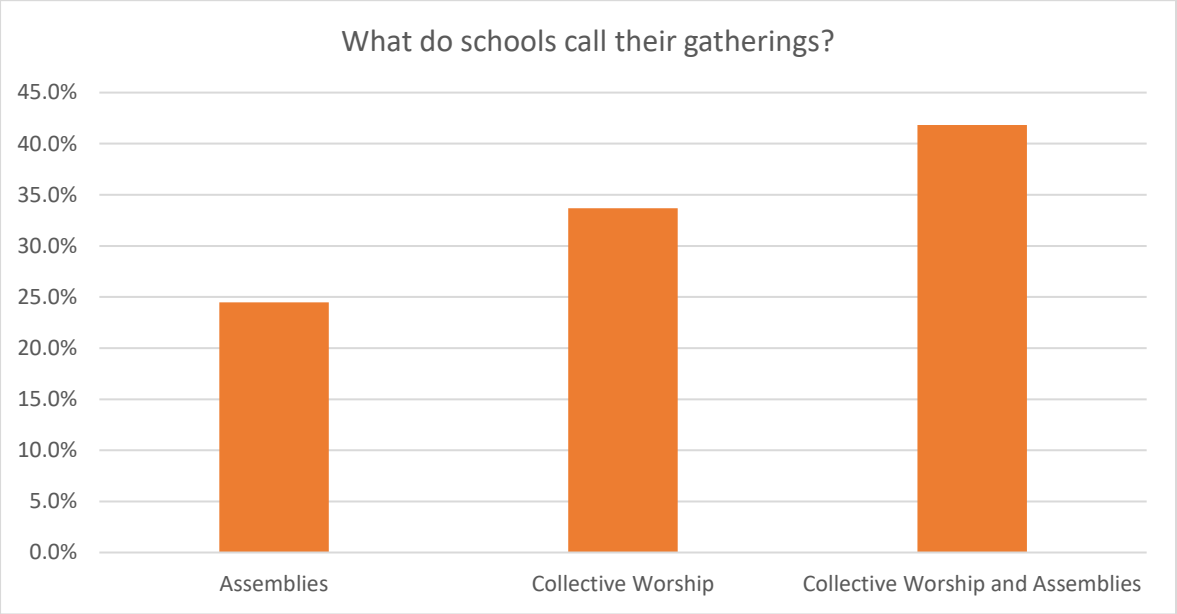

Figure 4.1: What do schools call their gatherings? - percentages of all schools in my main sample who claim to include religious content in school gatherings.

Official legislation and guidance justify requiring schools to provide regular 'collective worship' by insisting that this differs from 'corporate worship' such as that found in church services. They state that unlike the latter, collective worship is not intended to be an expression of shared beliefs among participants, so pupils' religious identities and worldviews need not be compromised in these sessions and it is not inappropriate for the state to maintain this requirement despite the significant changes that have occurred in the nation's religious landscape.[261] In addition, some schools and religious denominations attempt to present collective worship sessions as not religious worship but 'worthship', where pupils are not taught specific religious beliefs and practices per se, but are

[261] Department for Education, *Religious Education and Collective Worship 1/94* (Department for Education, 1994), p. 21 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/281929/Collective_worship_in_schools.pdf> [accessed 25 August 2024].

encouraged to find value in things and experiences around them.[262] Despite these interpretations, the term 'collective worship' still holds religious connotations for many as the word 'worship' is most commonly used in relation to religious people, beliefs and practices;[263] in contrast, the term 'school assembly' does not. Government guidance considers school assemblies to be 'distinct' from collective worship,[264] and although it does not elaborate on how the two are expected to differ, the centrality of religion within both sessions is likely one key distinction. In fact, Cumper and Mawhinney define assemblies as 'regular, nonreligious collective school gatherings where news of activities and successes by pupils are shared and celebrated.'[265]

With this in mind, schools who call their gatherings 'collective worship' appear to be signalling that religion features significantly in these sessions, but those who call them 'assemblies' do not, and could even give the opposite impression – that the gatherings in question do *not* concern religion. It becomes confusing then, when schools apply this latter label to gatherings involving explicitly religious topics and practices such as saying prayers or singing hymns. 38% of school websites in my main sample who called their gatherings 'assemblies' did this – below are some examples.

One non-faith community primary school stated:

> We have regular visits from representatives of Christian organisations who will deliver assemblies and performances when needed such as the Christmas Shoe box appeal.

Another non-faith community primary school said:

> We are a non-denominational school which means that we do not have an act of worship in our school. However, we do have assemblies which sometimes have a Christian theme as well as other themes associated with our school values and British values.

Such comments were less common among faith schools, but one Catholic primary school in my main sample stated:

> [A]s a Catholic school, we attach the greatest importance to Religious Education in the life of our school. We aim to deliver a broad and engaging Religious Education, enriched in the

[262] Brian Gates, 'Ending Christian Assembly: let's open our eyes to the value of collective worship in schools', *The Conversation*, 3 July 2014, <https://theconversation.com/ending-christian-assembly-lets-open-our-eyes-to-the-value-of-collective-worship-in-schools-28736> [accessed 25 August 2024].
[263] 'Collective Worship and school assemblies: your rights', Humanists UK, [n.d], <https://humanists.uk/education/parents/collective-worship-and-school-assemblies-your-rights/> [accessed 25 August 2024].
[264] Department for Education, *Religious Education and Collective Worship 1/94* (1994), p. 21.
[265] Alison Mawhinney, 'The Law on Collective School Worship: The Rationale Then and Now' in *Collective Worship and Religious Observance in Schools*, eds., Peter Cumper and Alison Mawhinney, (Peter Lang Ltd, 2018), pp. 117-145 (p. 140).

> Catholic ethos of the school community. This not only applies to specific R.E. lessons but in the everyday interaction of school life, assemblies, meal times, play times and all the relationships that exist within the school. We try to help children to find a personal faith in God and to enjoy a sense of awe and wonder at His creation.

It is possible that these schools anticipate some parents reacting negatively to hearing that the school conducts regular worship sessions, and hope to avoid this by using the more-secular-sounding label, 'assembly,' to downplay or distract from the centrality of religion within these sessions. We would have to interview school leaders and teachers to be sure, but regardless, a consequence of using labels with nonreligious connotations to introduce gatherings with clearly religious content is that the intended role and significance of religion within these sessions becomes difficult to interpret.

Confusion of this sort is also generated when schools label gatherings 'collective worship' *and* 'assembly,' seemingly interchangeably. For example:

> There is a statutory requirement for children to take part in an act of collective worship each day. Our policy ensures that the children have time to reflect and think during the school day. Our assembly themes are very varied and call on a variety of stories from the major world religions as well as stories with moral messages. Although we are not a religious school, the majority of stories are founded in the Christian traditions and beliefs as we are required to do by law.
>
> Assembly is a time when the whole school or part of it comes together for a specific purpose. On most occasions, assembly is a time when children, staff and any visitors worship together - collective worship. In addition to an act of worship, assembly time is also an opportunity to develop a culture of sharing, for example, pupils sharing their learning and achievements. It is also a time for giving out notices and information.
>
> Each school day begins with an opportunity for prayer and quiet reflection. Assemblies, staff briefings and staff meetings as well as Religious Education lessons all include an act of worship, reflection or a form of meditation that is led by students and staff.

In these examples, there is no clear distinction between the assembly-elements and worship-elements of school gatherings; the two terms are used closely. Due to the contrasting connotations invoked by each one, the focus and nature of these gatherings – including the intended significance of religion in them – is ambiguous.

Altogether, 65% of school websites in my main sample, who claim to involve religious content in their gatherings, refer to these as 'assemblies' instead of, or as well as, adopting the official term, 'collective worship'. This is a large proportion but clearly not the whole sample. However, confusion over the religious nature of gatherings is not only introduced through the labels that schools attribute to them; it is also introduced or increased in descriptions of the content of these sessions.

Content

Another aspect of analysing my dataset included exploring and coding the content – topics and activities – that schools claimed to cover during gatherings. My analysis identified four categories of content:

> **Citizenship Education –** aiming to develop pupils into good citizens by, for example, promoting positive values or instilling a community spirit in gatherings.
>
> **School Matters** - celebrating pupils' achievements, giving notices about school activities, and inviting children to share what they have been learning about in class.
>
> **Learning About Religion** - pupils are taught *about* religious beliefs or practices in a more objective manner, similarly to Religious Education lessons.
>
> **Doing Religion** - pupils are invited or expected to participate in religious practices such as praying or singing hymns.

Figure 4.2 shows the content of school gatherings according to their websites, as a proportion of all those who explicitly stated that they had gatherings.

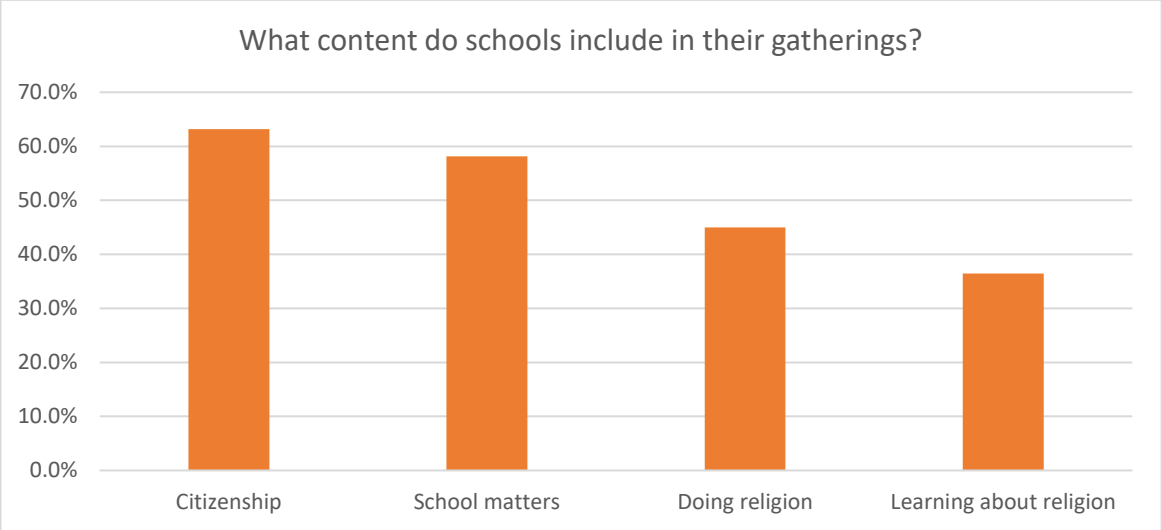

Figure 4.2: The types of content covered in gatherings – percentages of schools whose websites indicate they do gatherings.

Clearly, Citizenship content is the most commonly associated with gatherings, present in 63.2% of school websites who claimed to conduct some form of gathering, followed by School Matters, which were listed on 58.2% of websites. Religious content – Doing Religion and Learning About Religion – were less common, but definitely not rare; 45% of schools in my main sample that claim to conduct school gatherings appear to Do religion, and 36.5% appear to lead pupils in Learning about religion. More exposition on these findings is provided in the next chapter, but I will highlight here that most schools do not just focus on one of these content areas; instead, they generally include varied activities and topics from several of these categories. More often than not, this spans the religious *and* nonreligious.

For example, one CofE primary academy mentioned that all the following occurred within their gatherings:

- Pupils would be presented with awards for reaching reading targets,
- Fundamental British Values would be promoted, for example tolerance of other faiths would be promoted through discussions about prejudices and prejudice-based bullying, followed and supported by learning in RE and PSHE,
- Pupils would have the opportunity to "come closer to God" and have "God…come closer to [them]" through things like individual prayer,
- Pupils would develop an understanding of Jesus Christ and a Christian understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

These could be categorised as School matters, Citizenship, Doing religion *and* Learning about religion, respectively, and yet they all appear to occur within the same gatherings. Combining religious and nonreligious content was common among school websites in my sample. 80% of schools who described religious content occurring in their gatherings also claimed to include content that could fit in the nonreligious categories from my typology – Citizenship or School matters. Consequently, it is often unclear how centrally the religious aspects are intended to feature within these sessions and whether the session is intended to be understood as a largely religious or secular event. This confusion is further propounded by the language used to describe the content that I have labelled "Doing religion."

Figure 4.3 breaks down the various religious practices that I have categorised as "Doing religion", mentioned by schools in my main sample.

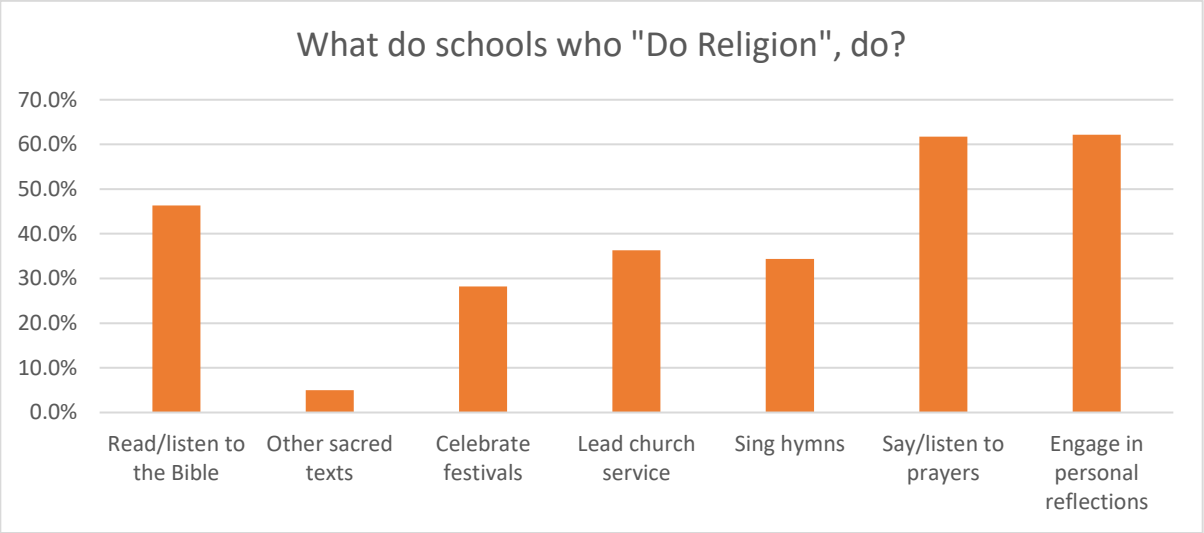

Figure 4.3: How schools "do religion" in gatherings – percentages of all schools in my main sample categorised by my analysis as "doing religion" in their gatherings.

The next chapter includes a more detailed exploration of these findings, including comparisons of the activities done across different types of school, but here I want to draw attention to the fact that 'reflections' were the most commonly-cited form of 'doing religion' among schools in my main sample. 62.2% of schools categorised as 'Doing Religion' described 'Reflections' as occurring within their gatherings. I categorised such activities as 'religious content' because a close association with 'prayers' was often implied – a glance at the graph above shows that both these columns are almost identical (62.2% of schools mentioned reflections, and 61.8% of schools mentioned prayers) - however, they were rarely solely presented as 'religious reflections.' More commonly, these were ambiguous activities that *could* be interpreted as religious but did not *have* to be.

For example, in the excerpt below, one school states that assemblies – in which they 'listen to teachings' and participate in 'prayer and hymns' – are presented to children as a 'period of calm and reflection' and so while the act of reflecting is not explicitly introduced as a religious practice, a connection with the religious aspects of school assemblies is implied. This is demonstrated in the two excerpts below, both taken from different non-faith, community primary schools:

> We conduct our assemblies in a dignified and respectful way. We tell the children that assembly is a period of calm and reflection. We regard it as a special time and expect the children to behave in an appropriate way. We ask them to be quiet, thoughtful, listen carefully to the teachings, and participate fully (where possible) in prayer and hymns.

And:

As a school we:

- take into consideration the family background, ages and abilities of the children when determining the precise nature of daily Collective Worship.
- offer time for reflection through a variety of collective prayers. These might include praise, seeking forgiveness, asking on behalf of self and others or quiet reflection.

This trend was also identified among faith schools, as is demonstrated in the below excerpt taken from a CofE primary academy:

Our objectives are to give children the opportunity to:

• Think about how they see themselves and how they see and treat others.

• Encounter a variety of Christian beliefs and practices.

• Have time and space for stillness, reflection and prayer.

When considered together, the labels and language used in relation to school websites' descriptions of gatherings indicates that these events are neither wholly or solely religious or secular – even when it appears that religious content, which could be considered religious 'worship,' is involved. Similar tactics also appeared to be employed in website presentations of school values.

School values - findings

Labels and focus

Unlike with collective worship, schools are *not* legally required to involve religion in their school values lists, however, they might choose to. The previous chapter outlined three ways in which school websites in my samples associated their values lists with religion; first, by adopting values that themselves clearly reference religious beliefs, traditions or practices, second, by attributing a label to values lists that explicitly associated them with religion – for example, 'Christian values' or 'gospel values' – and third, by drawing on religious teachings or figures in justifying or explaining their selected values – for example, connecting each value with a relevant Bible verse promoting it.

This previous chapter also showed that these methods were not particularly popular within my dataset. In my main sample, which is nationally representative of all English state schools, 5% listed explicitly religious values, 14% attributed religious labels to their values lists, and 6% offered religious justifications and explanations. In these instances, there is little evidence of ambiguity; these schools clearly intend their values to be interpreted as 'religious,' or at least, as connected to religion in some way. As the next chapter will show in more depth, this was more common among

faith schools than non-faith schools, but these trends were not universally evident in either of my booster samples. 33% of schools in my faith booster sample, who posted values lists online, did *not* associate these with religion in any way, and two schools from my non-faith booster did – screenshots are provided below.

For the majority of schools in my main sample who did *not* utilise these methods, the intended meaning of their values lists – and whether or how they are meant to relate to religion – is much less clear. These school values could be considered 'nonreligious' but only because they do not reference religion at all; none of the school websites in any of my nationally representative samples presented their values as *explicitly* atheistic, promoting *unbelief* or rooted in secularist worldviews.

None of the values lists that I analysed referenced nonreligious ideologies such as humanism or atheism and none listed values that generally underpin nonreligious worldviews; some examples might include 'unbelief,' 'scepticism,' 'rational thought' or 'scientific evidence.' Furthermore, schools never introduced their values lists as 'nonreligious values' or 'humanistic values' in the way that some schools labelled their lists 'Christian' or 'gospel values,' and none justified their selection by appealing to the values or perspectives of groups or individuals well-known for their lack of religious belief – for example, Humanists UK[266], or well-known proponents of atheism.

Instead, as figure 4.4 shows,[267] most school values were simply introduced with a generic label like 'our values,' or 'school values.'

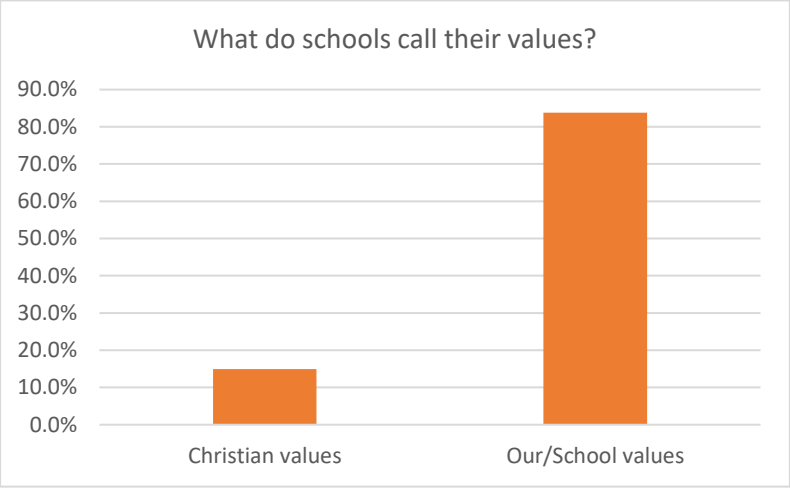

Figure 4.4: What do schools call their values? – percentages of all schools in my main sample with online values lists.

[266] 'Our Values', Humanists UK, [n.d.], <https://humanists.uk/about/our-values/#:~:text=As%20humanists%2C%20we%20support%20the,today%2C%20as%20well%20as%20humanism> [accessed 3 March 2024].
[267] A handful of schools, not represented on this graph, either gave a different label to their values lists or did not give a label at all.

The following screenshots of websites in my main sample demonstrate this in practice:

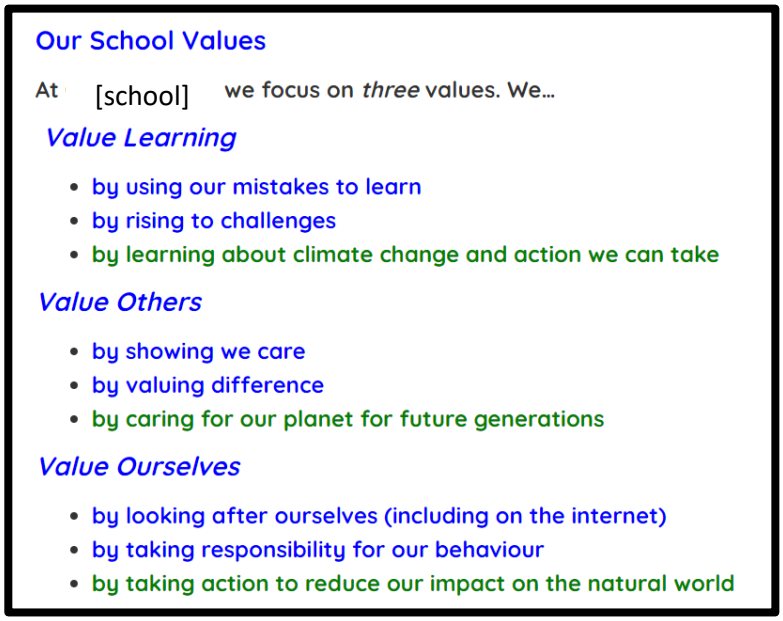

Figure 4.5 A screenshot of school values as presented on one website in my main sample.

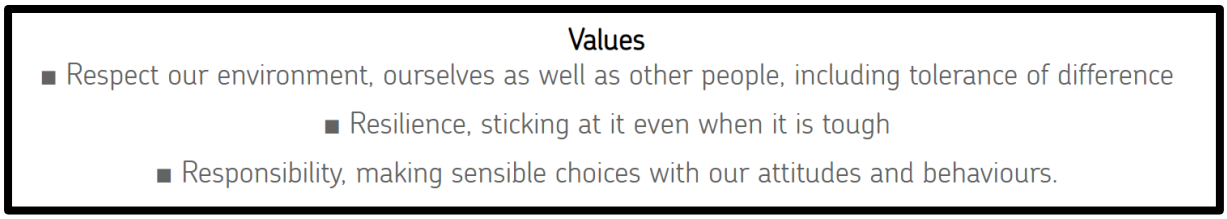

Figure 4.6 A screenshot of school values as presented on a second website in my main sample.

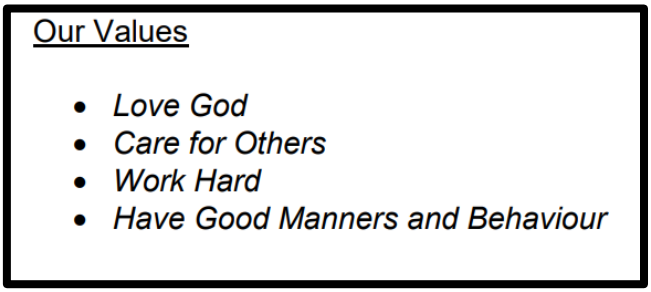

Figure 4.7 A screenshot of school values as presented on a third website in my main sample.

Multiple interpretations

These screenshots also demonstrate the range of detail offered alongside values lists – while some schools explain what each value is intended to mean, many (89% of all in my main sample who provide values lists online) follow the last example and simply provide a list of short words. This

creates an ambiguity around what exactly the school is promoting to pupils – both in terms of what these individual values mean but also if and how they relate to religion; they could be interpreted either way.

By offering little guidance on what these words are intended to point to, or where they come from, individuals can inject their own interpretations. For example, in the third screenshot above, the first value, 'Love God' does not state *which* god is being referenced, so could be adopted by a member of any religious group. The others, 'Care for Others,' 'Work Hard,' and 'Have Good Manners and Behaviour,' although often promoted in religious teachings, are not explicitly aligned with these, and so could be adopted by a member of any religious group, *and* those of no religion, without compromising their personal worldviews or identities. The adaptability of school values is further demonstrated by looking at the ten most commonly selected values among schools in my main sample.

Ten most common School Values – grouped by overarching theme	**Percent of school websites that list these as a School Value[268]**
Respect	48.1%
Responsibility	19.3%
Resilience	17.8%
Honesty	15.7%
Perseverance	14.1%
Friendship	13.9%
Aspiration	13.4%
Compassion	12.8%
Love	12.5%
Kindness	12.3%

Table 4.1 The ten most-commonly-selected school values within my dataset and the number of schools who listed them – as percentages of schools in my main sample, who provided values lists online.

Table 4.1 displays the ten most commonly selected values from values lists in my main sample of schools – further exposition is provided in the next chapter.

There is no universally agreed-upon list of 'religious' values – even within individual religious traditions – yet support for all ten values listed here can be found within the teachings of many religious worldviews. Consequently, a religious individual may interpret them as 'religious values,' or

[268] As a percentage of all schools who offered lists of school values – 561.

as values that align with their personal religious beliefs – 'Christian values' for example – but unless the school explicitly indicates that they should be perceived in this way, individuals are not forced to do so. Similarly, there are no agreed-upon 'nonreligious' or 'atheistic' values and yet these ten most commonly selected values are likely also widely supported by individuals and organisations who identify with and promote these worldviews. Consequently, they could just as easily be perceived as 'nonreligious' or 'humanistic,' because they align with what these individuals deem to be important and positive characteristics and behaviours, and yet because no schools explicitly present them in this way, individuals are not forced to interpret them as such.

Religious Education - findings

Ambiguity was also a common trend in schools' presentations of RE lessons, but it manifested in different ways from those detailed so far. Unlike website descriptions of collective worship and school values, descriptions of RE were much more likely to openly indicate that religion was the focus of these sessions.

Labels and focus

Perhaps the clearest evidence of this is in the labels attributed to the subject. Despite legislation referring to the subject as 'Religious Education,' this title is not compulsory and schools are free to curate their own label. Those wishing to instil ambiguity around the centrality and significance of religion in these lessons may choose to adopt one that shifts focus away from religion, or that splits focus between religion and other elements of the subject. There is no shortage of inspiration for schools wishing to do this – on multiple occasions, stakeholders calling for the scope of the subject to be broadened beyond just the six Major World Religions have suggested changing the subject's name as part of this. The Commission on RE put forward the title 'Religion and Worldviews'[269] in their 2018 report, and Clarke and Woodhead first recommended the name 'Religious and Moral Education' – in line with the label used in Scotland – but revised this to 'Religions, Beliefs and Values' after further consultations.[270] Most recently, in 2022, Wales passed the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act which renamed the subject 'Religion, Values and Ethics.'[271] This legislation has no impact on English RE as education is a devolved matter in the UK, but clearly, changing the subject's name to reflect a broader focus beyond traditional conceptions of 'religion' is widely supported and a

[269] Commission on Religious Education, *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward, a national plan for RE* (CoRE, 2018) p. 20, <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf> [accessed 6 December 2024].
[270] Clarke and Woodhead, *A New Settlement Revised: Religion and Belief in Schools* (2017), p. 19.
[271] 'Religion, Values and Ethics replaces 'Religious Education' under Curriculum for Wales', Welsh Government (2022) <https://educationwales.blog.gov.wales/2022/07/19/religion-values-and-ethics-replaces-religious-education-under-curriculum-for-wales/> [accessed 22 December 2024].

variety of options have been openly discussed. However, my analysis of school websites suggests that very few English state schools have adopted any such alternative titles; the vast majority of schools in all my samples simply referred to these lessons as 'Religious Education,' clearly indicating that religions are their central focus.

Of the 541 schools in my main sample who claim to teach a subject resembling RE, 91.1% call this subject Religious Education. Only a handful reference other foci like philosophy (1.8%), ethics (3.5%), values (0.2%) and worldviews (0.4%) in the titles they give to this subject, and then, they usually still invoke religion – for example, 'Philosophy and Religion' or 'Religion and Ethics.'

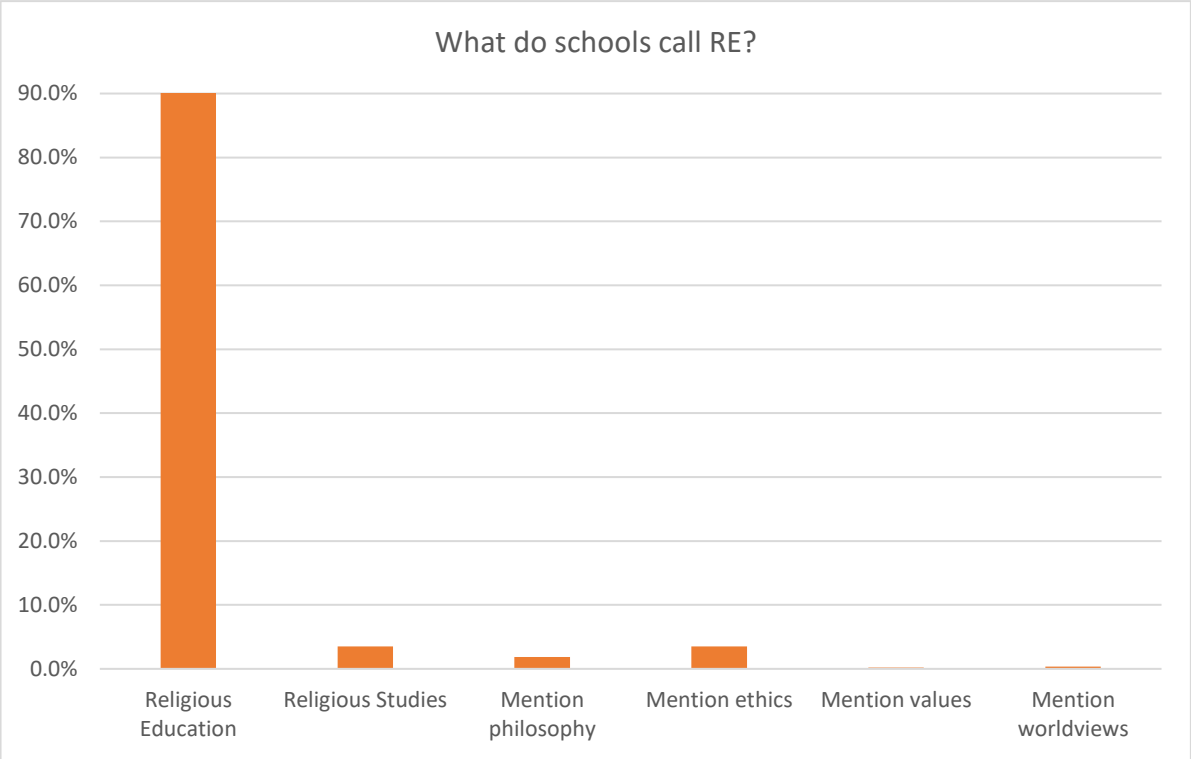

Figure 4.8 The labels given to RE – percentages of schools in my main sample, who claimed to teach a subject resembling RE.

These trends are present across all school types, including those in my booster samples of faith and non-faith schools, though slightly higher proportions of non-faith schools opt for 'Religious Studies' or titles including the words 'philosophy' and/or 'ethics' compared with faith schools, and higher proportions of the latter include the term 'values' than their non-faith counterparts.

I cannot be sure of motivations behind schools' choices in this respect from website information alone, but it seems likely that the title 'RE' is so popular because it is the one that teachers and parents will be most familiar with, having been the subject's official name in legislation and government discourse for decades.

These findings may not seem ground-breaking on their own, but the apparent willingness to openly state the religious content of RE lessons contrasts sharply with the seeming reluctance to do so in relation to school gatherings and school values. This contrast is only made clearer if we compare how websites describe the content covered in these activities compared with that described as explored in RE lessons – again, in the case of the latter the religious focus is almost always made explicit.

Content taught

92.8% of schools in my main sample claimed to teach a subject that resembled RE and although a handful (1.8%) of these offered very little information about this aspect of the curriculum, only two published absolutely nothing other than listing the subject as one taught in the school. A more thorough analysis of the RE syllabuses schools claimed to follow will be provided in the next chapter, but in short, all websites that provided *some* curriculum information indicated that pupils would learn about one or more of the so-called Major World Religions – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism – in RE lessons; few claimed to teach about nonreligious views or non-traditional religions and spiritualities.

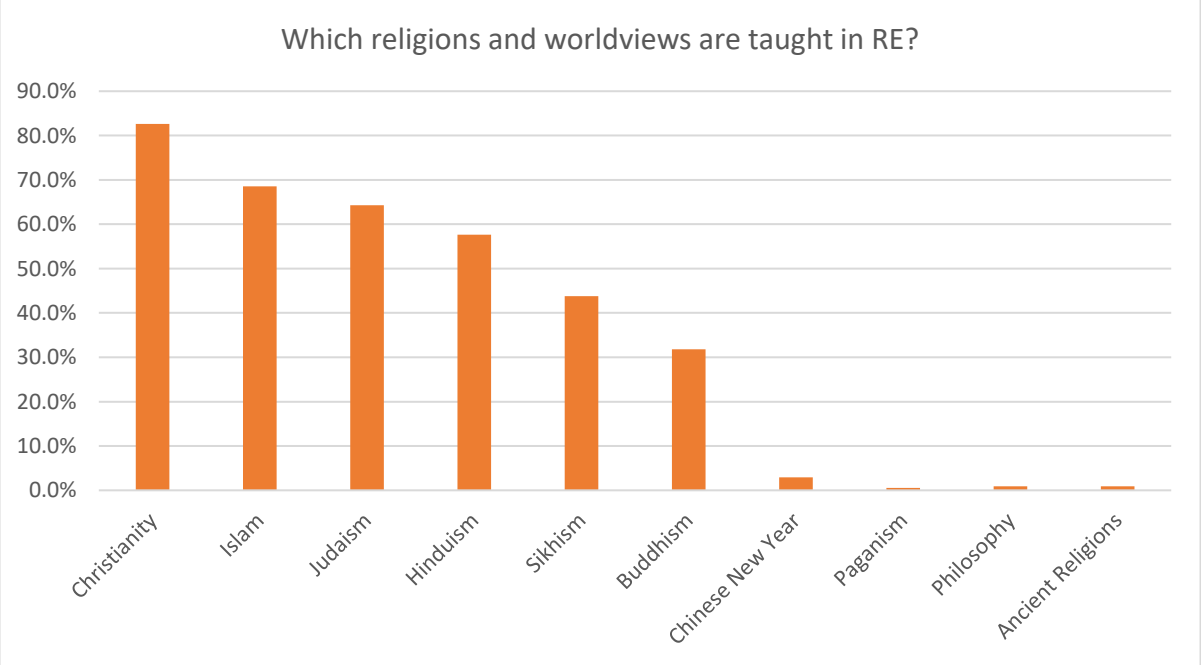

Figure 4.9: The religions and worldviews that schools in my main sample claim to teach in RE – percentages of all who claim to teach this subject.

Only 3% of schools who claimed to teach RE, and provided syllabus information online, claimed to teach about Chinese spiritualities, 0.9% included Ancient Religions in their syllabus overviews, 0.9% mentioned Philosophy/philosophers as topics of study, Paganism was covered by only 0.6% of schools and Witchcraft, Zoroastrianism, and Indigenous religions were only mentioned by one school

respectively. Furthermore, despite growing and increasingly vocal support for *nonreligious* worldviews to be studied in RE,[272] only 26.6% of schools in my main sample, who appear to teach RE and provide information about these lessons, mentioned doing so in overviews of their syllabus. Consequently, the majority of school websites in my main sample clearly present religion – specifically, traditional conceptions of religion – as the core focus of RE lessons; starkly contrasting with the ambiguity surrounding the involvement of religion in school gatherings and values noted earlier in this chapter.

It is possible that this is not an intentional choice made by individual schools – the extent to which institutions can determine the content and focus of their RE lessons is limited by legislation which specifies that these lessons should teach about the 'principal religions in Great Britain'[273] and forces some schools to adopt certain syllabuses, such as that published by their local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). However, these same schools *do* have some control over how this content – and the subject more broadly – is presented on their websites. As described above, legislation relating to collective worship also clearly states that these sessions should be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character',[274] 'reflect[ing] the broad traditions of Christian belief' – in other words, that religion should feature clearly and centrally within these – and yet my dataset shows that many schools choose not to make this clear when presenting and describing their gatherings online. Instead, the labels attributed to school gatherings and the topics and activities claimed to occur within them tend to make it unclear if, and how centrally, religion will feature within them. Schools could, presumably, utilise similar tactics to imbue a similar sense of ambiguity around their RE lessons, but my research suggests that most do not. Consequently, although the duties to conduct collective worship and teach RE are often considered to be connected or closely related, schools appear to approach and present the religious components of both in different ways. My dataset alone cannot reveal why this is the case but existing academic research in this area

[272] 'The case for including Humanism in RE', Humanists UK, [n.d.] < https://understandinghumanism.org.uk/teaching-about-humanism/the-case-for-including-humanism-in-re/#:~:text=The%202018%20British%20Social%20Attitudes,a%20result%20of%20their%20beliefs.> [accessed 25 August 2024]; Simon Perfect, 'Non-religion in Religious Education – why it's a good thing', *Theos Think Tank*, 1 December 2015 <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2015/12/01/non-religion-in-religious-education-why-its-a-good-thing> [accessed 25 August 2024]; Dr Kevin O'Grady, 'We should be teaching about non-religious worldviews in RE, but how?', RE:Online, 1 August 2018 <https://www.reonline.org.uk/2018/08/01/we-should-be-teaching-about-non-religious-worldviews-in-re-but-how/> [accessed 25 August 2024].

[273] *Education Reform Act 1988*, Part I, Section 8, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/section/8/enacted> [accessed 25 August 2024].

[274] Ibid, Part I, Section 7.

provides a possible explanation – schools' varying approaches here could be due to the fact that religion is expected and intended to feature in different ways in both.

The previous chapter in this thesis noted that while legislation indicates that RE should be an *objective* exploration of religion – not aiming to shape pupils' personal beliefs in any particular direction – collective worship is often expected to be more subjective, intending to stimulate pupils to explore and form their own personal views. Ipgrave highlights this distinction in teachers' descriptions of their approaches to both mandates. The RE teachers she interviewed tended to emphasise the objective nature and intentions of RE – one stated that they adopted a 'well-balanced approach' to the subject that 'wasn't at all' confessional[275] – whereas similar intentions were not highlighted in descriptions of collective worship. She goes on to conclude that RE and collective worship feature very different 'interpretations' of religion and though she does not specify what these are, it is likely that they centre around – or at least involve – the perceived need for objectivity in one, and the allowance of subjectivity in the other. In fact, Bryan and Revell's interviews with Student Teachers in the UK noted that most identified objectivity and neutrality as core qualities of "good" and "professional" RE teachers, and suggest that this stems from official guidelines and teacher-training – in other words, it is not something thought up and introduced by the student teachers individually, but is imparted and encouraged in official authoritative channels.[276]

The desire for objectivity in RE began to spread following Ninian Smart's *Working Paper 36: Religious Education in Secondary Schools*, published in 1971, which presented the 'phenomenological' approach to studying religions as a way of ensuring that the subject could maintain relevance amid increasing religious pluralism and changing moral attitudes. In short, this new approach aimed to 'develo[p] understanding of religions without promoting any particular stance'[277] – that is, it encouraged teaching objectively *about* the so-called 'world religions' as opposed to teaching children what they should personally believe. This was a significant change from the confessional Religious Instruction of the previous decades and although Smart's phenomenological approach to RE has its critics, its success is evidenced by the fact that it still underpins many syllabuses used by schools today;[278] research shows that modern-day RE usually does not intend to 'nurture faith' of

[275] Ipgrave, 'Conversations between the Religious and Secular in English Schools', (2012), p. 32.
[276] Hazel Bryan and Lynn Revell, 'Performativity, Faith and Professional Identity: Religious Education Teachers and the Ambiguities of Objectivity', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 59.4 (2011), pp. 403-419 (p. 416).
[277] Robert Jackson, 'Religious Education in England: The Story to 2013', *Pedagogiek*, 33.2 (2013), pp. 119-135 (p. 121).
[278] Francis Farrell, ''Why all of a sudden do we need to teach fundamental British values?' A critical investigation of religious education student teacher positioning within a policy discourse of discipline and control', *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 42.3 (2016), pp. 280-297 (p. 282).

any sort"[279] and expects pupils to be 'objective… [and] bracket out their own value judgements or suspend their own beliefs.'[280] Furthermore, the National Content Standard for RE in England – a non-statutory document published by the RE Council of England and Wales in 2023 – lists as a 'key guiding principle' for teachers creating and teaching RE curricula, that 'where a compulsory programme involving teaching about religions and beliefs is not sufficiently objective, efforts should be made to revise it to make it more balanced and impartial'.[281]

Analysis of my dataset – namely, the prevalence of "choice statements" demonstrated in the previous chapter – initially appears to provide further support for assertions that such phenomenological approaches to RE, remain popular in schools today. 71.9% of schools in my main sample, who provided information about RE, published "choice statements" – that is, declarations that RE lessons would not forcefully interfere with pupils' personal religious or spiritual views and identities. At first glance, this appears to indicate that these almost 3/4s of schools in my main sample presented RE as objective studies of religions. However, on closer inspection, it is not necessarily this simple and herein lies the ambiguity; not in whether religion features in these sessions, but in how explorations of religious beliefs, conducted in RE lessons, are intended to impact pupils' personal views.

The third chapter of this thesis noted that 71.9% of schools in my main sample published choice statements in relation to RE online. Interestingly, around 2/3s of these did not just declare that schools intended to avoid influencing pupils' personal views during these lessons, but also stated that the lessons aimed to aid pupils in forming their own views by offering them opportunity to critically explore a range of beliefs and determine their own personal responses to them. While both arguably maintain a safe distance from confessional RI of previous decades by emphasising that schools are not infringing on pupils' religious freedoms of choice – hence their categorisation as "choice statements" – the latter do not clearly present objectivity as the main method of ensuring this. Rather than RE requiring pupils to 'bracket out their own beliefs', schools publishing these sorts of choice statements indicated that children would be able, or even encouraged, to seriously contemplate and re-assess their own worldviews during or as a result of school RE lessons. These

[279] Ursula McKenna, Sean Neill and Robert Jackson, 'Personal worldviews, dialogue and tolerance – students' views on religious education in England' in *Teenagers' Perspectives on the Role of Religion in their Lives, Schools and Societies: A European Quantitative Study,* ed. by Pille Valk and others (Waxmann Verlag, 2009), pp. 49-70 (p. 49).
[280] Lynn Revell, 'Religious Education in England', *Numen*, 55.2-3 (2008), pp. 218-240 (p. 227).
[281] Religious Education Council of England and Wales, *National Content Standard for Religious Education in England* (RE Council of England and Wales, 2023), p. 27, <https://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/National-Content-Standard-for-Religious-Education-for-England.pdf> [accessed 25 August 2024].

sessions are therefore presented as having some elements of subjectivity, introspection and impact on personal religious or spiritual views and identities. In fact, one Roman Catholic school in my sample openly described their RE programme as "both subjective and objective".

Associations commonly made between RE and community cohesion, or PREVENT agendas further compound this blurring of objective and subjective techniques of study. The horrific terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the USA and 7/7 in England heightened concerns about the need to challenge religious radicalisation and foster positive inter-community relationships across British society. Schools – and RE lessons in particular – were identified as one way of meeting this need; it was hoped that educating pupils about faiths and beliefs other than their own would generate positive perceptions of various religious groups, challenging negative stereotypes and promoting community cohesion.[282]

Anti-extremism legislation developed significantly in the subsequent decades, and in 2014, triggered by the Trojan Horse Affair whereby an anonymous letter alleged that Muslim educators in Birmingham were plotting to take over local schools and impose a conservative Islamic ethos,[283] the then Coalition Government formalised education's role in national security.[284] A new duty was introduced that required English schools to 'actively promote' the so-called Fundamental British Values of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs, and to report individuals (including children) appearing to contravene these values as potentially at risk of radicalisation[285].

The allegations surrounding the Trojan Horse Affair were later proven to be false[286] and yet concerns about the potential for schools to be sites of radicalisation, specifically those in predominantly Muslim communities, persisted. In fact, O'Toole argues that the affair was an expression of deep societal anxieties about Islam, multiculturalism, and national identity, and that it has had a lasting impact on how schools—particularly those in Muslim communities—present themselves to the public.[287] One such impact is the tendency to identify RE lessons as a key area where the promotion

[282] Moulin, 'Religious Education in England After 9/11' (2012), p.159.
[283] John Holmwood and Therese O'Toole, *Countering Extremism in British Schools? The truth about the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair* (Policy Press, 2018), pp. 5-7.
[284] Previous iterations of the Government's anti-terrorism agenda, PREVENT, had expected that schools would play an important role in countering extremism, but the 2014 PREVENT policy was the first to impose this as an explicit duty on schools.
[285] 'Guidance on promoting British Values in schools', Gov.uk, (2014), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published> [accessed 24 August 2024].
[286] 'Extremism in schools: the trojan Horse affair', Education Select Committee (2015), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/473/47304.htm> [accessed 25/07/25].
[287] Therese O'Toole, 'The political inclusion of British Muslims: From multiculturalism to muscular liberalism', 22.4 (2022), pp. 589-602 (p. 598).

of “Fundamental British Values” (FBVs) can take place.[288] In this context, RE becomes about more than just objective exploration of religious traditions; it functions as a tool for schools to demonstrate compliance with social cohesion, anti-extremism, and British values agendas.[289]

Consequently, the presentation of RE on school websites – like those in my dataset – often serves a dual purpose: it reflects a sincere educational commitment to inclusion and understanding, but also acts as a strategic response to the demands of a post-PREVENT educational landscape, shaped by political narratives and public scrutiny. My dataset shows that RE is still widely presented as – at least partially – a response to these issues.

33% of schools in my main sample, who claimed to teach RE, indicated that these lessons would contribute to promoting community cohesion and positive perceptions of, or attitudes towards, other religious and cultural groups. Some examples include:

> At [redacted] Primary School, we value RE because it promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society. It prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life and promotes community cohesion.
>
> Our RE curriculum, alongside our assemblies and core values strongly supports the promotion of Fundamental British Values by helping children to develop a mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith
>
> Pupils will be equipped to face the demands of the contemporary world they live in, developing positive attitudes to their learning and to the beliefs and values of others in line with Fundamental British Values.

In other words, although the framework that most schools’ RE curriculums are based upon advocates for objective or ‘balanced and impartial’ study *of* religions,[290] and although the previous chapter of this thesis shows that most schools – including faith ones – do not openly declare intentions to evangelise to pupils via these lessons, most *do* claim to try and shape pupils’ personal opinions of various religious groups in seeking to fulfil community cohesion and anti-extremism duties. Furthermore, pupils have no choice but to adopt these positive perceptions of religious

[288] Carol Vincent, ‘Cohesion, citizenship and coherence: schools’ responses to the British values policy’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40.1 (2019), pp. 17-32, (p.22); Angela Quartermaine, ‘Discussing terrorism: a pupil-inspired guide to UK counter-terrorism policy implementation in religious education classrooms in England’, 38.1 (2014), pp. 13-29, (p. 26).
[289] Daniel Moulin, ‘RE in England After 9/11’, *Religious Education*, 107.2 (2012), pp. 158-173, (p. 169).
[290] Religious Education Council of England and Wales, *National Content Standard for Religious Education in England* (2023), p. 27.

groups that are being encouraged – consequences for those not actively supporting or acting in accordance with Fundamental British Values (henceforth FBVs) involve being suspected of radicalisation and extremism.[291] The success of these initiatives is debated – critics argue that schools are often unable to truly instil the FBVs in pupils[292] – but regardless, it is in this paradoxical embrace of both objective and subjective methods and intentions that school website descriptions of RE invoke ambiguity. 62% of schools in my main sample, who claimed to teach RE, created this ambiguity via either choice statements or references to FBVs and community cohesion.

Consequently, my findings do not prove that RE is definitively intended to be, or experienced as, a completely objective *or* subjective study of religions. Though some institutions may lean towards one approach over the other, both appear to be true in many cases.

Faith-related admissions criteria - findings

In contrast, my dataset did not reveal any sort of ambiguity surrounding the inclusion of religion in faith schools' admissions policies. Where faith-related criteria were listed, the vast majority of schools clearly stated their religious focus and how applicants could qualify for them.

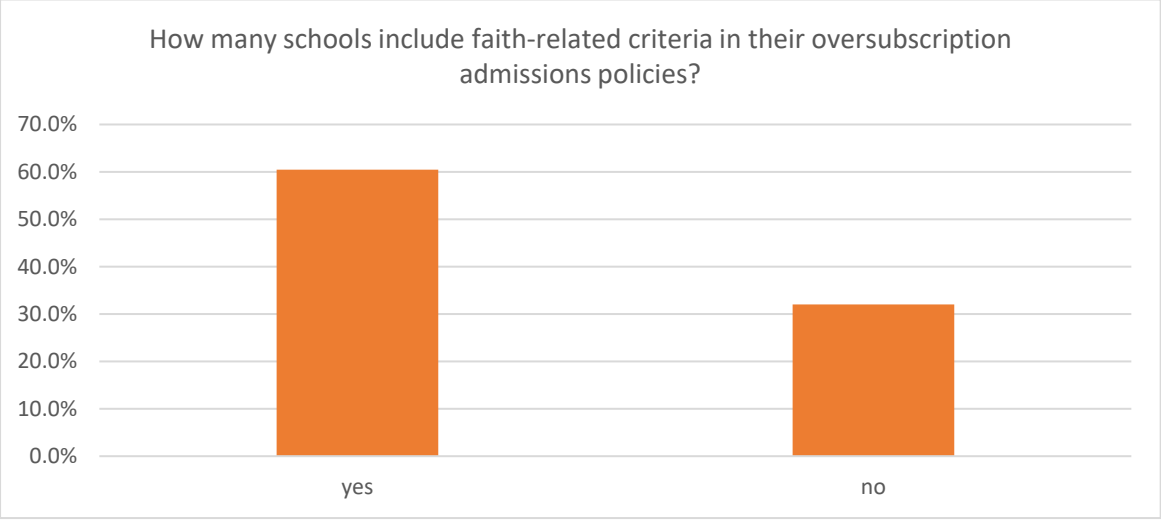

Figure 4.10: The proportion of schools in my booster sample of faith schools with, and without, faith-related criteria in their oversubscription admissions policies.

[291] Claire E. Crawford, 'Promoting 'fundamental British values' in schools: a critical race perspective', *Curric Perspect*, 37 (2017), pp. 197-204 (201); Mary Healy, 'Belonging, Social Cohesion and Fundamental British Values', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 67.4 (2019), pp. 423-438 (p. 426).
[292] Christine Winter and others, 'A moral education? British Values, colour-blindness, and preventing terrorism', *Critical Social Policy*, 42.1 (2022), pp. 85-106, (p. 92).

As was announced in the previous chapter, 60% of schools in my faith-school booster sample included at least one religious criterion in their oversubscription policy as detailed online (Figure 4.10). Very few of these schools were unclear about how applicants could qualify for this – most clearly stated that applicants should either be baptised, possess a Certificate of Catholic Practice, or attend religious services 'regularly' (determined by the school) over a set length of time (also determined by the school). These criteria themselves are generally clear-cut – applicants are either baptised or they are not, they either have the Certificate or not, and have either attended church as per the school's requirements, or they have not. The only way that ambiguity *could* be introduced here would be in individual schools' definitions of 'regular church attendance' however this was rarely the case – only 21 (11.9%) of faith schools whose oversubscription criteria included church attendance did not define their understanding of this, and only one defined it in a highly confusing way. The following comes from the oversubscription policy of a Church of England primary school:

> Governors define regular attendance as attendance at a weekly service on at least 26 occasions in any period of 12 consecutive months falling within the two years preceding the application.

It is also worth noting that 7% of schools in my faith booster sample did not provide clear oversubscription policies online for me to collect and analyse – depicted in the 'unclear' group in Figure 4.10. However, I did not consider these schools to be surrounding their admissions procedures with ambiguity as it is likely that they *will* provide this information *somewhere* for parents considering applying – not only is it a legal requirement for institutions to clearly outline their admissions procedures, but it is also in their best interests as shrouding the application and admissions process in mystery is likely to dissuade parents from applying

Discussion - ambiguity, inclusion, and free choice

This chapter has so far demonstrated that, where legislation allows, English state-school websites tend to avoid stating clearly *whether* religion features in regular elements of their activities and operations, *how* it features there, and/or *what impact* its presence is intended to have. School gatherings appearing to fulfil the collective worship requirement are rarely presented as solely or wholly religious affairs online, either in the labels used to introduce them or in overviews of the content and focus of these sessions. A similar confusion is also evident in websites' overviews of school values – explicit connections between these values lists and religion are rare, as are explicit connections with nonreligious or atheistic worldviews. Finally, while website overviews of schools' approaches to RE usually make the religious focus of these lessons clear, whether and how these sessions are expected to influence pupils' personal beliefs and identities is much less obvious.

Inclusive ambiguity

Ambiguity surrounding the form and role of religion's involvement in English state schools has been noted in academic literature before. In relation to collective worship, analyses of legislation and official guidance highlight the lack of clarity surrounding what these sessions should entail.[293] Additionally, observations of various schools' gatherings and interviews with the teachers leading them show that the close proximity of religious and nonreligious content in these sessions, along with attempts at "neutral" ways of introducing these, can cause ambiguity around if, how, and how centrally, faith and spirituality are intended to feature in school gatherings. The tendency to combine religious and nonreligious content in these sessions is demonstrated by Greg Smith, who notes that one school assembly he observed involved pupils singing Christian songs and hymns followed by a rendition of 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang'[294], and Richard Cheetham who reports that many of the schools *he* studied did not focus solely on traditional theistic teachings but also included explorations of broader morality.[295] Cheetham also provides a clear example of how language used by teachers either during, or in reference to these sessions, can similarly engender ambiguity. Those he interviewed emphasised the importance of introducing religious activities or aspects in "less prescriptive" ways so as to enable pupils to respond in a wide range of ways; not beginning prayers with "let us pray", for example, but with an "invitation to reflect on what had been said". While the activity was still referred to as a "prayer", pupils were not forced to interpret or experience it along traditionally religious lines and therefore the intended religiosity of the session becomes unclear.[296]

Similar methods were identified by Strhan and Shillitoe, and Stern and Shillitoe respectively; the former study revealed that one school removed the "Amen" from the end of their school prayer, and made a conscious effort to introduce it as a "school poem" – though in interviews, some still called it a prayer.[297] The latter noted that schools participating in the Prayer Space initiative – which involves creating spaces in schools for pupils to experience and participate in personal prayer – often described these spaces as offering opportunity for "reflection" or "meditation" as opposed to explicitly religious communication with the divine.[298] Finally, just as schools in my dataset were found to often conflate the terms "collective worship" and "assembly", adding another layer of

[293] Cumper and Ipgrave, 'Collective Worship in England', (2018) p. 35; Stern and Shillitoe, 'Prayer spaces in schools – a subversion of policy implementation?' (2019), p. 5.
[294] Greg Smith, *Children's Perspectives on Believing and Belonging*, (National Children's Bureau for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005), p. 35.
[295] Cheetham, 'Collective Worship: A window into Contemporary Understandings of the Nature of Religious Belief?' (2000), pp. 77-78.
[296] Ibid., p. 75.
[297] Shillitoe and Strhan, ''Just leave it blank' non-religious children and their negotiation of prayer in school', (2020), pp. 624-625.
[298] Stern and Shillitoe, "Prayer Spaces in Schools: A Subversion of Policy Implementation,' (2019), p. 11.

ambiguity as to the intended centrality and significance of religion within them, this is also commonplace in literature either in direct quotes taken from pupils and teachers, or by the academic authors themselves. Stern and Shillitoe quote one teacher who described their "assemblies" as:

> [V]ery formal…We've got three hundred people in together and…we all sing a hymn, and a prayer will be said, and they will answer Amen.[299]

Smith's study referenced above calls the gathering where pupils sang hymns, "assembly", Strhan and Shillitoe described observing "assemblies/collective worship" as part of their investigation of English school pupils' attitudes to prayer, without any attempt to distinguish between the two, and Clarke and Woodhead's *A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools* opens with a summary of how religion and English education are connected, stating that the 1944 Education Act legislated for, among other things, "collective worship (or 'school assemblies')."[300]

While this ambiguity is often demonstrated in existing literature discussing the collective worship duty, it is rarely seriously interrogated and therefore explanations for its provenance and prevalence are few and far between. Stern and Shillitoe's study of Prayer Spaces in schools offers one possible explanation, discussed briefly in the previous chapter. They propose that the tendency for teachers to present these Spaces as "straddle[ing] the Christian and non-Christian, religious and nonreligious"[301], rather than as openly and explicitly Christian as the initiative was apparently originally intended to be experienced, is a form of "subversive obedience" – schools intentionally reframing elements of the initiative that they feel uncomfortable with to make these Spaces appropriate and impactful within their specific context and environment. Schools who imbue ambiguity around school gatherings more generally – not just Prayer Spaces – could be argued to be subversively obeying the collective worship duty in that they are reframing it as not explicitly Christian, or even necessarily clearly religious, so that the overarching duty can be fulfilled with pluralistic and largely non-Christian, or even non-religious, pupil communities. However, as legislation itself imbues the collective worship duty with ambiguity in order that schools can interpret and fulfil it however is best for their particular circumstances, this explanation does not completely work – the religious ambiguity demonstrated in school gatherings is arguably a

[299] Ibid., p. 14.
[300] Clarke and Woodhead, *A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools* (2015), p. 10 <https://www.nasacre.org.uk/file/nasacre/a-new-settlement-for-religion-and-belief-in-schools.pdf> [accessed 06 December 2024]
[301] Stern and Shillitoe, 'Prayer Spaces in Schools: A Subversion of Policy Implementation,' (2019), p. 11.

continuation of the ambiguity instilled in the duty by government authorities, not a subversion of overtly Christianizing intentions.

Yet, Stern and Shillitoe's exploration of this subversive obedience is still helpful for our understanding of ambiguity in relation to broader school worship because it highlights the perceived importance of making religious aspects of school life inclusive and accessible for all pupils. Their research shows that subverting the explicitly religious aims of Prayer Spaces does not just occur at the whim of the teachers; it is not just a reflection of their personal preferences but is ultimately motivated by a desire to ensure that these Spaces can be accessed and experienced by *all* pupils. For example, some teachers wanted to remove the word "Prayer" from the name of the Spaces because it "turns some of the students off", while others claimed to have taken "Jesus" and any direct references to Christianity or God from these activities; moves that Stern and Shillitoe introduce as attempts to "alleviate the potential tensions for children from a non-Christian or nonreligious background"[302], and later summarise as reflecting teachers' "anxiety to please everyone (especially colleagues, students and parents)"[303]. It is the explicitly Christian, and potentially Christianizing aspects of Prayer Spaces – the initiative was launched by an evangelistic Christian charity[304] – that are being undermined or subverted in order to enable pupils from all religions and none to participate meaningfully. The ambiguity demonstrated above makes this possible because rather than the school defining what these Spaces intend to teach pupils, or what they intend them to experience within them, it "allow[s] students and teachers to create their own meaning and practice" and interpret the Spaces and activities occurring within them in line with their own beliefs and identities.[305]

This same desire for inclusivity could also explain the ambiguous ways in which religion and spirituality are often linked with broader school gatherings; in fact, Cheetham's research, briefly introduced above, supports such a conclusion. He explains the religious ambiguity invoked in gatherings at the schools he studied as partially motivated by teachers' convictions that it was not their place to tell pupils what to believe – they should be able to "make up their own minds in the realm of religious beliefs" – but also by a desire to ensure that these sessions were inclusive of all. While legislation allows parents to withdraw their children from school worship, teachers in Cheetham's research explicitly stated that they wanted to avoid this. They expressed an "extremely

[302] Ibid., p. 10.
[303] Ibid., p. 11.
[304] 'About Us', 24-7 Prayer [n.d.] <https://www.24-7prayer.com/about/about-us/who-we-are/?_gl=1*1aftb20*_up*MQ..*_ga*MTAwOTg1NzQ1Mi4xNzI3NDE4Nzkw*_ga_EP7TTC0T8Z*MTcyNzQxODc5MC4xLjEuMTcyNzQxODg2My4wLjAuMA> [accessed 27 September 2024].
[305] Stern and Shillitoe, 'Prayer Spaces in Schools: A Subversion of Policy Implementation,' (2019), p. 8.

strong desire…to keep the whole school together for assembly, despite different beliefs of pupils and staff"[306] and by creating worship sessions that could be both Christian and non-Christian, religious *and* nonreligious, depending on how individuals wish to interpret and interact with them, they are apparently able to achieve this. A similar sentiment was noted in Strhan and Shillitoe's exploration of pupils' experiences of prayer in English primary schools – they claimed that teachers wanted to reframe the school prayer in less explicitly-religious ways to ensure that it was "accessible and inclusive" for all students[307] – though what this means and why teachers were concerned about it is not fully explored.

Where literature exploring RE demonstrates ambiguity similar to that highlighted in my research, this also appears to be underpinned by concerns for inclusivity. Though there have been moves to ensure that nonreligious views are increasingly included in the study of RE, and language has in some quarters shifted towards exploring "values" or "worldviews" as opposed to rigid faith traditions in these lessons, it is still generally assumed – in academic literature, official guidance documents, and subject curriculums – that religions are the main focus of these lessons; after all, the law clearly states that schools must, in these lessons, teach about the "principal religions" in Great Britain. Yet, these same discourses also reveal the complex nature of this subject and the multiple ambiguities and uncertainties embedded within it.

Critics have variously claimed that, due to the lack of a national curriculum for RE, its absence from the "core curriculum", the paucity of funding and resources allocated to it, and the continued existence of the parental right to withdraw, confusion – or ambiguity – is generated around its aims, purpose and importance.[308] On one hand, schools are legally required to teach it and government officials have claimed that it is an important element of British schooling – a valuable avenue for promoting community cohesion and religious tolerance in our increasingly pluralistic society,[309] for example – while on the other, the *ways* in which it is implemented, or not, can often indicate opposing attitudes.

[306] Cheetham 'Collective Worship: A Window into Contemporary Understandings of the Nature of Religious Belief?' (2000), p. 73.
[307] Shillitoe and Strhan, ''Just leave it blank' non-religious children and their negotiation of prayer in school' (2020), p. 624-625.
[308] Mark Chater, 'The fire next time? A critical discussion of the National Curriculum Framework for RE and the policy recommendations in the *Review of Religious Education in England*', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 36.3 (2014), pp. 256-264 (p. 260); Paul Smalley, 'A critical policy analysis of local religious education in England', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 42.3 (2020), pp. 263-274 (p. 264).
[309] Moulin, 'Religious Education in England After 9/11' (2012), p. 165.

Literature also indicates that the intended impact of RE lessons is somewhat ambiguous. Despite this subject often being presented as an *objective* study of religious beliefs,[310] analyses of official and non-statutory guidance, as well as studies of real practice indicate that it often also has subjective or introspective elements. For example, critics point out that complete objectivity here is impossible to attain[311] especially as schools are required to prioritise Christianity over other worldviews[312], to present religious faith positively so as to fulfil community cohesion and anti-terrorism duties,[313] and to operate within a largely secular educational framework. Each of these factors adds a lens through which pupils encounter and explore various religious groups, which can shape the perceptions and attitudes they form, even if the school openly intends to provide objective study. The subject's close proximity to the collective worship duty, which *is* more openly confessional and introspective, further contributes to this,[314] as do the frequent declarations in official documents and by participants in academic research that these students are encouraged to explore and form their *own* personal beliefs and identities during or as a result of these lessons. So, while no existing study has explored schools' self-described approaches to RE in the way that I have, or on the scale that I have, what we *do* have does appear to support my conclusions regarding the ambiguously objective *and* introspective idealised nature of RE.

This ambiguity can also be traced back to concerns for inclusivity. The move from confessional Religious Instruction, towards phenomenological and ideally "objective" Religious Education, was partly a response to the fact that the former was becoming increasingly inappropriate and irrelevant for post-war multi-ethnic and multi-faith populations, and the more recent emphasis on pupils having the opportunity, either during or as a result of, these lessons to form their *own*, *personal* views regarding faith and spirituality is arguably an extension of this. Both demonstrate a reluctance among schools to use these sessions to induct pupils into a certain religious tradition, and a preference instead for accepting each individual's personal beliefs and agency to form these for themselves. Bryan and Revell's interviews with student teachers in England support this, showing that most participants who identified as Christian stated that they would not tell their students about their personal beliefs, mainly for fear of unduly influencing *their* personal views and therefore

[310] Jackson, 'Religious Education in England: The Story to 2013' (2013), p. 121; McKenna, Neill and Jackson, 'Personal worldviews, dialogue and tolerance – students' views on religious education in England' (2009), p. 49; Lynn Revell, 'Religious Education in England' (2008), p. 227.
[311] Daniel Moulin, 'Giving Voice to the 'Silent Minority': The experience of religious students in secondary school religious education lessons', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33.3 (2011), pp. 313-326 (p. 313)
[312] Revell, 'Religious Education in England' (2008), p. 231.
[313] Nixon, Smith and Fraser-Pearce, 'Irreligious Educators? An Empirical Study of the Academic qualifications, (A)theistic Positionality, and Religious Belief of Religious Education Teachers in England and Scotland', (2021), p. 16.
[314] Ibid., p. 18.

being branded as unprofessional,[315] and Mckenna, Neill and Jackson's questionnaire distributed among British secondary school children found that respondents' "commitment to…an inclusive approach to RE" was "striking".[316]

Finally, discourse surrounding school values has also previously noted a tendency towards vagueness and ambiguity – some studies have described schools' and teachers' values as "lacking clarity"[317] and any "precise nature"[318], by virtue of being short, simple lists of idealised characteristics or behaviours. While research offers little insight into the motivations behind schools' choices, it has been suggested that this vagueness is, similarly to cases discussed above, rooted in a desire that they be – or be perceived as – inclusive; James Arthur states that "[schools] have found subscribing to any set of values deeply problematic in a pluralist society and so they often commit themselves to nothing in particular."[319]

Furthermore, one of many criticisms levelled at the controversial fundamental British values also concerns their ambiguity; for example, on announcing that schools would be expected to actively promote these, newspaper headlines branded them variously as "vacuous nonsense", "Squelchy and foggy", and "Meaningless at best, dangerous at worst and a perversion of British history in any case".[320] There exists no official explanation for the vagueness of Fundamental British Values – or any official explanation of how and why they were selected, or why they were changed from values then Prime Minister Tony Blair described as "British" in 1997.[321] Nevertheless, it has been suggested that the concise list was created in order to inculcate inclusivity – "The values are both broad and vague, allowing many people to sign up to them. This avoids more precise definitions that might generate controversy."[322]

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[315] Bryan and Revell, 'Performativity, Faith and Professional Identity: Religious Education Teachers and the Ambiguities of Objectivity' (2011), p. 416.
[316] McKenna, Neill and Jackson, 'Personal worldviews, dialogue and tolerance – students' views on religious education in England' (2009), p. 61.
[317] James Arthur, *Citizens of Character: New Directions in Character and Values Education* (Andrews UK Ltd, 2010), p. 12.
[318] Anne Gold and others, 'Principled Principals? Values-Driven Leadership: Evidence from Ten Case Studies of 'Outstanding' School Leaders', *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 31.2 (2003), pp.127 – 138 (p. 135).
[319] James Arthur, *Citizens of Character: New Directions in Character and Values Education* (Andrews UK Ltd, 2010), p. 32.
[320] Robin Richardson, 'British values and British identity: Muddles, mixtures and ways ahead', *London Review of Education*, 13.2 (2015), pp. 37-48 (p. 42).
[321] Alison E. C. Struthers and Julie Mansuy, ''British Values Are Also Values All Around the World': teaching Fundamental British Values through a Human Rights Lens', *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 12.3 (2020), pp. 696-710 (p. 698).
[322] Carol Vincent and Myriam Hunter-Henin, 'The problem with teaching 'British values' in school', *The Conversation*, 6 February 2018, <https://theconversation.com/the-problem-with-teaching-british-values-in-school-83688> [accessed 03 October 2024].

Literature discussing the involvement of religion in school values lists – and fundamental British values – is rare, however Peter Hemming and Carol Vincent both explore this topic in separate, small-scale studies of English schools. Interestingly, both authors highlight instances where the values and ethos of the institutions that they studied had strong religious underpinnings and yet both also, arguably, reveal a persistent ambiguity in how these values are articulated and presented.

I noted earlier that within my samples, faith schools were more likely than non-faith counterparts to explicitly associate their values lists with religion. This is also essentially what Hemming finds. He used ethnographic methods to study with two primary schools in England – one non-faith Community school and one Voluntary Aided Roman Catholic school – exploring if and how religion featured in their ethos and everyday practices. He found that while the non-faith school's ethos promoted a "generic humanist position" that emphasised values such as "inclusion, diversity and respect for individual differences"[323], in the Roman Catholic school, "religious values and practices permeat[ed] everyday…life"[324]. Given that he only studied two schools, Hemming makes no claims about generalizability here – he does not suggest that *all* faith schools in England feature religious values so explicitly and prominently – and therefore there is no clash between his findings and my assertions, made so far in this thesis, that explicit connections between English state schools' values and religion are, overall, rare. Instead, his in-depth exploration of these schools and their opposing approaches to integrating religious values into their ethos is illuminating, offering a level of detailed insight that analyses of school websites cannot offer.

Furthermore, my claims about school values often being presented as highly ambiguous are also arguably supported by Hemming's work – specifically in his discussion of the values of the non-faith school he studied. This school did not identify its own values as "humanist"; rather, this was a term Hemming employed in his analysis to characterise their emphasis on individual autonomy and moral reasoning. This aligns with the findings of Strhan and Shillitoe, who observed that English primary schools often promote implicitly humanistic values – particularly those related to individual choice and freedom in matters of religion – without explicitly framing them as such.[325] Consequently, while the school's ethos was clear in what it aimed to promote to pupils, it was *not* clearly aligned with any particular worldview or philosophical framework. Hemming suggests that this enables the school's values to be considered acceptable by many within the diverse, multi-cultural and religiously pluralistic community that the institution serves. These values, then, were neither explicitly religious

[323] Peter Hemming, *Religion in the Primary School: ethos, diversity, citizenship,* 1st edn (Routledge, 2017), p. 116.
[324] Ibid., p.56.
[325] Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe, *Growing up Godless: non-religious childhoods in contemporary England* (Princeton University Press, 2025), p. 90.

nor overtly secular or anti-religious, contributing to their wide appeal. While he does not suggest that the ethos and values of this non-faith school are representative of all non-faith state schools in England, the case study he presents appears to offer valuable support for the inclusive ambiguity identified in my own large-scale research.

Carol Vincent conducted 55 interviews and 44 observations in 9 case study schools – primary and secondary – in England, exploring the "complex inter-relationships between religion, values and civic virtue" in these institutions and the English education system more broadly.[326] She claims that religion "permeates" values education in English schools in two ways[327]. First, in the discourse underpinning the imposition of fundamental British values where anxiety concerning Islam features heavily, and second, in the methods that schools use to promote their own values. Vincent observes that even when schools do not explicitly associate their values with religion, they often employ pedagogical strategies that closely resemble those used by religious communities to transmit beliefs and moral teachings. For example, schools often develop lists of core values that function as behavioural frameworks, effectively replacing traditional rules. These values are intended not only to guide behaviour in school but to shape children's moral development beyond it—one headteacher, for instance, described them as "qualities that are going to help you in life." These values are reinforced through lessons, assemblies, and visual reminders such as noticeboards displayed throughout the school. Vincent argues that this practice unintentionally mirrors aspects of religious communities.[328] However, she does not fully explain how these methods differ from those used in other areas of the curriculum, nor does she provide concrete examples of religious communities engaging in similar practices, to prove that there is indeed a likeness.

Furthermore, in discussing one non-faith school that she claimed demonstrated this resemblance, Vincent acknowledges that "this was not the result of deliberate intention by the school leadership"[329]; simply something that she, as a researcher of this topic, identified. That is, this connection between the school's values education programme and religion was her own interpretation, informed by her in-depth understanding of the historical relationship between moral education and religious discourse. For most observers, particularly parents or community members, any connections with particular worldviews would likely go unnoticed. The school itself did not explicitly align their values with religious teachings or figures, nor did they present them as anti-religious or atheistic values and consequently, while it might not be their intention to be associated

[326] Vincent, 'Civil virtue and values teaching in a 'post-secular' world' (2018), p. 227.
[327] Ibid.
[328] Ibid., p. 243.
[329] Ibid., p. 236.

with any particular worldview, Vincent's analysis here demonstrates that such ambiguity surrounding school values *enables* them to be interpreted in a variety of ways by different individuals, influenced by their differing contexts and worldviews.

It is likely that schools will give a more detailed explanation and perhaps justification of their chosen values when promoting these to pupils in lessons or assemblies – giving examples of how to treat others with respect, for example, or providing reasons why the school thinks that this is a good value to be teaching – in which case, the *lack* of detail and explanation offered online, despite websites being important sources of communication between school and parents, and a key element of their self-marketization, is interesting and seemingly intentional. We would have to interview school teachers to be sure of the motivations for presenting values in this way but it appears that a desire for inclusivity is likely part of the rationale here.

This chapter has so far demonstrated that school websites are often unclear about if and how religion features in their school gatherings and values, and about the intended impact of RE lessons on pupils. I have also shown that this tendency towards ambiguity has been demonstrated in existing literature and previous studies too – though not with samples of schools as large or diverse as mine, and not in relation to all three areas of school life together. It is most clearly highlighted and most seriously interrogated in research exploring collective worship, indicating that more research into where, how, and why this ambiguity features in RE and school values would be helpful to generate an equal understanding across these areas of school life.

Finally, in exploring support for this religious ambiguity in existing literature and research, I have also demonstrated that in all three areas of school life it can be traced – at least partially – to desires among school staff for these to be, or at least to be perceived as being, inclusive of all pupils – recognising that they likely come from diverse backgrounds with views that differ from each other and the teachers, and recognising that schools should not force them to change these views but should respect and protect the pupils' integrity. This reverence for inclusivity requires accepting that individuals can and should be able to form their *own* beliefs on religious and spiritual matters, and that it is not the school's place to overtly and intentionally influence pupils' beliefs in this respect. It also ultimately grants power to the pupil to make decisions for themselves – or to the parents to shape their children's religious lives in their preferred direction. Students and parents are not expected to mould their personal beliefs about religion or spirituality to those of the school, but many of the schools that I have studied, and that others have studied and written about, appear to mould their approaches to religion to the sensibilities of its pupil population.

Academics have linked inclusion with liberal individualistic approaches to religion; for example, Katz et al's interviews with Gen Z noted their "widespread concern with values pertaining to equity, inclusion and frequent respect for diversity", going on to suggest that the notion of free individual choice in relation to religion was "sacred" for them. However, sociologists have also identified privatisation and individualisation as trends in broader societal attitudes towards religion – not just among Gen Z.[330] They are mentioned as core parts of contemporary secularization theories,[331] in descriptions and analyses of the so-called "religious marketplace",[332] and are even reflected in approaches adopted by religious groups to remain relevant and interesting to modern audiences.[333] Consequently, Bruce stated that "the purpose of religion is no longer to glorify God: it is to help find peace of mind and personal satisfaction"[334] and my dataset indicates that, in many English state schools, the purpose of state education is no longer to instil Christian faith and knowledge in pupils – something that would have been taken for granted some time ago – but to allow students to explore and express religion and spirituality for themselves; or, this is the narrative that many school websites reflect, partially through employing ambiguity in areas of school life where religion may feature.

Of course, some schools in my sample were *not* ambiguous as to whether and how religion featured in their activities – some explicitly stated their intentions to instil specific religious beliefs and identities in pupils through gatherings, RE and school values. These exceptions do not necessarily falsify my argument here, but rather demonstrate that there are some limits to the popularity and prevalence of these liberal individualistic approaches to religion and belief in contemporary British society. This will be explored in more detail in the last chapter of this thesis, ''T' is for Tacit Restrictions'.

Blurred boundaries

Another way of interpreting these findings is as a demonstration of previous academics' claims regarding the commonplace "blurring" of religiosity and non-religiosity, in contemporary British society. Though many statistics chart the declines of Christian belief, affiliation, and practice among the British population over recent decades, multiple sociologists have evidenced that the popularity and prevalence of strict atheistic worldviews have not, simultaneously, risen exponentially. Woodhead's research into the beliefs and behaviours of British "nones" – those who self-identify as

[330] Katz and others, *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age* (2021).
[331] Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (2011), p. 119.
[332] Rob Warner, *Secularization and its Discontents* (2010), p. 30.
[333] Mathew Guest, *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the Twenty-first Century* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), pp. 38-45.
[334] Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 13.

"nonreligious" – found that less than half (41.5%) were "convinced atheists" in that they definitely did *not* believe in a God or higher power, and only a small minority (13%) held views similar to those of New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins.[335] Instead, most Britons now appear to exist in what Voas refers to as the "fuzzy middle"[336]; neither clearly or strictly adopting traditional religious beliefs and worldviews, nor wholeheartedly eschewing these and taking up rigidly atheistic and anti-religious stances.

The apparent reluctance felt by institutions towards overtly stating whether a part of their activities is intended to be experienced as in line with a particular religious tradition, and the resultant ambiguity caused by therefore combining religious and nonreligious elements in close proximity, with little to no distinction between the two, could be catering to this fuzzy majority. I cannot tell from my research whether this is intentional or conscious on the part of schools or not, but it is nevertheless interesting from a sociology of religion standpoint.

Given the dramatic decline of Christian affiliation and rise of "nonreligion" one might expect that the presence of religion or spirituality in public spaces would be becoming less acceptable, however this does not appear to be the case; schools – even those with no official religious affiliation – do not seem to be expected to eradicate all interactions with religion, or at least all *opportunity* for interaction with religion, as is the case in other proudly "secular" countries such as the United States of America and France. This is not to say that expectations over the *way* that religion features and operates in public spaces has not changed over recent decades in England – the emphasis on individual agency and choice that has developed over recent decades is one clear example that it has[337] – but clearly, the religious changes that have taken place in contemporary Britain are not necessarily linear, from religious to atheistic, and the relationship between these two classifications is much more complex and nuanced than is often expressed in overviews of contemporary religious trends; as Linda Woodhead points out, "people don't fit the categories which the state, religious leaders and many academics continue to use"[338] because, in Steve Bruce's words, "the religious and secular are not mirror images of each other."[339] If schools are, as has previously been suggested, "microcosms" reflective of wider society,[340] it seems likely that their willingness to forgo clear

[335] Woodhead, The rise of no religion in Britain: the emergence of a new cultural majority' (2016), p. 250.
[336] David Voas, 'The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe', *European Sociological Review*, 25.2 (2009), pp. 155-168 (p. 163).
[337] Guest, *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the Twenty-first Century* (2022), p. 23.
[338] Woodhead, 'Intensified Religious Pluralism and De-differentiation: the British Example' (2016), p. 43.
[339] Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (2011), p. 19.
[340] Ipgrave, 'Conversations Between the Religious and Secular in English Schools' (2012), p. 47.

boundaries between religious and secular parts of school life – to exist in the fuzzy middle – is due to, or permitted by, the fact that this blurring occurs regularly, and often without controversy, throughout said wider society. Once more, this reflects the prevalence of individualistic perceptions of and attitudes towards religion. Individuals – and apparently institutions – can exist in this ambiguous religious and nonreligious space because they are no longer expected to adopt complete belief systems of conventional religious traditions. Instead, they can enter and act within the religious marketplace, determining their own views for themselves; they have "become their own priest". Acting in this way and allowing others to act in this way requires perceptions of religion as something that is private and in large part personally determined or chosen, and renders simple categorisation of individuals – and institutions – as "religious" or "nonreligious" impossible, as will be further explored in the final chapter of this thesis.

In conclusion, the previous chapter showed that most English state school websites do not explicitly state that their approaches to religious aspects of school life are underpinned by adherence to values of individual liberalism – choice statements were not published by *all* schools, and not in *all* areas of school life where religion could be involved. Yet, the tendencies highlighted in this present chapter for schools to shroud these aspects of their activities in ambiguity so as to grant individuals freedom to inject their own interpretations of proceedings in line with their own personal beliefs demonstrates implicit adherence to these liberal individualistic perceptions of and engagements with religion and spirituality; either by revealing widespread concerns for inclusivity – or at least giving the impression of this – which requires respect for individual choices, or by revealing the blurred nature of religion and secularity in contemporary British society, which reflects the expected personal nature of these choices.

This has confusing implications for claims made by academics previously that notions of free individual choice are "sacred" or "sovereign" in contemporary British society, in relation to matters of religion and spirituality – both supporting and challenging them, seemingly simultaneously. The next chapter explores a second trend highlighted in analysis of my dataset which contributes further to this discussion, revealing further evidence of implicit reverence for notions of religious choice, as well as limitations to this.

5. ‘C is for Contrasting Approaches

To briefly recap, the research questions being explored in this thesis are:

3. How does religion feature in the operations and activities of English state-funded schools – according to their websites?

4. What does this indicate about broader societal attitudes towards religion; specifically, the value supposedly placed on notions of “free individual choice” in relation to religious matters?

The size and complexity of the dataset generated by my study of school websites means that there is no concise answer to the first question. Aside from the tendency for religious ambiguity described in the previous chapter, analysis of my dataset does not reveal many overarching trends in English state schools’ self-described approaches to collective worship, RE, school values, or faith-related admissions criteria. In fact, the ways in which institutions claim to feature and engage with religion in these areas of school life appear to contrast in many significant ways. This diversity is the focus of the present chapter – I will outline some key trends in schools’ methods for interacting with religion and belief as described on their websites while also outlining how these vary significantly between institutions. I intend for this to provide a comprehensive response to the first of my research questions but I will also argue that these findings are extremely relevant to my second one too.

While I could not ask schools directly if and how notions of religious choice and individual freedoms underpinned their chosen approaches to these areas of school life, I will suggest that the diversity of methods indicated in my dataset, coupled with a paucity of justifications for these or explanations of the motivations behind their selection, reflects a widespread sense of independence in relation to whether and how schools engage with and feature religion. Of course, schools cannot simply do whatever they wish here – there are some boundaries imposed by law or diocesan authorities that shape if, how, and when, schools engage with religious matters – nevertheless, institutions are generally granted significant freedom to form their own approaches to these aspects of school life and my dataset indicates that most exercise this. The previous chapters of this thesis have explored ways in which schools’ approaches to religion appear to actively protect and promote pupils’ religious freedoms and choices. However, I will propose that the tendency for diversity evidenced in *this* chapter demonstrates a widespread assumption that institutions should also have agency over religious matters – their *own* “right to choose” if and how to involve explorations of religion in their activities and school life – without the need to defer to the guidance or expectations of traditional authorities; religious or otherwise. I will argue that this provides further evidence of English state

schools' – and by extension, wider English society's – implicit commitment to neo-liberal, individualistic perceptions of and engagement with, religion and spirituality.

I will present evidence for these claims in relation to each of my four research foci separately, beginning with Faith Admissions Policies, then turning to collective worship, school values, and RE, before discussing the diversity demonstrated in relation to each area collectively.

Faith-related Admissions Criteria - findings

So far in this thesis, faith admissions policies have been the only of my four research foci consistently failing to demonstrate – explicitly or implicitly – the importance of free individual choice in schools' engagements with religion. Unlike collective worship, RE, and school values, website overviews of faith-related admissions policies were never accompanied by explicit assurances of schools' intentions to protect and promote individual choice or religious agency – "choice statements" – and were only very rarely presented with any hint of ambiguity. However, the tendency for schools to adopt contrasting approaches to featuring and engaging with religion is very clearly demonstrated in this portion of my dataset. Schools in my faith booster sample – the only sample where I collected and analysed oversubscription admissions policies – approached the issues of *whether* to include applicants' religious background as a criterion of admission when oversubscribed, and exactly *how* to do this, in highly diverse ways. Before outlining these, it is important to note that because state-funded faith schools in England are overwhelmingly Christian, church schools made up the vast majority of institutions in my faith school booster sample, and the admissions criteria they use reflects this. Consequently, the following findings explore trends in Christian faith schools; further research would need to be conducted with non-Christian faith schools to explore the admissions processes applied in these institutions.

The first hint that schools approach faith-related admissions in varying ways is revealed by considering how many institutions include religious criteria in their admissions policies and how many do not. As outlined in the previous chapter of this thesis, ''A' is for Ambiguity' (Figure 4.9, replicated below), while many schools in my faith booster sample (60%) chose to include faith-related criteria in their oversubscription criteria, many (30%) did not. The rest (10%) did not provide a clear overview of their oversubscription policies online.

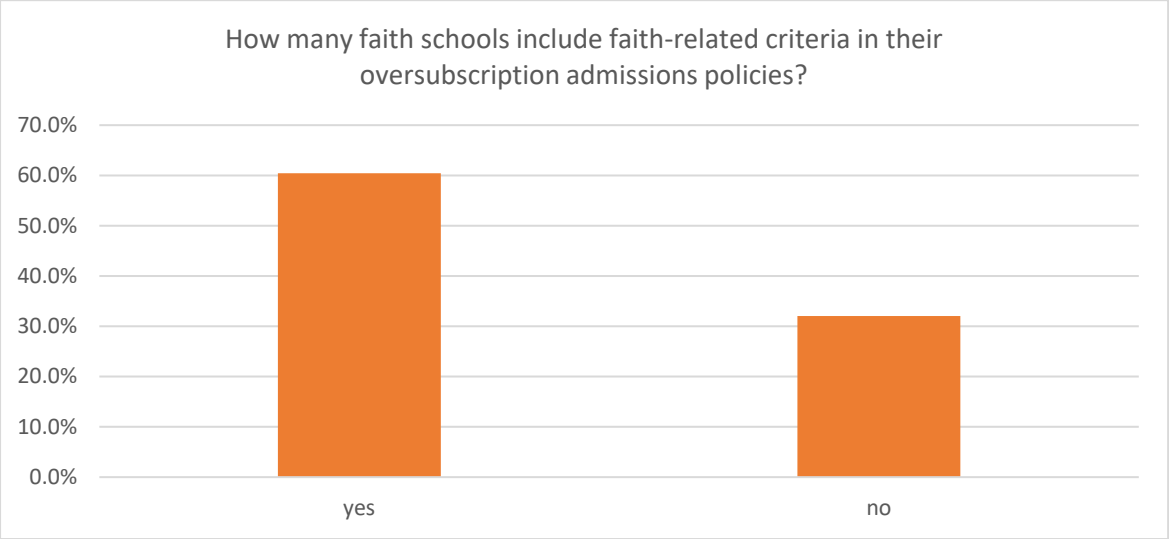


Figure 5.1: Percentage of schools in my faith-booster sample who include faith-related criteria in oversubscription policies

Given that discussions about faith school admissions policies usually acknowledge that faith-related criteria are not *always* included[341], this is not a groundbreaking finding. However, it clearly demonstrates at least two contrasting attitudes towards the notion of offering places to applicants based partially on their religious background; one where this is deemed useful and acceptable, and another where it is apparently not, both held by substantial proportions of state-funded faith schools. Furthermore, where schools *do* include faith-related criteria, my dataset shows that the methods used and significance attributed to these vary significantly between institutions.

Methods of including faith in admissions criteria

The third chapter of this thesis, ‘‘F’ is for Free Choice’, revealed that faith-related admissions criteria variously concerned applicants’ baptism status, the regularity of their and their families’ church attendance – sometimes both – or their possession of a Catholic Certificate of Practice (Figure 5.2, replicated below).

[341] Clarke and Woodhead, *A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools* (2015), pp. 53-55; West, Hind and Pennell, ‘School Admissions and ’Selection’ in Comprehensive Schools: Policy and Practice’ (2004), p. 356.

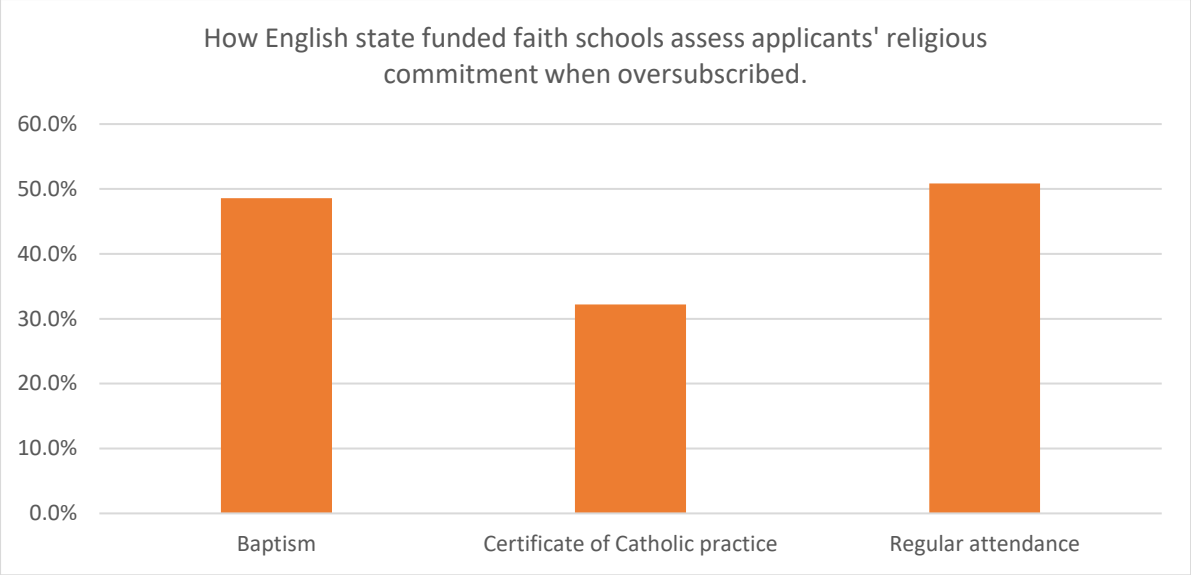


Figure 5.2: Faith-related criteria considered by English state schools in oversubscription policies – percentages of all schools in my booster sample of faith schools, with faith-related criteria in their oversubscription policies.

Again, this is not a ground-breaking finding – existing literature has noted these three options as commonplace faith-related admissions criteria – but they each reflect different approaches to determining or measuring applicants' religious commitment. Additionally, if we look closely at how schools define "regular attendance" at church in my dataset, even more variations become apparent. Where an individual's baptism status or possession of a Catholic Certificate of Practice is relatively black and white – they either have it or they do not – there is no universally agreed timeframe in which one can be said to have attended church "regularly". Consequently, schools are able – within limits – to determine their own framework and as Table 5.1 shows, they contrast significantly in how frequently applicants are expected to attend such services, and the length of time over which they are expected to maintain this.

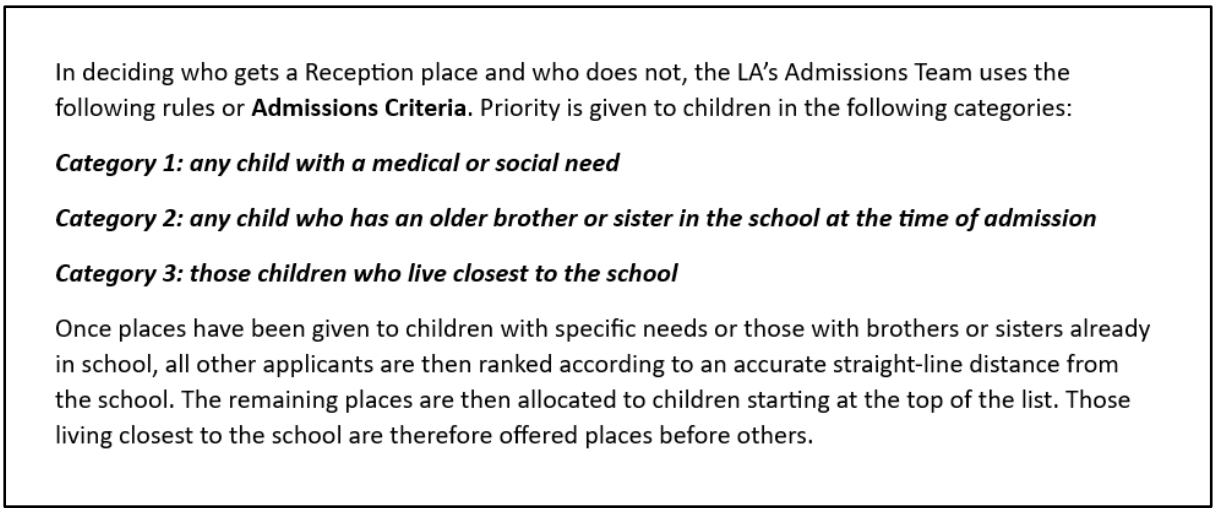
How regularly pupils should attend religious services	Length of time pupils should attend services "regularly"							
	6 months	12 months	18 months	2 years	3 years	5 years	unclear	Total
Once a month	16	52	1	11	0	0	11	91
twice a month	9	12	1	17	1	0	1	41
26 times	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
15 times a year	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
10 times a year	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
4 times a year	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
unclear	1	0	0	0	0	1	28	30

Table 5.1: How English state-funded faith schools define "regular church attendance" as a criterion of admission in their oversubscription policies.

Although the most-popular definition of "regular attendance" was attending church once a month for 12 months prior to applying to the school, a significant number of institutions in my sample opted for different boundaries – the least demanding required applicants to attend church four times in the 12 months prior to applying whereas the most demanding required attendance twice a month for three years prior to applying. To complicate matters further, 20 schools did not clearly define "regular attendance" but said that those who attended church more regularly, for a longer period of time, would be prioritised above those who attended less regularly or over a shorter period of time. However, this does not mean that all schools opting for other faith-related criteria implemented these uniformly; analysis of my dataset indicates that the significance attributed to these criteria varies significantly across all institutions.

Significance of faith-related admissions criteria

The oversubscription criteria in schools' admissions policies are always listed in order of importance. For example, the excerpt below is taken from the policy of one faith school in my booster sample.


In deciding who gets a Reception place and who does not, the LA's Admissions Team uses the following rules or **Admissions Criteria.** Priority is given to children in the following categories:

Category 1: any child with a medical or social need

Category 2: any child who has an older brother or sister in the school at the time of admission

Category 3: those children who live closest to the school

Once places have been given to children with specific needs or those with brothers or sisters already in school, all other applicants are then ranked according to an accurate straight-line distance from the school. The remaining places are then allocated to children starting at the top of the list. Those living closest to the school are therefore offered places before others.

Figure 5.3: A screenshot of an English state-funded school's oversubscription admissions policy, taken from a school website in my main sample.

As this passage explains, if the school is oversubscribed, they will offer places to all applicants who fulfil the first criteria – in this case, all applicants with medical or social needs. They then take all remaining applicants and allocate places to those who qualify for the second criteria – in this case, all those with siblings already attending the school. If there are still places to allocate after having admitted all applicants under these first two criteria, then remaining applicants are ranked based on their distance to the school and given places accordingly. This continues until all the school places have been allocated. Any applicants remaining after this point are unsuccessful. As a result, the placement of the faith-related criterion/a, within this list, is significant; if it features near the top of the list, applicants meeting this requirement have a high chance of being offered a place based on their religious background, whereas if it features towards or at the end of the list, applicants with strong nonreligious connections to the school – for example those with siblings at the school or who live nearby – will already be offered places on the basis of these, before those with *just* a religious connection are considered. In the latter case, meeting the faith criteria/on is less critical to securing a school place.

To measure the significance attributed to faith-related criteria in my dataset, I first identified the most-common nonreligious criteria in schools' policies and the order in which they were usually listed. These are:

1. Whether the applicant was a Looked After Child (LAC) under the care of the local authority,
2. If the applicant has a sibling already enrolled at the school,
3. If the applicant lives near to the school – sometimes within a pre-determined "catchment area," other times distance between home and school is measured and those who live nearest the school are admitted first.
4. Any other children.

I categorised schools based on where their first faith-related criterion featured in relation to these nonreligious criteria:

Category A schools were those who considered an applicant's religious background before any other non-faith-related criteria were considered, including before Looked After Children (LAC).

Category B schools considered applicants' religious backgrounds only after having admitted applicants who are Looked After Children.

Category C schools offered places to applicants based on their religious background after having admitted all who are LAC and all who have siblings at the school, but before those who lived nearby *or* after admitting all who are LAC and then all who live nearby the school but before all who have siblings already in attendance – so, after some significant nonreligious criteria, but not all of them.

Category D schools listed faith-related criteria after all of the above; that is, they admitted all applicants who were LAC, or had siblings at the school, or who lived nearby the school before they admitted applicants based on their religious background. In these circumstances, it is likely that most – if not all – school places are given to applicants based on the non-faith-related criteria and therefore the faith criterion holds very limited significance.

Finally, a separate category, **Category E**, was created for schools who reserved a portion of their places to be allocated on the basis of applicants' religious backgrounds, and ensured that all other places would be allocated based on non-faith-related criteria such as if applicants have siblings at the school or live nearby.

A table providing further explanation for and examples of these categories can be found in the Appendix 2 of this thesis.

Figure 5.4 below shows how many schools in my faith booster sample belong to each category of this typology – as percentages of all who implemented faith-related admissions criteria.

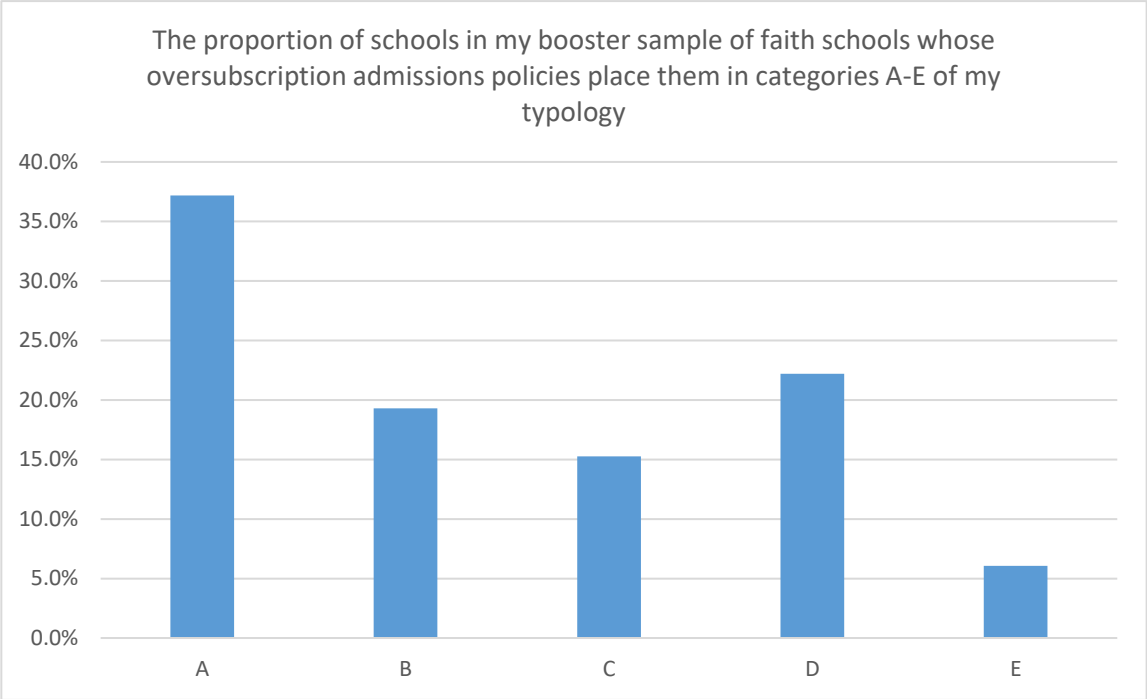


Figure 5.4 – The proportion of schools in categories A-E of my typology, based on where they place faith-related criteria in their oversubscription policies, as percentages of all schools in my faith booster sample who included such criteria in their policies.

Almost 40% of schools in my faith-booster sample, who implemented faith-related admissions criteria, belong in Category A – they consider applicants' religious background before anything else, admitting those who fit their religious criteria before those with other legitimate nonreligious ties to the school such as having a sibling there or living nearby; even apparently before admitting Looked After Children (LAC) in the local area. However, the second most-common category among faith schools I studied who implemented faith-related admissions criteria was Category D, where applicants' religious backgrounds are considered as a basis for securing a school place only *after* all other key nonreligious admissions criteria have been considered – almost a quarter of schools in my faith booster sample with faith-related oversubscription admissions policies fit in this group. Again, these findings demonstrate contrasting approaches to the inclusion of faith-related criteria in schools' oversubscription policies – some present pupils' religious background as a key element of

their success in gaining a place, whereas others prioritise various alternative, nonreligious factors before this.

Consequently, rather than identifying a single template used by most faith schools for implementing faith-related admissions criteria, my findings demonstrate multiple ways in which schools appear to adopt contrasting attitudes towards and methods for implementing such criteria. This is permitted under current legislation. The 2021 School Admissions Code prohibits non-faith schools from considering applicants' religious background when choosing whom to offer places, and it stipulates that faith schools should only include such considerations in the event that they are oversubscribed. While there are some stipulations around how faith schools can do this – they must make sure that parents can easily understand how any faith-related criteria will be satisfied, looked after children must always be prioritised above non-looked after children, and they must consult with their specific admissions authorities[342] – it stops short of prescribing a set approach for faith schools here. Therefore, schools are granted some freedom here and my dataset suggests that schools are exercising it. We would need further research to understand *why* schools opted for the specific policies that they did as this information was, unfortunately, not provided online, however a similar complexity and diversity are also evident in schools' self-described approaches to collective worship.

Collective Worship - findings

Just as the first indication of diversity in schools' approaches to faith-related admissions criteria was the fact that many schools chose *not* to include such criteria in their admissions policies, so the first indication of diversity within approaches to collective worship is, in my dataset, the relatively large proportion of schools who appear to *not* fulfil this requirement. 32.9% of schools in my main sample did not mention conducting regular worship sessions with their pupils, and when describing regular school gatherings – usually called "assemblies" – they did not claim to cover any religious topics or include any religious practices within these. Consequently, they give no indication that they comply with the legal requirement to lead pupils in regular acts of collective worship. Previous studies have predicted much higher levels of non-compliance; in 2004 Ofsted announced that 76% of secondary schools were not fulfilling the obligation for collective worship[343] and in 2011 a ComRes survey commissioned by the BBC reported that 64% of parents who responded said that their child's school

[342] Department for Education, *School Admissions Code* (Department for Education, 2021), p. 16, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60ebfeb08fa8f50c76838685/School_admissions_code_2021.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2024].
[343] Staff and agencies, 'Call to drop collective worship', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/apr/21/schools.uk2> [accessed 6 April 2024].

did not do collective worship.[344] It is possible that these higher projections are more accurate – that the school websites on which my data is based may want to give a false impression of compliance for the benefit of Ofsted inspectors who – among other things – "review and consider" information available on schools' websites when preparing for an inspection.[345] We would need more research involving direct interaction with schools to be sure, but as my research does not aim to map *actual* goings-on in schools, but instead how they *claim* to approach these areas of school life, this does not immediately invalidate my work. Instead, in analysing these claims surrounding collective worship – or the lack thereof – it quickly becomes apparent that there exist two contrasting attitudes towards this duty held by different state-funded schools in England; one which considers compliance, or at least giving the impression of this, to be appropriate and/or necessary, and another which does not. However, variations between schools' approaches do not end here; my dataset shows that where schools appear to lead pupils in regular worship, the *way* in which they do this also tends to differ significantly between institutions.

Content of school gatherings

As explained in the previous chapter, ''A' is for Ambiguity', my analysis of school websites' descriptions of collective worship/gatherings revealed four "types" of content or topics of interest apparently explored during these sessions. These were:

> **Citizenship Education –** content aiming to develop pupils into good citizens by, for example, promoting positive values or instilling a community spirit
>
> **School Matters** – content celebrating pupils' achievements, giving notices about school activities, and inviting children to share what they have been learning about in class.
>
> **Learning About Religion** – content teaching pupils *about* religious beliefs or practices in a more objective manner, similarly to Religious Education lessons
>
> **Doing Religion** – content where pupils are invited or expected to participate in religious practices such as praying or singing hymns.

[344] 'State schools 'not providing group worship'', *BBC News*, 6 September 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-14794472> [accessed 6 April 2024].
[345] School inspection handbook', Ofsted (2024), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/school-inspection-handbook-for-september-2023#before-the-inspection> [accessed 15 December 2024].

School websites generally contained a large amount of information pertaining to school gatherings, so identifying a small number of different "types" of content was a useful way of breaking down a comprehensive textual dataset. However, as I also showed in the previous chapter, school gatherings often appeared to combine content from several of these categories. It was very rare that gatherings explored topics and activities that could solely be categorised as "Learning about Religion" or "Doing Religion", but the exact combination of content types implemented varied between institutions.

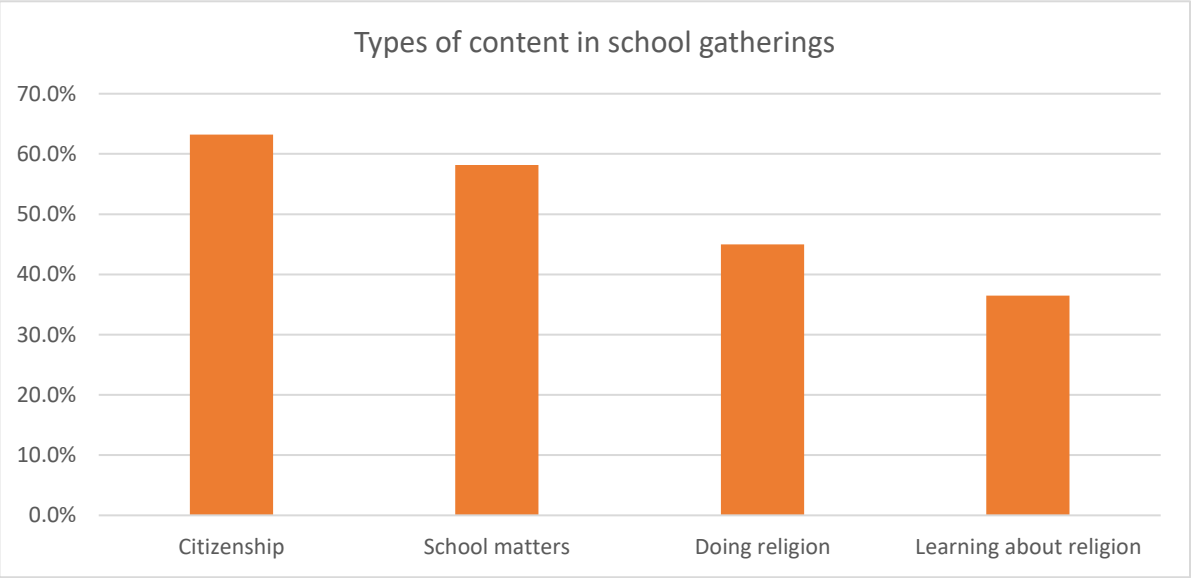


Figure 5.5: (replication of Figure 4.2) The types of content covered in gatherings – as a percentage of schools whose websites indicated they do gatherings.

Figure 5.5 is a replication of Figure 4.2 from the previous chapter and shows the varying prevalence of these four content types in school gatherings. However, as was also indicated in the previous chapter, this apparently clean and simple categorisation conceals a more complicated reality; each of these four content labels is an umbrella under which a wide range of activities and topics are collated. For example, Figure 4.3 in the previous chapter (replicated in Figure 5.6 below), demonstrates the various forms of "Doing Religion" as illustrated in my dataset.

Doing Religion

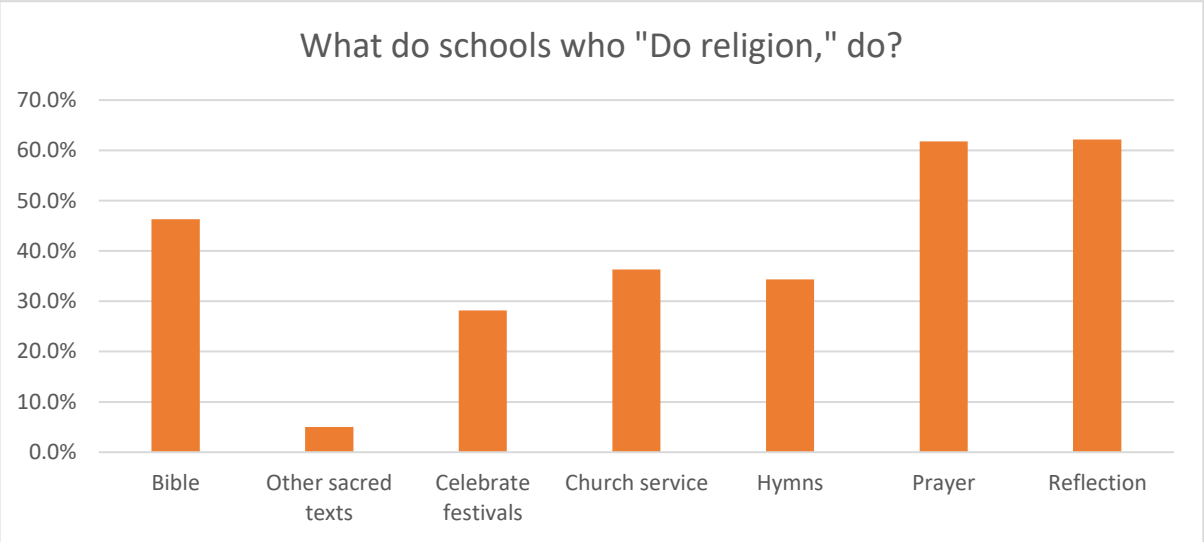


Figure 5.6 Activities associated with "Doing Religion" and the proportions of schools in my main sample, coded as "Doing Religion" in their gatherings, who implement them.

These are a wide range of activities, and gatherings implementing different ones – or different combinations – will create very different experiences for the pupils in attendance. They will also reflect contrasts between different schools' approaches to what constitutes "collective worship" and how this should be conducted. However, the variation does not end here; further analysis of my dataset reveals that even *within* these activity categories, different schools executed these activities in contrasting ways. There is not space here to demonstrate this for each of the activities categorised under the "Doing Religion" label, so I will focus on the three most-commonly mentioned activities from the graph above – Bible-reading/listening, Prayers, and Reflections

Almost 50% of schools in my main sample whose content involved "doing religion" explored the Bible in some way but how this was done varied significantly across institutions. For example, some schools indicated that children would passively listen to Bible stories read by a teacher or adult visitor, while others claimed that pupils were involved in reading and discussing the Bible during these times, even participating in theatrical re-enactments of Bible stories via the Open the Book initiative.[346]

[346] Open the Book is a story-telling initiative promoted by The Bible Society that aims to bring Bible stories to life for school children. Volunteers – usually members of a church – visit local schools regularly to share Bible stories in fun, interactive and memorable ways, usually during collective worship or school assembly. For more information - <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/get-involved/open-the-book/> [accessed 10/07/25].

School gatherings also appeared to involve prayer in different ways; some institutions indicated that this was a collective act, involving the whole school but led by an adult, others stated that pupils would pray individually in silence, and others still described situations where pupils took turns leading the school in a prayer. The content of these prayers was not often shared online but in some a consistent framework or "school prayer" appears to be regularly used in school gatherings, whereas others indicated that prayers were more improvised. Furthermore, institutions also appeared to expect different responses from pupils to invitations to prayer; some institutions required that all pupils participate fully and vocally in sessions of prayer – joining in saying "Amen", for example, whereas others indicated that pupils were able to choose not to participate if they wished – though most stipulated that they should remain silent and respectful of those who *did* want to pray at these times. Whether this latter route really works – Strhan and Shillitoe reported that some primary school children felt compelled to join in with prayers even when teachers did not explicitly force them to, for fear of "getting in trouble,"[347] – it is appears that there is no single, uniform way in which prayers are included in school gatherings. Instead, different approaches and methods are implemented by different institutions.

Finally, "Reflections" are listed in my analysis as a religious practice because they were, in the vast majority of cases, closely associated with prayer – hence why the proportion of schools doing both in Figure 5.6 above is almost exactly the same. However, there was some variation between schools in the topics that pupils were expected to reflect on, and the intended outcomes of these exercises; some institutions clearly hoped that pupils would reflect on religious matters, perhaps aiding the development of personal religious beliefs and identities, while others associated these "reflections" with meditation and broader spirituality – not focusing solely on traditional conceptions of religion, but also not explicitly ruling this out. The excerpts below demonstrate some of this diversity:

> "[Collective worship] is a time where children have the opportunity to learn, reflect and grow in their understanding of God and of themselves."
>
> "We use Christian symbols as a focus for reflection and provide opportunities to discover the value of meditation and silence."
>
> "Reflection on the world - Children are asked to think about British values and Christian values through issues that have arisen in school, or national or international news events."
>
> "Objectives of collective worship:

[347] Strhan and Shillitoe, ''Just leave it blank' non-religious children and their negotiation of prayer in school', (2020), p. 626.

- Reflect upon dimensions of human life – the wonderful, beautiful, joyful, heroic, humorous, tragic, sorrowful, solemn.
- Reflect on the way in which humankind has expressed the deepest spiritual feelings, through the creative and expressive arts, scientific discovery, religious practice, service to God and other people."

Learning About Religion

Schools whose content can be categorised as "Learning About Religion" did not often provide much detail about the exact topics they covered and activities implemented, however, they did tend to outline the intended outcomes of these educational gatherings, and again, my dataset indicates some diversity between institutions here. For example, some presented these elements of school gatherings as extensions of RE lessons:

> "In addition to weekly RE lessons, our pupils attend regular assemblies, which often have a current festival or celebration focus. We welcome visitors, such as the local Jewish Rabbi, who bring to life and extend pupils' knowledge of festivals."

Whereas others aligned them with the legal duty for all schools to promote the Fundamental British Values or to contribute to pupils' SMSC development and Citizenship education, for example:

> "At [redacted] School, all children participate in daily assemblies. During assemblies, children are invited to learn about different religious faiths and areas of Personal, Social, Health Education."

Others still appeared to want to teach *about* religious beliefs with a view to instilling these in pupils:

> "Through Collective Worship, symbols around the school and classroom practice we help [pupils] to learn about the loving God who made them and Jesus whose example they can follow."

My dataset cannot explain the motivations behind schools' varied approaches to featuring and exploring religion in their school gatherings – because, as with schools' descriptions of faith-related admissions policies, details of such were not provided online. Nor does my data shed light on how these activities are experienced by students and how – or indeed whether – they impact their personal beliefs; though these would both be interesting questions to tackle in future studies. Instead, these findings further emphasise the diversity of schools' approaches to collective worship. Institutions not only vary in whether traditional religious beliefs and teachings are featured in these sessions, or the broad framework in which this is done – Doing Religion, with an emphasis on experiencing religious practices, or Learning About Religion, with an emphasis on developing

academic understanding – but they are able to choose which specific activities will be implemented in line with this, and can utilise varying resources and build on varying intentions in doing-so. Consequently, my dataset does not highlight a single most popular approach to collective worship adopted by state schools in England, but instead it indicates a variety of ways in which schools are able to personalise the content of their gatherings.

Of course, no institution has complete free rein over the format and content of these sessions. They must adhere to the law which stipulates, for example, that collective worship should take place daily and that it should be "broadly Christian" – that is, not confessionally teaching the specific beliefs of any particular denomination, unless the school has an official religious designation – and that it should usually take place on the school premises.[348] They may also wish to align their practices with the preferences of their pupils' parents to avoid controversy and complaints – parents have, in the past, taken legal action against schools seen to be conducting assemblies that were "too Christian".[349] However, specific expectations concerning the form and content of collective worship have never been officially stated – not even in Education Acts or in Circular 1/94, the only official guidance ever published on this subject. Neither define what "worship" is or how it should differ from "assemblies", nor do they provide schools with a list of suggested activities or topics to cover in these sessions. Circular 1/94 does state that they should "contain some elements which relate specifically to the traditions of Christian belief and which accord a special status to Jesus Christ", but also goes on to say that content need not relate *solely* to Christianity[350] and, in fact, explicitly encourages institutions to form their *own* approaches to the duty:

> The extent to which and the ways in which the broad traditions of Christian belief are to be reflected in such acts of collective worship should be appropriate to the family backgrounds of the pupils and their ages and aptitudes. It is for the head teacher to determine this after consultation with the governing body.[351]

[348] *Education Reform Act 1988*, Part I, Chapter I, 6-7.
[349] Harriet Sherwood, 'Parents launch court action over Christian school assemblies', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2019, < https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/29/parents-launch-court-action-over-christian-school-assemblies> [accessed 14 October 2024].
[350] Department for Education, *Religious Education and Collective Worship: circular number 1/94* (1994), p.21
[351] Ibid., p.22.

Schools can find free guidance elsewhere from religious[352] and secular[353] sources, or they can purchase and implement assembly plans from private sellers,[354] however none of these are endorsed or recommended by official government educational authorities. Consequently, English state schools are allowed and indeed *expected* to formulate their own approach to school gatherings and specifically, to collective worship. In fact, this is reflected in the Church of England Board of Education's recent recommendation that schools ensure their collective worship is "inclusive, invitational and inspiring" by, among other things, considering what is "most appropriate…for the spiritual life of their particular community" and forming an approach that "grows out of the local context and out of pupils' experience."[355] The diverse nature of schools' approaches as demonstrated in my dataset indicates that many exercise the freedom that is available to them to create their own, individual approaches to fulfilling this duty. A similar trend is also evident in schools' approaches to values education.

School Values - findings

As with the previous sections of this chapter, variation in schools' approaches to involving religion in school values is quickly evidenced in observing the proportions of schools that appear to do this, and the proportion that do not. The third chapter of this thesis, 'F is for Free Choice' noted that of the 560 schools in my main sample who included values lists online, 140 (27%) appeared to associate these lists with religion in some way; though a clear minority this is still a substantial proportion, especially given that legislation does not encourage or even mention involving religious beliefs or traditions in schools' own values lists, whereas it *does* expect collective worship to be conducted and outlines ways that faith schools can include faith-related criteria in their oversubscription policies.

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[352] 'Collective Worship', Catholic Education Service [n.d.], <https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/schools/religious-education/item/1003584-collective-worship> [accessed 18 October 2024]; 'Church of England sets out guidance for collective worship', Church of England (2021), <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/news-releases/church-england-sets-out-guidance-collective-worship> [accessed 18 October 2024]; 'Primary school assemblies', CAFOD [n.d.], <https://cafod.org.uk/education/primary-teaching-resources/primary-school-assemblies> [accessed 18 October 2024].

[353] 'About Us, Assemblies For All, [n.d.], <https://assembliesforall.org.uk/about/> [accessed 18 October 2024].

[354] 'Sparkyard', Sparkyard by Out of the Ark, [n.d.], <https://www.sparkyard.com/> [accessed 15 December 2024]; 'Assemblies', Twinkl [n.d.], <https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resources/senior-leadership-team-slt/senior-leadership-team-assemblies> [accessed 15 December 2024]; 'Secondary assemblies resources', TES [n.d.] <https://www.tes.com/teaching-resources/hub/secondary/whole-school/assemblies/> [accessed 15 December 2024]; 'Ten:Ten Resources', Ten:Ten Resources [n.d.] <https://www.tentenresources.co.uk/> [accessed 15 December 2024].

[355] Church of England Education Office, *Collective Worship in Church of England Schools: Inclusive Invitational Inspiring* (Church of England, 2021), pp. 2-3, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/collective-worship-guidance-18052021.pdf> [accessed 15 December 2024].

The previous chapters of this thesis have also already shown that school values can be associated with religion in many different – or "contrasting" – ways; sometimes the values themselves explicitly reference religious beliefs, identities, or practices, sometimes schools describe or label their values lists as religious, and sometimes attempts to justify or explain their selected values reference religious figures or teachings. Once again, the variations do not end here; although my dataset reveals that only a small proportion of schools from my main sample, who provide values information online, implement these methods, the exact *ways* in which they did so varied significantly between institutions.

Religious Values

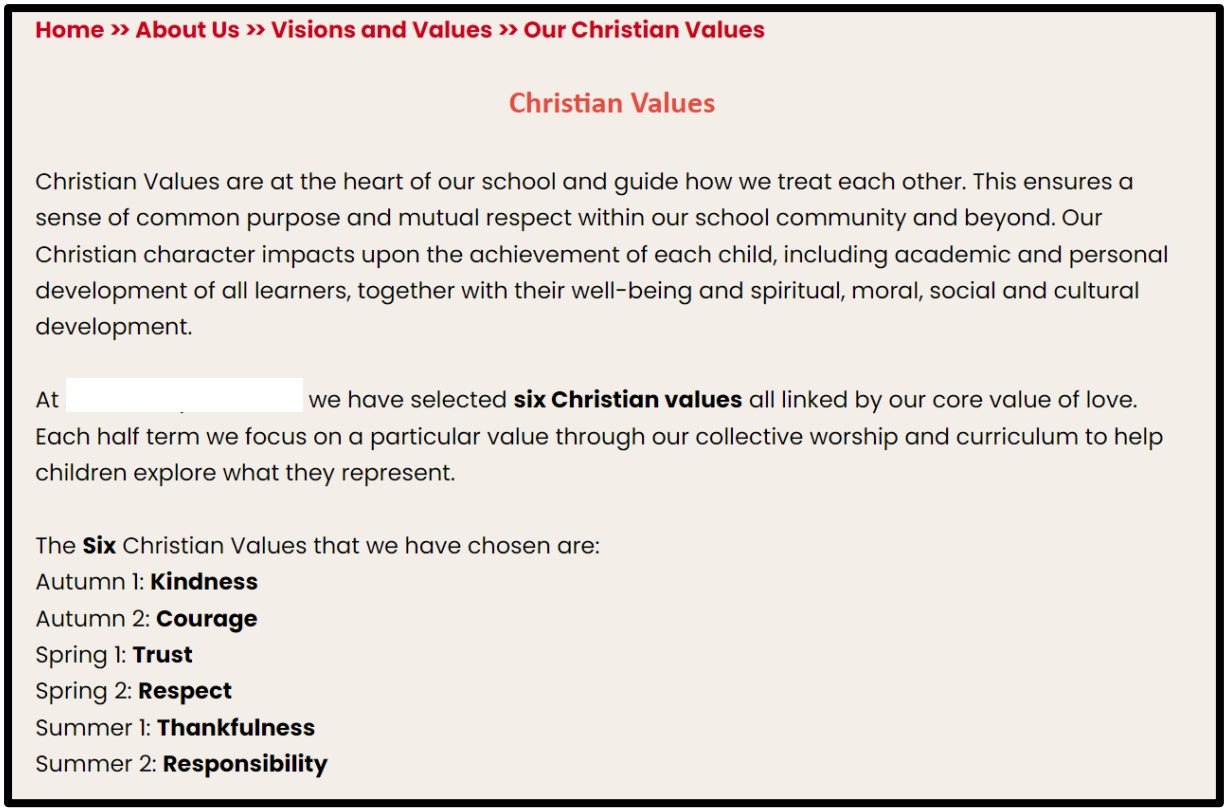
For example, while only 5% of schools in my main sample, who provided school values lists online, included "explicitly religious values" in these, where schools *did* do this, there was little uniformity in what these religious values were. Table 5.2 shows all the "explicitly religious values" listed on the websites of schools in my main sample, and while "Faith" is the most-commonly-selected of these, it was only listed by a handful of schools. Furthermore, aside from some of these clearly pointing to Christianity over any other faith – "Following Jesus" and "Motivated by Christ", for example – there do not appear to be any clear patterns or themes regarding the sort of "explicitly religious values" that English state schools adopt; some refer to actions encouraged among followers – "Witness" and "Believe" – others to personal characteristics – "Religious Integrity" and "Prophetic" – and others still mention broader notions that feature in various religious teachings – "Creation" and "Fruit of the Spirit." There is no generic list of "explicitly religious values" that was co-opted by schools – any overt references to religion were apparently selected independently by each institution.

Explicitly religious value	Percent of websites in my main sample that list these as a School Value
Faith	2.4%
Love of God/Agape	0.7%
Koinoia	0.7%
Following Jesus	0.5%
Creation	0.2%
Religious integrity	0.2%
Holiness	0.2%
Prophetic	0.2%
Motivated by Christ	0.2%
Believe (religious belief)	0.2%
Witness	0.2%
Fruit of the spirit	0.2%
Good works	0.2%

Table 5.2: School values collected by my website analysis that could be considered explicitly religious, and the proportion of schools in my main sample that listed them as their own

Religious Labels

Associating values with religion by attributing a religious label or description to their lists was, however, more common – around 14% of schools in my main sample, who provided school values information online, did this. Yet, as with the values lists themselves, the exact labels attached varied between institutions. The most-common religious labels were “Christian values” or “Gospel values” as demonstrated in the excerpts below.



Home >> About Us >> Visions and Values >> Our Christian Values

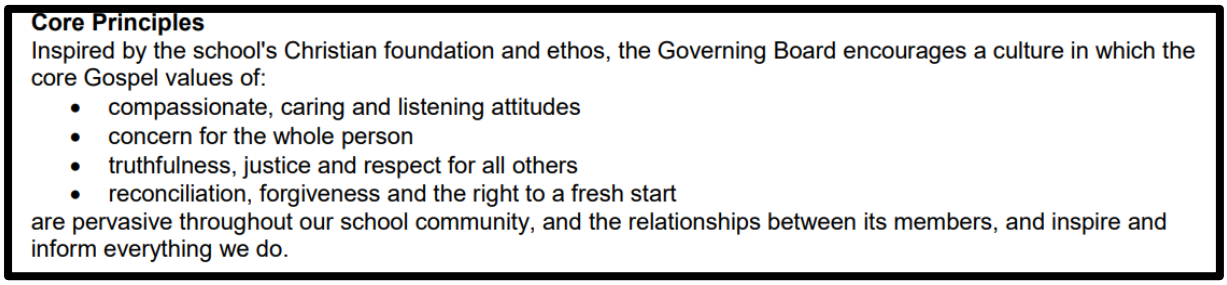
Christian Values

Christian Values are at the heart of our school and guide how we treat each other. This ensures a sense of common purpose and mutual respect within our school community and beyond. Our Christian character impacts upon the achievement of each child, including academic and personal development of all learners, together with their well-being and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

At we have selected **six Christian values** all linked by our core value of love. Each half term we focus on a particular value through our collective worship and curriculum to help children explore what they represent.

The **Six** Christian Values that we have chosen are:
Autumn 1: **Kindness**
Autumn 2: **Courage**
Spring 1: **Trust**
Spring 2: **Respect**
Summer 1: **Thankfulness**
Summer 2: **Responsibility**

Figure 5.7: Screenshot of one English state school's values as displayed on their website.



Core Principles
Inspired by the school's Christian foundation and ethos, the Governing Board encourages a culture in which the core Gospel values of:

- compassionate, caring and listening attitudes
- concern for the whole person
- truthfulness, justice and respect for all others
- reconciliation, forgiveness and the right to a fresh start

are pervasive throughout our school community, and the relationships between its members, and inspire and inform everything we do.

Figure 5.8: A screenshot of another English state school's values as displayed on their website.

Others used terms such as "Golden Rules" - a nod to Matthew 7:12 – "Catholic," and "Commandments," often in combination with a variety of other terms such as "core," "key," "values," "virtues," and/or "rules." The effect of all such labels was the same – to associate that school's values list with religion, or present them as religious – but the diverse methods noted here show that there was no set formula by which schools did this. These labels were not copied from one another, but seemingly developed and applied independently by individual schools – created to best describe how they perceived their particular values list and how they wanted them to be understood. Finally, these religious labels were also not attributed to a consistent set of values; though schools generally listed between three and five values, I collected over 100 different ones all

presented by different schools under religious titles such as “gospel” or “Christian” values, including many that without this label, might not necessarily be interpreted as such – “curiosity”, “equality” and “democracy”, for example. This indicates that schools not only appear to exercise a significant degree of independence in selecting their values, they also feel able to determine the extent to which any religious connections are highlighted in how they are presented.

Religious Justifications

The third way in which my analysis noted school values to be associated with religion – in schools’ explanations or justifications of their selected values – was also only implemented by a small proportion of schools in my main sample (6% of those who provided values information online) and yet the ways in which it was done varied once again between institutions.

A handful attempted to legitimise their chosen values by claiming that they were also promoted by well-respected religious figures. The specific individuals referenced varied between schools; examples include Cardinal Hume, Martin Luther King, Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, and Catholic nun Mary Ward. The rest authenticated or expanded on their values lists by referencing religious teachings. Again, the specific teachings utilised, and the way these were presented, varied between institutions. For example, some schools introduced their values lists as collectively underpinned by a single religious teaching:

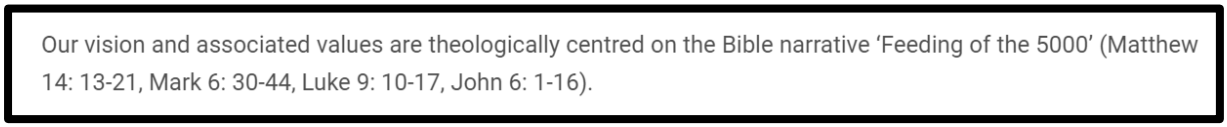


Figure 5.9: A screenshot of a religious justification attributed to a school’s values, as displayed on their website.

While others attributed separate Bible verses to each value; one school in my main sample linked their value, “love,” with Matthew 22:37-39 – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind”, their second value, “Kindness,” with Luke 10:25-37 – the parable of the good Samaritan, and their third value, “Trust,” with Proverbs 3:5-6 – “Trust the Lord with all your heart.”

Considered together, these findings indicate that rather than all institutions following suit in this issue, attempts to associate school values with religion or present them as religious are highly varied and therefore likely individually determined by each school. As with the other segments of this chapter so far, this apparent diversity aligns with stipulations currently laid down in law. The 1988 Education Reform Act states that all English state-funded schools are legally required to promote the Social, Moral, Spiritual and Cultural development of pupils and although the teaching of positive

"values" is not specifically stated as a part of this, it is widely considered a fundamental part of schools' response to this duty.[356] Yet, there is no official stance on whether or how schools should reference or involve religion in the positive traits and values that they choose to promote to students. Faith schools may feel compelled to associate their values with the school's religion as a way of demonstrating their "distinctiveness"[357] in comparison with non-faith counterparts – something encouraged by both the Catholic Education Service[358] and the Church of England[359] – but no official list of "religious values" or official methods by which schools' values should be best associated with religion has been produced for such schools to adopt. Once more, my dataset presents no clear insights into the reasons behind schools' decisions here because this information was simply not presented online, however it appears that institutions are granted some freedom around if and how they involve religion in their values lists, and the variations evident within my dataset indicates that many exercise this freedom – including many faith schools who choose not to explicitly associate their values with religious worldviews or traditions at all.

Interestingly, my dataset also shows that diversity in schools' values did not solely relate to if and how these were affiliated with religion – the values lists themselves also tended to vary significantly between institutions.

School values in general

My analysis notes that the 561 schools in my main sample, who provided values information online, listed 252 different broad values – for example, "respect" and "kindness." However, within each of these broad values, different schools specified differing intentions or foci; for example, different schools who listed values referring to "respect" made various stipulations about exactly *what* should be shown respect – some mentioned "respect for the environment," others mentioned "respect for teachers" and others still mentioned "self-respect." If we count all such variations as separate values – which they technically are – these 561 schools listed as many as 735 different values.

[356] Carroll, Howard and Knight, *Understanding British Values in Primary Schools,* (2018), p. 4.
[357] Helen Jelfs, 'Christian distinctiveness in Church of England schools,' *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 31.1 (2010), pp. 29-38, (p. 31).
[358] Rt Rev Marcus Stock, 'Why Catholic Schools matter at this General Election', Catholic Education Service, 25 November 2019 <https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/about-us/news-items/item/1003678-why-catholic-schools-matter-at-this-general-election> [accessed 15 December 2024].
[359] Church of England and The National Society, *The Church School of the Future Review*, (Archbishops' Council Education Division, 2012), p. 3 <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/2012_the_church_school_of_the_future_review_web_final.pdf> [accessed 15 December 2024].

Ten most common School Values – grouped by overarching theme	Percent of school websites that list these as a School Value[360]
Respect	48.1%
Responsibility	19.3%
Resilience	17.8%
Honesty	15.7%
Perseverance	14.1%
Friendship	13.9%
Aspiration	13.4%
Compassion	12.8%
Love	12.5%
Kindness	12.3%

Table 5.3: The most common values themes present in the values lists of schools in my main sample

Table 5.3 shows the ten most-commonly-listed school values-themes referenced in school values lists, as presented in the previous chapter (Table 4.6). The proportions of schools selecting values pertaining to these themes are low. "Respect" values were clearly the most popular, but the others in this "top ten" list were much less common. "Responsibility" and "Resilience" were the second and third most-commonly-represented values groups, yet were present on less than 20% of school websites, and the tenth most-commonly-selected value, "kindness" was only in 69 lists.

This variety indicates that values lists were not simply "copy and paste" affairs, but were being independently curated by individual schools. Again, no explanations for schools' varied decisions were forthcoming on school websites – most institutions did not fully explain the values that they had adopted, let alone why they were selected. Legislation also allows for this variation – official guidance on the values that schools should adopt and promote, regardless of their affiliation with religion, is also very limited. Though anti-terrorism legislation requires that schools actively promote the Fundamental British Values of Democracy, Rule of Law, Individual Liberty, and Mutual Respect and Tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs, these are not required to be presented specifically as "school values." In 1996 the National Forum for Values in Education and the Community published a list of values that it suggested schools could teach (Friendship, Justice, Truth, Self-respect, Freedom, Respect for the environment)[361] and the Crick Report offered a much larger list in 1998[362], but none of these stipulate that schools *must* adopt these values and no other suggestions have been made in more recent reports. Consequently, schools enjoy a significant level of freedom in this area of their operations and my dataset indicates that many exercise this – that is,

[360] As a percentage of all schools who offered lists of school values – 561.
[361] Arthur, *Citizens of Character – new directions in character and values education* (2010), p. 42.
[362] The Advisory Group on the Teaching of Citizenship and Democracy in *Schools*, *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998), p. 44, <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/4385/1/crickreport1998.pdf> [accessed 11 April 2024].

many English state schools appear to exercise agency and individuality in the broader selection of school values, not just in determining if and how these values will relate to religion.

In recent years, discussions about the best ways for schools to involve and explore religious or spiritual beliefs and traditions have increasingly recommended that "values" be included as a topic of study or consideration alongside more traditionally religious worldviews. It is thought that doing so will be more reflective of the multi-faith and increasingly nonreligious society that is contemporary Britain - in fact, in 2022 Wales changed the name of RE to "Religion, Values and Ethics" to "more accurately reflect the broad scope of the subject's pluralistic requirement, and position within the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience."[363]

The diversity in schools' chosen "values", and government's apparent reluctance to tell schools what values to promote, aside from the FBVs, coupled with schools' tendency to *not* offer justifications for their chosen values – to not present them as anything other than "our school values", not rooted in or validated by any external religious, spiritual or philosophical authority is significant. It hints at a common perception that one's values are personally formed or chosen, just as religious beliefs are, and though it is not the intention of this thesis to explore how notions of free choice and agency are invoked and implemented in relation to *values*, as opposed to religious beliefs, perhaps this is a topic for future study.

Schools' approaches to teaching RE also demonstrated high levels of variation and contrast, too.

Religious Education – findings

This chapter has so far stated that the first indication of variation in schools' approaches to faith-related admissions policies and collective worship was the relatively high proportions of schools who appear to *not* involve religion in these aspects of their activities and operations – 30% of schools in my faith-booster sample did not appear to include faith-related admissions criteria in their oversubscription admissions policies and 32.9% of schools in my main sample who claimed to hold regular gatherings did not state that these involved religious content or practices constituting collective worship. Furthermore, while a clear majority (63%) of schools in my main sample, who provided values lists online, did *not* link their chosen values to religion in any way, just under one third (27%) *did*, once more indicating that institutions opt for varying approaches towards this element of their operations. However, the RE segment of my dataset does not follow this trend. The

[363] 'Religion and Worldviews Introduction (FAQs)', RE Council of England and Wales [n.d.] <https://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/resource/worldviews-introduction-faqs/#:~:text=The%20Welsh%20Government%20has%20provided,Area%20of%20Learning%20and%20Experience.%E2%80%9D> [accessed 15 December 2024].

vast majority (92.8%) of schools in my main sample claimed to teach RE – the other 7.2% did not openly admit to *not* teaching this subject, but also did not clearly state that they *did.* These figures indicate that while sizeable proportions of English state schools appear to hold contrasting attitudes about the necessity of complying with the collective worship requirement, or the appropriateness of including faith-related criteria in their admissions policies and involving religion in their values lists, the perceived importance of appearing to comply with the RE duty appears to vary much less; in general, schools want to give the impression that they fulfil this requirement.

Analysis of my dataset suggests that there is also less variation in *how* schools do RE compared with how they do collective worship, faith-related admissions, or how they associate their values with religion. The previous chapter, "'A' is for Ambiguity" briefly revealed that most schools in my main sample who claimed to teach RE appeared to do so within a phenomenological, "Study of Religions," framework; teaching about central and comparable aspects of the so-called "Major World Religions" – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. Very few school websites in my samples claimed to teach religions or worldviews outside of this list. Only 26.6% of those in my main sample who claimed to teach RE mentioned exploring nonreligious worldviews in these lessons – most (67%) focusing on Humanism – and only a handful mentioned teaching about other religious or spiritual perspectives such as Chinese spiritualities (3%), Ancient Religions (0.9%), Philosophy/philosophers (0.9%) or Paganism (0.6%) and Witchcraft, Zoroastrianism, and Indigenous religions were only mentioned by one school respectively. There do not currently exist any large-scale, in-depth analyses of state-funded schools' RE syllabuses but what *does* exist also highlights that many institutions appear to approach the teaching of this subject in similar ways; academies were found to generally adopt the Locally Agreed Syllabus even if not required to,[364] and studies of Locally Agreed Syllabuses found that they were generally arranged around similar definitions and perceptions of religion – i.e. the phenomenological approaches to studying religion and the emphasis on the major world religions.[365]

This present chapter aims to demonstrate that English state schools' attitudes towards and methods for featuring and engaging with religion in their regular activities and operations vary significantly and will argue that this diversity is rooted in and reflective of wider society's concerns for individuality and personal freedom of choice in relation to religious and spiritual matters. If schools' self-described approaches to RE are relatively uniform as has been shown in this thesis so far, this

[364] Ofsted, 'Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report', (Gov.uk, 2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report> [accessed 14 December 2024].
[365] Revell, 'Religious Education in England' (2008), p. 226.

could pose a serious challenge to such an argument. This will be explored more fully in the "contrasting correlations" segment of this chapter, however, a closer look at the RE segment of my dataset does indeed reveal some significant contrasts between institutions – specifically in the number and combinations of "Major World Religions" studied and in the level of significance apparently afforded to the subject – which will be outlined here.

Religions taught

Although most school websites that I analysed appeared to teach about the "Major World Religions" in RE, how many, and which ones, were chosen varied significantly between institutions. The law requires that state-funded schools without religious characters should teach RE in a way that "reflect[s] that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions in Great Britain"[366]. This expects that schools will cover more than one religion, but does not stipulate exactly how many should be studied. Figure 5.10 opposite shows that the vast majority of schools in my main sample, who described the curriculum covered in RE lessons, claimed to cover between 4 and 6 religions. However, a tiny proportion – 4.8% – indicated that they only taught one; this included two Jewish schools who only appeared to teach about Judaism, and 25 Christian schools – 19 of which are Roman Catholic and 6 Church of England – who appeared to only teach about Christianity. These might only seem like small proportions of English state schools as a whole, but it is significantly more common if we look at faith schools alone. 16.8% of those in my faith school booster sample, who provided RE curriculum information online, indicated that only one religion was covered in these lessons. This figure is more alarming, especially given that while the law allows most faith schools to teach RE "according to their Trust Deed" – that is, in line with the religion they are officially affiliated with – they are still expected to teach about at least one other

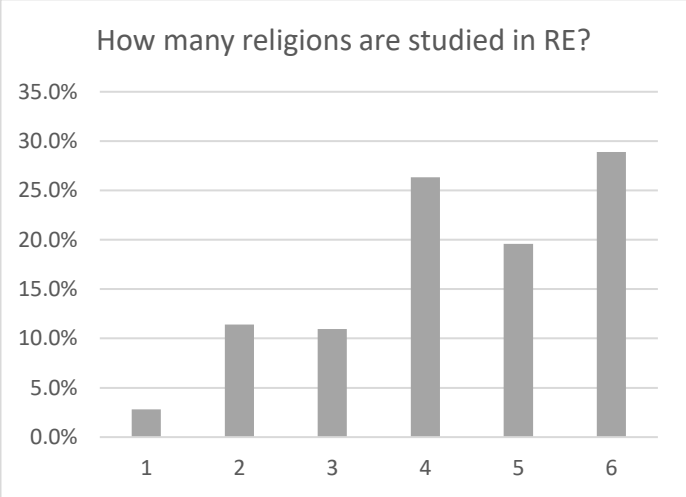


Figure 5.10 A graph showing how many religions English state schools claim to teach about in RE – as percentages of all schools in my main sample who provided curriculum information for RE online.

[366] *Education Act 1996*, Part V, Chapter III, Section 375 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/375#:~:text=375%20Agreed%20syllabuses%20of%20religious%20education.&text=(3)Every%20agreed%20syllabus%20shall,religions%20represented%20in%20Great%20Britain.> [accessed 22 December 2024].

faith alongside this. I cannot be sure from my analysis of websites that these schools *definitely* only teach about their own religion in RE lessons, and in any case, it is not my intention to judge schools' decisions here but to outline them. So, while these findings *may* provide support for critics of the current system whereby different schools are able to teach different kinds of RE, I mention them here instead to highlight one element of diversity in schools' approaches to this subject. If we dig deeper into my dataset, the exact combinations of religions covered also varied significantly between institutions.

Figure 5.11 shows the proportions of schools in my main sample that claimed to teach about Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism in RE lessons, as percentages of all who indicated that they teach RE and provided curriculum information online.

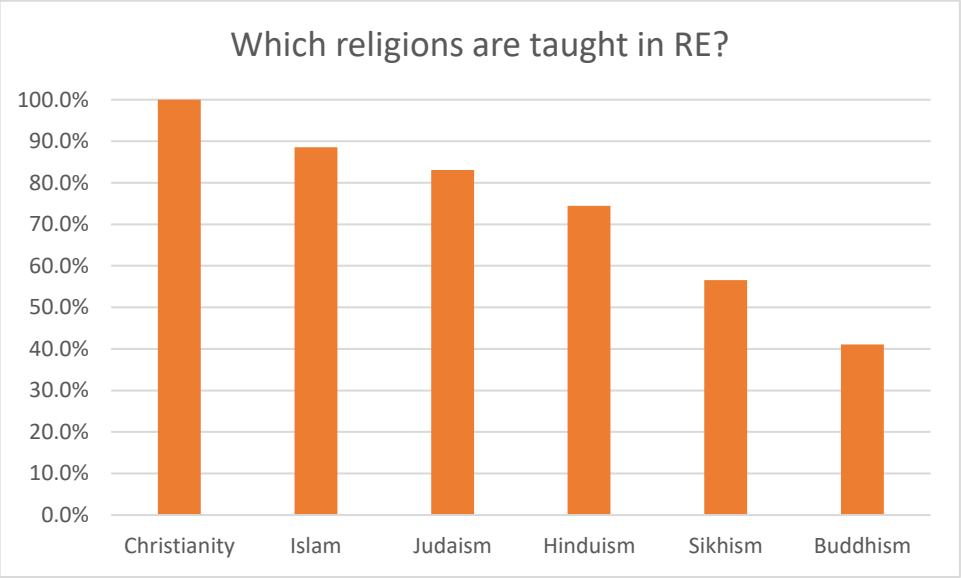


Figure 5.11: The proportions of schools in my main sample who claim to teach about each of the six major world religions – as percentages of schools in my main sample who claim to teach RE.

Christianity is a clear favourite, being mentioned in the overviews of almost all (82.6%) schools in my main sample who provided RE curriculum information online, however, the proportions of schools teaching other religions varied significantly. Islam, the second-most-commonly-mentioned religion was present in the overviews of 68.6% of schools who provided curriculum information online, whereas Buddhism was only included in 31.8% of such schools.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to analyse much further the claimed content of RE curriculums in my dataset because schools varied so significantly in the amount of information they provided here – though this does provide another clear example of the variation in schools' approaches to this subject.

Prioritization and Presentation

Although legislation requires that schools include "curriculum information" on their websites, including for RE, they do not specify the exact details that schools should supply or how these should be presented.[367] It is therefore likely that the language used, and the way in which this information is presented are decided by the school – perhaps alongside their Multi-Academy Trust, if they have one, or board of governors – and can consequently shed light on their attitudes towards the subject and its significance. Institutions who do not hold RE in high regard are unlikely to devote time and energy to curating a detailed overview of it for their website, whereas those that do – or at least expect that parents of prospective pupils to consider it important, or who want to impress OFSTED – are more-likely to invest resources into carefully outlining how the subject is taught and emphasising the school's desire to deliver this teaching effectively. There was significant variation in these three metrics on the website of schools in my main sample.

For example, in terms of the language used, some websites introduced RE as a highly important subject, closely linked to the school's ethos and aims:

> "Excellent provision of Religious Education is essential for any Church School and we give this a high priority in our curriculum throughout the school."
>
> "We see RE as the core of the curriculum through which we promote each child's innate capacity for awe, wonder, reverence and spirituality"
>
> "At [redacted], as a Catholic school, we attach the greatest importance to Religious Education in the life of our school."

34.2% of schools from my main sample, who claimed to teach RE, made such statements. Others appeared distinctly less enthusiastic about it, only mentioning it in passing. The following excerpts were the only times that these respective schools said anything about "RE" as a subject:

> "At [redacted], our religious education curriculum gives our children a broad understanding of world religions."

[367] 'What maintained schools must publish online', Gov.uk, (2024) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-maintained-schools-must-publish-online#values-and-ethos> [accessed 15 December 2024].

> "Children in Years 1 to 6 (Key Stages 1 and 2) follow the subjects of the National Curriculum. This comprises of English, Mathematics, Science, Computing, Religious Education, Design and Technology, Geography, History, Art, Music, and Physical Education."
>
> "All schools are also required to teach Religious Education at all Key Stages. You can apply to withdraw your child from Religious Education."

Similar statements were found on the websites of 48.6% of schools from my main sample, who claimed to teach RE. The remaining schools did not say anything about RE, other than to list it as a subject that they teach.

Furthermore, the depth of detail offered about the subject, and the location of this information on the school website also varied significantly between institutions in my main sample. One way of measuring this is to count the number of words provided in schools' descriptions of RE. Figure 5.12 shows that these counts varied significantly between institutions in my main sample.

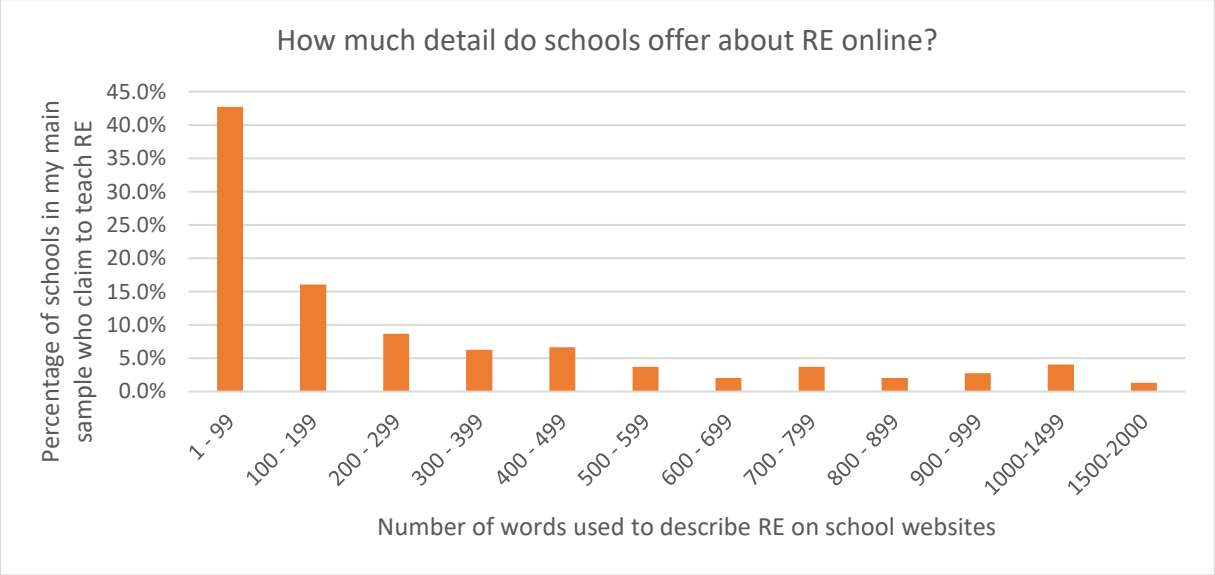


Figure 5.12: The number of words used to describe RE on school websites in my main sample.

On average, English state schools in my main sample used 461 words on their websites to describe and explain RE, however, the wordcounts recorded in my dataset span from 6 - "We follow the Buckinghamshire RE syllabus." – to 1801, and many schools were located at various stages between these two very different numbers. 21.8% of all schools who mentioned RE used 20 words or fewer to provide information about the subject. 57.3% used 100 words or more, and 19.6% used 500 words or more.

As for the location of this information, 29% provided this on a generic "curriculum" page alongside information about other subjects whereas others presented it in dedicated RE spaces, for example

on a webpage dedicated solely to RE (30%) or on separately downloadable RE policy (35%) or RE syllabus documents (22.5%).

Unlike the other three foci studied in this thesis, legislation grants schools much less freedom over whether and how they teach RE. The law clearly states that all schools are expected to teach this subject and stipulates that significant proportions – maintained community, foundation or voluntary schools without religious characters and most foundation and voluntary controlled schools with religious characters – must implement the Locally Agreed Syllabus for their area. Consequently, unlike the free rein granted in relation to collective worship, the content and focus of these schools' RE lessons are clearly outlined for them. Other institutions – academies, free schools and voluntary aided schools – are able to create their own RE syllabuses or can choose to adopt a pre-made one, meaning that they have more control over what they teach and how, yet they are not completely unrestricted in this endeavour. When writing their own syllabuses, these schools must ensure – like the writers of Locally Agreed Syllabuses – that RE lessons "reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain"[368]. Furthermore, schools with official religious characters are often expected to align RE teaching with their trust deed. Clearly, schools have stricter guidelines to abide by in relation to RE than other areas of school life where religion features – explaining the relative uniformity highlighted in my dataset. However, if we compare these expectations with those surrounding other academic subjects, legal requirements relating to RE are actually relatively limited – namely, there is no national curriculum and the stipulation that schools should teach about Christianity and "principal religions" is vague and therefore open to interpretation. Other documents provide further guidance for schools on what RE should look like, such as the National Curriculum Framework for RE in England and the National Content Standard for RE, however, none are statutory. Therefore, there is still room for schools to personalise their approach to RE and the content that is covered within these lessons, and my dataset suggests that many English state schools exercise this freedom – opting to study certain religions and topics over others and expressing their individual attitudes towards the subject in how it is presented. As with each of the previous sections of this chapter, the reasons behind schools' choices here are not clearly declared online.

Discussion - Contrasting approaches as embodiments of free choice

The findings outlined in this chapter indicate that schools' approaches to featuring or engaging with religion vary significantly between institutions. While, to my knowledge, no other studies have

[368] *Education Act 1996*, Part V, Chapter III, paragraph 375.

simultaneously researched how schools implement collective worship, RE, school values *and* faith-related admissions policies, there is a wealth of academic literature that explores each of these aspects of schools' operations separately. Significantly, many such studies support my findings by also indicating high levels of variation in institutions' approaches to these aspects of school life. For example, Woodhead and Levitt's study of the admissions procedures used by faith schools in Leicester revealed that where faith-related criteria were involved, there was "little consistency" in how this was done,[369] and the Fair Admissions Campaign's interactive map displaying English secondary schools' admissions policies was created *because* such variation exists both in if and how faith-related criteria are included in these.[370] Additionally, Jeanette Gill's overview of worship sessions in some English schools states that many "adopt a system which they perceive best serves their principal aims and the social needs of their pupils"[371], and in describing RE, Mark Chater remarks:

> In the world of religious education it is common to remark that there are as many different interpretations of RE, and of what it means to be religiously educated, as there are people engaged in it. Certainly in the UK context, the large number of organisations involved in RE bears witness to a plurality not only of practices but of methodology and purposes too.[372]

In contrast, far fewer studies have explored the religious content and intent of school values lists, so there is less evidence of diversity in schools' methods here. However, Ipgrave reported that in the schools she studied, there were at least three different ways in which schools embedded religion in their ethos; as a school's ethos is often closely associated with their values this demonstration of variation may lend some support to my findings. Furthermore, two other studies conducted on schools in North America found that these institutions included diverse themes, aims and concerns in their mission statements which, again, are often closely associated with if not formed in conjunction with a school's values. While these studies do not prove that the same variation occurs in UK schools, the way these findings are interpreted is helpful to our present discussion. Both suggested that the diversity found in schools' mission statements indicated that institutions were creating their *own* statements rather than thoughtlessly adopting generic ones.[373] Consequently,

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[369] Levitt and Woodhead, 'Choosing a faith school in Leicester: admissions criteria, diversity and choice' (2020), p. 234.
[370] 'Map of English secondary schools by religious and socio-economic selection', Fair Admissions Campaign [n.d.] <https://fairadmissions.org.uk/map/> [accessed 15 December 2024].
[371] Jeanette Gill, 'Approaches to Collective Worship in Multifaith Schools' in *Spiritual and Religious Education*, eds., Mal Leicester, Celia Modgil, Sohan Modgil (Falmer Press, 2000), pp. 318-333 (p. 321).
[372] Mark Chater, 'The fire next time? A critical discussion of the National Curriculum Framework for RE and the policy recommendations in the *Review of Religious Education in England*' (2014), p. 257.
[373] Albert J. Boerema, 'An Analysis of Private School Mission Statements,' *Peabody Journal of Education*, 81.1 (2006), pp. 180-202, (p. 180); Steve Stemler and Damian Bebell, 'An Empirical Approach to Understanding and

while some academics have previously suggested that school mission statements were "empty rhetoric"[374] or "rhetorical pyrotechnics" with "little structural or operational consequence,"[375] the individuality noted in these studies led the authors to argue that they are instead valuable "windows" into the school's "ideals and operations;"[376] that is, that they can shed light on what schools consider important, or at least, how they want to portray their priorities and concerns which in turn can shed light on those of wider society.

I propose that similar conclusions can be drawn from my findings too – that the diversity surrounding the specific values adopted by schools in my samples suggests that English state schools are curating their *own,* individual, values lists. I also propose that this can be extended to explain the diversity of schools' approaches to associating their values with religion, and to featuring or engaging with religion in other areas of their operations too – collective worship, RE, and faith-related admissions policies. My dataset indicates that schools tend to implement varying and contrasting methods in these aspects of school life, because rather than blindly adopting a generic framework or set of methods here – copying and pasting a generic list of school values or oversubscription admissions policy, or following to the letter a commercially available collective worship plan or RE syllabus – schools are choosing to curate or at least customise their *own* approaches to featuring and engaging with religion.

Furthermore, that school websites in my dataset so rarely attempted to explain why they chose the methods that they had, or to defer to external authorities to legitimise their selection, hints at a commonplace confidence among schools in exercising agency and individuality here – a belief that they are able to determine for themselves if and how religion will feature in school life, and an expectation that this will be understood and respected by others; expectations that appear to align with values of individual liberalism as introduced in the introductory chapter of this thesis. In this way, the diversity demonstrated in my dataset could be understood as evidence supporting sociologists' claims that notions of "free choice" are "sacred" and "sovereign" in modern society, not because schools are attempting to protect and promote pupils' religious freedoms, and not because

Analyzing the Mission Statements of Selected Educational Institutions,' presented at the Annual Conference of the New England Educational Research Organization, (Portsmouth, NH, 1999).

[374] Stemler and Bebell, 'An Empirical Approach to Understanding and Analyzing the Mission Statements of Selected Educational Institutions' (1999), p. 26.

[375] Christopher C. Morphew and Matthew Hartley, 'Mission Statements: A Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric across Institutional Type,' *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77.3 (2006), pp. 456-471, (p. 456.)

[376] Stemler and Bebell, 'An Empirical Approach to Understanding and Analyzing the Mission Statements of Selected Educational Institutions' (1999), p. 26.

they are explicitly stating that this is the case, but because schools' actions here appear to embody and express these values.

I have also shown in each section of this chapter that the diversity demonstrated by schools in my samples is permitted under current legislation for faith-related admissions policies, collective worship, school values and RE. The tendency for schools to personalise their approaches to involving religion in these aspects of their activities and operations is not, therefore, a rejection of or rebellion against official expectations here but in some ways, a fulfilment of them. Successive Governments' reluctance to lay out exactly how schools should involve and explore religion and belief is at least partially rooted in the increasingly multi-faith nature of modern English society – a recognition that different institutions will comprise of pupil populations from different religious and cultural backgrounds, and therefore one single approach to featuring or engaging with religion will not be equally appropriate or effective in all institutions; one size will not fit all.[377] However it could also be considered evidence of sociologists' claims regarding the significance of notions of free choice and agency in relation to religious and spiritual matters in contemporary British society by showing that religion is treated as highly privatised and personalised even by government and educational authorities – not just by the schools themselves. Considered alongside the previous chapter of this thesis which argued that the religious ambiguity prevalent in school website descriptions of collective worship, RE and school values stems from a desire to enable everyone to inject their *own* interpretations of these aspects of school life, analysis of my dataset appears to indicate that sociologists' claims, mentioned above, are indeed accurate descriptions of modern English society's perception of and relationship with religion and spirituality. Yet, there are also some findings outlined in this chapter, relating to the limits of diversity in schools' approaches to religious elements of their operations that appear to challenge these claims, or at least caution against reductionist oversimplifications of them.

While my dataset reveals many highly varied ways in which religion is involved and explored in English state schools, on the whole, institutions were not acting *completely* uniquely; there were some commonalities in approaches taken – for example, ways of "doing religion" – and some restrictions around the choices that schools could make. While the most common thread unifying schools' approaches to these four areas of school life appears to be, ironically, their tendency to adopt *contrasting* such approaches, this tendency for diversity is not a preference for completely

[377] Stuart Maclure, *Education Re-formed: A Guide to the Education Reform Act*, 3rd edn, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1992); Paul Smalley, 'A critical policy analysis of local religious education in England', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 42.3 (2020), pp. 263-274 (p. 267).

unique approaches, and does not reflect unlimited religious freedoms. This is explored in more depth in the next and final of my “findings” chapters, T is for Tacit Restrictions.

6. 'T' is for Tacit Restrictions

So far in this thesis I have argued that while most English state-funded schools do not overtly state a commitment to promoting religious freedoms and individual choice, this is often *implicitly* indicated in the ways that they claim to feature and engage with religion. First in the ambiguity that refuses to clearly define the nature and intention of elements of school life involving religion, offering pupils and parents opportunity to inject their own interpretations of proceedings and determine, to a certain extent, their own participation. Second in the tendency for schools to adopt contrasting approaches to involving religion in regular activities and operations; this diversity, coupled with often very little explanation or justification of their chosen methods, indicates that these are somewhat independently curated by individual institutions – an expression of their expected agency over religious aspects of school life. Both trends show that authority over whether and how individuals and schools interact with religion is not necessarily held by traditional religious authorities, but these individuals and institutions appear to have, and to exercise, a significant amount of control over forming their own religious experiences and views.

I have also argued that while these findings are useful for furthering our understanding of how religion features – or is claimed to feature – in children's education in England, they also reflect the prevalence and prominence of individualistic and privatised perceptions of religion and spirituality in broader English society, perhaps even demonstrating the "sacred"[378] or "sovereign"[379] value that various scholars of sociology claim society attributes to notions of free religious choice. However, my dataset also highlights some instances where religious freedoms and individual agency appear to be restricted in relation to religious matters by English state schools – for example, where pupils are expected to wholeheartedly adopt and act in accordance with schools' religious values, or to fully participate in religious practices. Trends such as these have been briefly mentioned in previous chapters of this thesis but have not yet been explored in depth. Rather than ignoring them for fear that they may undermine my overall argument, they will be the focus of this final chapter.

Drawing on my dataset, I will outline multiple ways that the religious freedoms of pupils, their parents, and schools themselves, appear to be restricted within English educational settings. I will suggest that many such restrictions seem to be underpinned by collectivistic desires to promote shared views and experiences and, while at first glance this may appear to falsify the argument put forward in this thesis so far, I will argue that these findings actually simply emphasise some important caveats to our understanding of how neoliberal individualistic values relate to religion in

[378] Woodhead, 'The rise of no religion in Britain: the emergence of a new cultural majority' (2016), p. 251.
[379] Guest, 'The Reproduction and Transmission of Religion' (2009), p. 656.

contemporary British society. Namely, they highlight that the ability for individuals to determine their own religious beliefs, identities, and engagements with religious practices is not necessarily revered to the same extent by all segments of the population, or in all situations, and where this agency *is* protected this is never without limit; in Guest's words, people's religious choices are "never as free, as unhindered, or as self-directed as is often claimed."[380] I will explore how certain restrictions are arguably necessary in the effective protection of such freedoms, and how this process exists within a broader context whereby schools and wider society juggle several, sometimes competing, values and concerns simultaneously – collectivism *and* individualism, for example.

Consequently, I will conclude that rather than the restrictions highlighted in my dataset cancelling out or proving disingenuous schools' – and wider society's – apparent respect and concern for protecting religious freedoms and individual choice, these findings demonstrate the complex and nuanced reality of exercising such rights. They therefore caution against overly simplistic characterisations of how religion is viewed and interacted with in contemporary Britain – such as that this is underpinned by a single, simple, value such as "free choice" – and highlight that while individualistic ideals indeed appear to be prevalent and influential in these processes as has been noted by secularization theorists for decades, they exist in a dualistic tension with collectivistic ideals.

Restrictions to pupils' religious freedoms

Chapters three and four of this thesis have suggested that choice statements and ambiguity as to the form and intent of religious elements of school life indicate that many English state schools present themselves as protecting and promoting pupils' religious freedoms; enabling and even encouraging them to form their *own* personal views during these sessions. However, those previous chapters also note that ambiguity and choice statements are not present on every single school website that I studied. In fact, a small minority of institutions in my samples indicated directly opposing intentions – they hoped to instil certain religious beliefs and identities in pupils through religious elements of school life, directing pupils here rather than offering them freedom and independence. These are perhaps the most obvious place to begin discussing restrictions placed on students' religious freedoms in English schools.

As is outlined in the third chapter of this thesis, "'F' is for Free Choice", analysis of my main sample revealed that twelve schools published such declarations in describing collective worship (3.9% of those who claim to involve religious content in their gatherings), and three schools made similar

[380] Guest, *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the Twenty-first Century* (2022), p. 45.

statements in describing RE (0.5% of those who claimed to teach RE). Unsurprisingly, statements such as these were more common among faith schools than non-faith schools, but, again far from universally present there. 25.5% of the schools in my booster sample of faith schools declared their intentions to shape pupils' religious views and identities during collective worship and 10.7% intended to do this through RE, compared to 0.4% and 0% of schools in my non-faith booster sample respectively.

If the influence that these schools exert on pupils' religious beliefs prevents young people from adopting and expressing worldviews that differ from those of the school or teacher in question, this could amount to an infringement on pupils' religious freedoms – their religious choices being restricted. However, based on my dataset alone I cannot conclude that this is indeed what is happening in these institutions. No schools in any of my samples indicated that students would be *forced* to adopt a certain religious identity or punished for challenging the school's views, and hoping or claiming to encourage a child to adopt a particular faith is not necessarily the same as coercing or indoctrinating said child to do so against their will. Furthermore, scholars involved in the New Sociology of Childhood claim that children do not just passively accept the views of those around them but can exercise agency in determining their own beliefs regarding religious or spiritual matters,[381] even challenging influence exerted by authoritative figures such as parents.[382] Consequently, while openly declaring an intention to shape pupils' beliefs in a certain direction may appear, at first glance, to be a clear indication that some English state-funded schools prevent pupils from fully exercising their religious agency, my dataset alone can neither prove that this is the aim of these institutions nor that it accurately reflects pupils' experiences within them. Instead, clearer evidence of the restrictions that schools place on pupils' freedoms of choice in relation to religious matters comes from other parts of my dataset such as websites' presentations of the legal right to withdraw from collective worship and RE.

To avoid instances where schools require children to engage with religious education or instruction of a denomination or religion that differs from the beliefs and identities of their parents, education acts since 1870 have outlined and protected the parental right of withdrawal. Legally, parents and guardians are free to request that their children are withdrawn from collective worship[383] or RE[384] and schools must comply with any such requests. Interestingly, large proportions of the school

[381] Prout and James, 'A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems' (1997), pp. 7-32.
[382] Hopkins, Olson, Pain and Vincett, 'Mapping Intergenerationalities: the formation of youthful religiosities' (2011), pp. 322-325.
[383] Department for Education, *Religious Education and Collective Worship 1/94* (1994), pp. 24-25.
[384] Ibid., pp. 17-19.

websites in my main sample – 51.8% of those who claimed to involve religious content in gatherings and 74.1% of those who claimed to teach RE did *not* outline or even mention the parental right to withdraw from these activities respectively.

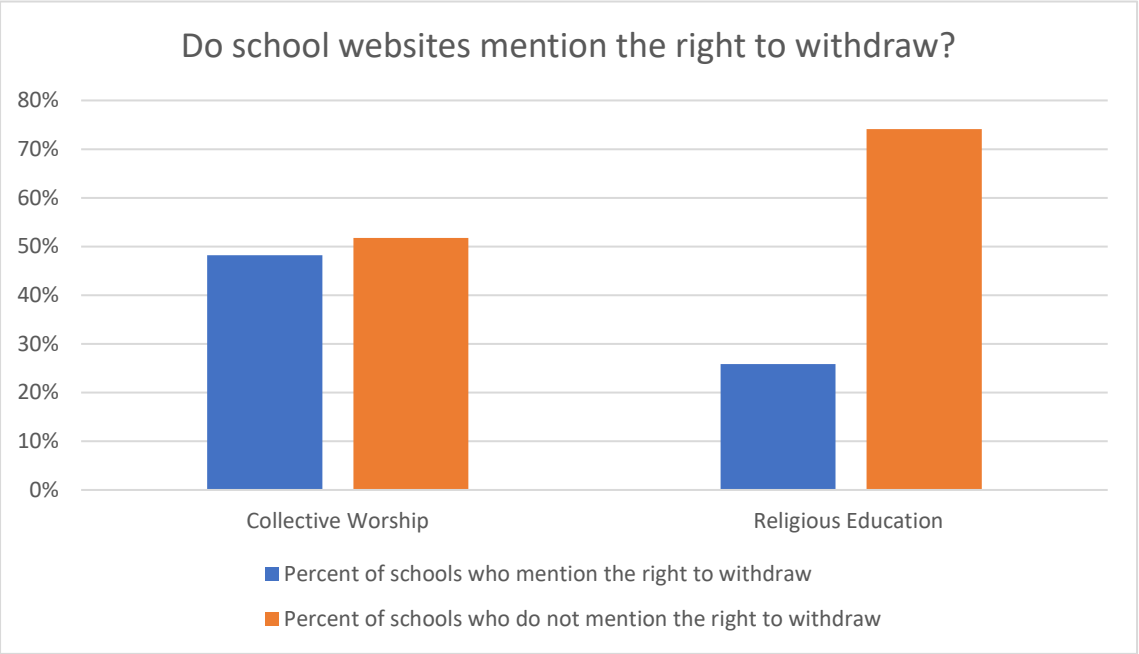

Figure 6.1: The percentages of schools in my main sample who do not mention the parental right to withdraw from school gatherings with religious content (collective worship) or RE, respectively.

Significantly, among schools that *did* mention these withdrawal rights online, none stated that pupils had any agency within this process or even suggested that their preferences might be considered. This is completely in line with legal requirements – legislation states that *parents* have the right to withdraw their children, but does not mention if or how children themselves should feature in this decision – but it does present a disconnect with the implicit and explicit indications, found elsewhere on many of these websites, that institutions intended to promote and protect pupils' religious freedoms and choices during these elements of school life. In fact it appears that in some instances, parental rights are prioritised above those of the pupils. This also appears to be the case in schools' admissions policies, including where applicants' religious background is considered.

My booster sample of state-funded faith schools contained 348 (61%) institutions who included faith-related admissions criteria in their oversubscription policies. None of these indicated that pupils' personal beliefs, choices or identities would be considered at all in the process of allocating school places; instead, the criteria used to measure applicants' religious commitment – church attendance and baptism status – all rely on the parents' actions and consequently reflect instead

their religious convictions. Again, this is completely legal, but in failing to acknowledge – or even blatantly undermining – young people's religious agency by solely measuring the religious commitment of their parents when deciding who to admit as pupils, these policies appear to contradict indications featured elsewhere on school websites that pupils' religious freedoms and agency are indeed highly respected and expression of them is commonly encouraged.

Turning now to explore schools' approaches to teaching RE, while this subject is largely presented as an objective study *of* religions and worldviews as opposed to the confessional religious instruction commonplace in previous centuries, my dataset indicates that there are also several ways in which pupils' ability to determine how they interact with religion appears to be limited in these sessions. The first concerns the limited breadth of content covered in RE compared to the variety of viewpoints that exist not only in the world, but in this country. Earlier chapters of this thesis showed that the vast majority of school websites in my samples that provided information about the content of RE lessons claimed to teach about a selection of the so-called Major World Religions – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. While some claimed to cover all 6 of these, many others only appeared to cover a select few. However, so many more religions and worldviews exist outside of these six, and many complicated sects or denominations exist *within* them, none of which appear to be given significant time or resources in these lessons. As shown in Figures 6.2 and 6.3, nonreligious views and religions or spiritualities outside of the so-called "major world religions" were rarely mentioned as topics of study in the RE curricula published on school websites – this despite research showing that most adults in Britain are now "nones" and that non-traditional spiritualities are growing in popularity, or at least growing in visibility within popular British culture.

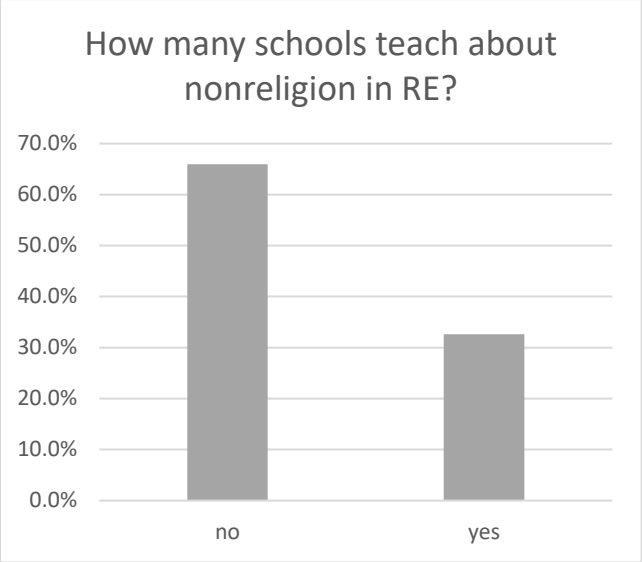

Figure 6.2: The proportion of school websites who claimed to teach about nonreligious views in RE – as a percentage of all schools in my main sample who provided RE curriculum information online.

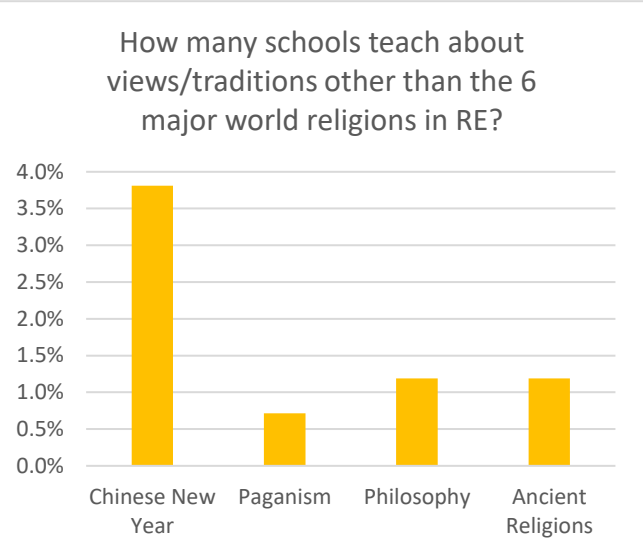

Figure 6.3: The proportion of school websites who claimed to teach about beliefs and traditions outside of the 6 major world religions – as percentages of schools in my main sample who provided RE curriculum information online.

Sociologists of religion often describe citizens of modern western societies as "consumers" operating in a "marketplace" of religions and worldviews.[385] It is argued that increased globalisation, immigration, and pluralism has caused individuals to be increasingly aware of a plethora of views, practices and lifestyles, and rather than simply inheriting the beliefs and traditions of one's parents many now feel able to adopt a worldview, or aspects of a worldview, that most appeals to them.[386] A wealth of research also attests to the fact that many religions have adapted to this market, learning and creatively implementing "the ways of Disneyland"[387] in efforts to attract new adherents and retain the interest of existing ones.[388] In this context, phenomenological approaches to teaching RE –

[385] Peter Berger, *Facing up to Modernity* (Penguin Books, 1979), p. 213; Laurence R. Moore, *Selling God: American religion in the marketplace of culture* (Oxford University Press, 1994); Laurence R. Iannaccone, 'The consequences of Religious Market Structure: Adam Smith and the Economics of Religion', *Rationality and Society*, 3.2 (1991), pp. 297-314.

[386] Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (2011), p. 138; Laurence Iannaccone, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, 'Deregulating Religion: The Economics of Church and State', *Economic Inquiry*, 35.2 (1997), pp. 350 – 364, p. 351.

[387] Jan Stievermann, Daniel Silliman and Philip Goff, 'General Introduction', in *Religion and the Marketplace in the United* States, ed. by Jan Stievermann, Daniel Goff and Detlef Junker (Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 1-32 (p. 1).

[388] Guest, *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the twenty-first Century* (2022), pp. 36-45; Sarah Koenig, 'Almighty God and the Almighty Dollar: The Study of Religion and Market Economies in the United States', *Religion Compass*, 10.4 (2016), pp. 83-97, (p. 87).

whereby students learn about a selection of religious traditions objectively, with the aim of informing their understanding of others and introducing them to views and beliefs that may shape their own – could be understood as introducing children to this marketplace and to the spiritual options available to them. However, rather than an extensive market-hall filled with a rich variety of different traditions and cultures, my data suggests that each school leads their pupils into a different hall with only a few stalls, some (mainly Christianity) more fully-decked-out than others. Herein lies the limitation; children can only choose to adopt or reject religious beliefs and identities that they know about, and if they are only learning about a small number of religious traditions and beliefs in RE, the choices pupils can make are arguably limited. Of course, school RE is not the only place where children learn about and explore religion and spirituality, but if schools perceive free individual choice as central to engaging with religion, and if RE is often presented as providing pupils the knowledge and opportunity necessary to exercise this choice in forming their own personal views as I have suggested previously in this thesis, it seems odd – and perhaps contradictory – that most do not appear to attempt to introduce pupils to as many of the religious and spiritual options that exist in the contemporary world as possible through these lessons.

Furthermore, despite many schools publishing "choice statements" in relation to RE – declaring that these lessons are intended to encourage pupils to form their own views regarding religious and spiritual matters, or at least stating that schools do not intend to shape pupils' personal beliefs during them – my dataset indicates that the religions that *are* taught about are often not presented completely neutrally. The fourth chapter of this thesis, "'A' is for Ambiguity", shows that significant proportions (33%) of schools in my main sample who claim to teach RE associate this subject with community cohesion agendas; that is, lessons are presented as one method by which institutions promote tolerance of and positive attitudes towards other religious groups. Therefore, even if these schools do not attempt to direct pupils' religious views and identities during these sessions in that they are not promoting a certain religious position in these lessons, pupils are clearly not completely free to form their own attitudes here; they are guided towards tolerance and acceptance of others.

Finally, pupils' religious freedoms are also arguably curtailed in the promotion of school values that are associated with religion. In chapter five of this thesis, I noted that some English state-funded faith schools associate their values lists with religion in some way – either through listing explicitly religious values (5% of schools in my main sample who listed values online), by associating values with religious teachings or inspiration (6%), and/or by attributing religious labels to them (14%). However, in chapter three of this thesis I showed that almost three quarters of schools in my main sample, who provided lists of school values online, stated that pupils were expected to adopt these and may be punished for not doing so. For example, the Behaviour Management Policy of one

school in my main sample indicates that their values are expected to be treated similarly to school rules;

> Our values underpin our expectations of all aspects of the behaviour of young people and adults… Good behaviour in school is central to a good education, as stressed in the current guidance from the Department of Education.

It goes on to state that pupils must sign the following declaration;

> I, as a student at [redacted], will support the values and ethos of the school, as set out in the Behaviour Policy and in our agreed Code of Conduct, 'Our Learning Community'.

Legally, schools are allowed to enforce values education in this way – in fact, the State is similarly, if not more, forceful in promoting Fundamental British Values (FBVs) – however the issue becomes murkier when the values that schools compel pupils to adopt and act in accordance with are explicitly associated with religion; limiting students' ability to openly reject or even challenge schools' religious values could amount to an infringement on their legally protected freedoms of thought, conscience, and religion. This possibility is further compounded by the fact that, unlike with collective worship and Religious Education, there is no legal right for parents to withdraw their children from school values education. Consequently, not only are young people limited in their ability to exercise agency over whether and how they interact with and adhere to religious teachings and beliefs in school settings, but parents' rights to raise their children in accordance with their own personal religious or spiritual views may also be being undermined.

Withdrawal clauses were introduced in relation to collective worship and RE to assuage concerns that, in these elements of school life where religion was intended to feature centrally, institutions would promote religious beliefs specific to certain denominations, to pupils, against parents' wishes.[389] In comparison, schools have never been encouraged in official legislation or government-issued guidance to associate their values lists with religious teachings or beliefs and this likely explains the lack of a legal right to withdraw from these. Unfortunately, my dataset does not shed light on how effective schools' attempts at promoting their values are – how many students actually adopt their school's values as their own, for example – so I cannot be sure whether or how pupils' freedoms are truly limited in instances where school values are associated with religion. Nevertheless, regardless of their success, the boldness with which schools attempt to promote their values to pupils – whether they are associated with religion or not – stands in stark contrast to how

[389] Lois M. R. Louden, 'The conscience clause in religious education and collective worship: Conscientious objection or curriculum choice?', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 26.3 (2004), pp. 273-284.

most appear to present and explore religious beliefs and practices in other elements of school life. This is particularly interesting given that personal values and personal beliefs – religious or otherwise – are often considered to function similarly to each other.

While there is no single, universally agreed upon, definition of a "value", a simple description could be that a person's values reflect what is important to them – they are the characteristics, attitudes or behaviours that are valued. For example, Freeman and Auster state; "To say that respect is one of my values is to say that, all things being equal, I prefer to treat others with respect and that others treat me with respect".[390]

However, in reality, values are often more complex than this. As Freeman and Auster acknowledge, values are not simply preferences but things that are *most*, or *very* important to us. Moreover, they impact our actions and decisions. This is better expressed in J. M. Halstead's definition of values as:

> "Principles, fundamental convictions, ideals, standards or life stances which act as general guides to behaviour, or as points of reference in decision making or the evaluation of beliefs or action and which are closely connected to personal integrity and personal identity".[391]

This definition too has its flaws – namely that it is convoluted and complex, however this is not necessarily Halstead's fault. The complexity of this definition reflects the difficulty surrounding discussions of "values"; the term can be used to refer to different things which are influential to different extents in various scenarios. Nevertheless, the construction of "values" as impacting an individual's actions, reflecting their views on what is important in life or how one should live well, and as signalling something of their personal identity, indicates a resemblance between these and personal beliefs, especially religious ones, which can arguably manifest in and influence an individual in similar ways. Considering this, the apparent lack of concern about protecting and promoting pupils' freedom of thought or conscience in relation to the promotion of school values, and where they are related to religions, the lack of concern for protecting pupils' religious freedoms, is interesting. It indicates that while institutions' approaches to elements of school life concerning personal religious beliefs generally appear to be underpinned by and reflective of liberal individualism – carefully demonstrating respect for individuals' rights to determine their *own* personal religious beliefs and how these should be expressed – approaches to values education

[390] R. Edward Freeman and Ellen R. Auster, *Bridging the values gap: how authentic organizations bring values to life* (Oakland: Barrett-Koehler Publishers Inc, 2015), p. 20.
[391] Halstead, 'Values and Values Education in Schools,' *Values in Education and Education in Values*, (1995), p. 5.

appear to be more-so underpinned by collectivistic ideals – identifying and instilling shared values as opposed to promoting independence.

In fact, this acceptance of collectivism as opposed to individualism is also reflected in the actual values that schools adopt as their own. Table 3.2 (replicated in Table 6.4 below) from the third chapter of this thesis shows that explicitly individualistic values were rarely included in the values lists of schools in my main sample. Instead, as Table 5.10 (replicated in figure 6.5 below) from the fifth chapter of this thesis shows, the values most commonly selected and promoted by English state-funded institutions often appear to contain collectivistic inclinations – highlighting desirable ways for pupils to treat others, and encouraging consideration of others as opposed to prioritising oneself.

Free choice–related values	Percent of websites in my main sample listing school values relating to individuality/choice
Making choices	0.9%
Freedom	1.6%
Personal development	0.7%
Personal responsibility	0.5%
Individuality	4.5%
Individual liberty	1.8%
Liberty	0.4%

Table 6.4 (replication of Table 3.2): Proportions of schools in my main sample who include individualism-related values as school values – as percentages of all schools who provide values lists online.

Ten most common School Values – grouped by overarching theme	Percent of school websites that list these as a School Value[392]
Respect	48.1%
Responsibility	19.3%
Resilience	17.8%
Honesty	15.7%
Perseverance	14.1%
Friendship	13.9%
Aspiration	13.4%
Compassion	12.8%
Love	12.5%
Kindness	12.3%

Table 6.5 (replication of Table 5.10): The most common values themes present in the values lists of schools in my main sample

We would need further research that interacts with teachers and pupils to properly understand how the restrictions listed so far are implemented and experienced. However, this affinity towards collectivism could help explain why, when religious freedoms are presented and treated as of paramount importance in some instances, they are simultaneously restricted in others.

Triandis defines "collectivism" as:

> …a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives – family, coworkers etc – are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives, are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals, and emphasise their connectedness to members of these collectives.[393]

He alternatively defines "individualism" as:

> …a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives – are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others, give priority to their personal goals

[392] As a percentage of all schools who offered lists of school values – 561.
[393] Harry C. Triandis, *Individualism and Collectivism* (Routledge, 2018), p. 4.

> over the goals of others, and emphasise rational analyses of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others.[394]

Much of this thesis has so far highlighted several ways in which schools' approaches to religious elements of school life appear to reflect the latter framework but there are also many indications that schools can be understood as highly collectivistic institutions.

Schools have the unenviable task of corralling large numbers of children and young people into many different settings and spaces, introducing them to specific topics and tasks, and cultivating in them particular skills and interests. They work within a very limited time-frame and often towards very demanding targets, and in the process of ensuring that these tasks are fulfilled efficiently and safely, students' individuality is sometimes necessarily compromised. For example, in many areas of school life pupils possess very little agency over what they do, when, and how; their days are timetabled for them, their curricula decided for them, and even matters relating to their appearance are carefully determined and policed by the adults in charge. Enrolling in a school is not just one step in the pursuit of an academic education but is often interpreted as a child joining the school "community" or even "family" – they come to belong to the school, representing it in any excursion outside school grounds and demonstrating the calibre of its pedagogical ability through their exam grades. Furthermore, if we look again at the ways in which pupils' religious freedoms are restricted in educational settings, these all appear to be limiting individualism in the process of promoting collectivism – not just for the sake of it.

Institutions who declare intentions to shape pupils' religious beliefs in a certain direction are clearly attempting to share their official religious views and identities with their students; restricting pupils' ability to withdraw themselves from collective worship or RE promotes collective experiences over independent and individualistic ones; in considering only parents' religious beliefs, school admissions policies are treating pupils as members of a "collective" – their family – as opposed to individuals with their *own* views and wishes; deciding to teach about a selection of the major world religions using phenomenological approaches requires reducing many varied and highly complex religious groups to six broad religions – treating *them* as collectives rather than recognising their individuality; attempts to promote community cohesion through RE and collective worship aim to prepare pupils for life as fully active members of wider British society, not as individuals wholly removed from this; finally, widespread expectations that students would adopt school values – religious and otherwise – without questioning or challenging them, and indeed punishing those that are deemed to not have

[394] Ibid., p. 4.

done so, clearly teaches that an individual's values are not entirely their own but should mirror those of wider society around them.

Perhaps, then, pupils' freedoms are limited in these ways not because schools are do not truly care about protecting and promoting students' religious agency and individuality, but because they are attempting to balance both individualistic *and* collectivistic ideals. A similar duality becomes apparent when considering how parents' religious freedoms appear to be restricted in school settings.

Restrictions to parents' religious freedoms

Schedule 1, part II, article 2 of The Human Rights Act (1998) notes that the State "shall respect the right of parents to ensure [that] education and teaching [of their children is] in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions" and paragraph 2 of Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that "[p]arties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents…to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right [to freedom of thought conscience and religion] in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child."[395] Though school websites in my samples never acknowledged these rights, the choice statements and ambiguity that appear to protect *pupils'* freedoms of choice by emphasising that the school will not attempt to shape their religious beliefs also, arguably, protects these parental rights too. In presenting themselves as not indoctrinating or forcing any views on their pupils, schools are also subtly indicating that collective worship and RE sessions will not counter parents' efforts to instil certain religious beliefs, if they choose to do so. Nevertheless, my dataset also highlights multiple ways in which parental rights to control how their children are educated, including their exposure to and interactions with religion and spirituality, are compromised in English state-funded schools.

One clear example of this concerns faith-related admissions policies. Allowing faith schools to consider the religious background of applicants when deciding whom to offer places was originally introduced, at least partially, with parental rights in mind – these methods were intended to improve parental choice regarding their children's education, giving demonstrably religious parents a better chance of getting their children into a faith school that is likely to replicate and support their particular worldview, than non-religious counterparts.[396] However, much evidence indicates that this system does not always work perfectly in this respect. Critics argue that allowing faith schools to prioritise applicants from certain religious backgrounds over those from other or nonreligious

[395] Convention on the Rights of the Child', United Nations [n.d.], article 14.
[396] Levitt and Woodhead, 'Choosing a faith school in Leicester: admissions criteria, diversity and choice,' (2020), p. 235.

backgrounds actually often *limits* some parents' choices because the criteria that they usually have to meet – baptism records or regular church attendance for a significant length of time – are not equally attainable for all types of family. Parents who struggle to understand how the requirements can be met – for example if English is a second language or if they lack the education, confidence or social capital to make sense of individual schools' admissions policies – and those who face more practical struggles – they lack the transport or time required to attend church regularly, for example – will have fewer schooling options than parents who are able to jump through the necessary hoops to secure their child's admission to a school with faith-related admissions criteria.[397] Consequently, despite both governments and schools apparently *intending* to grant parents freedom to raise their children as they wish, including by choosing an educational environment that supports their beliefs and preferences, many families may find their freedoms in this respect limited by the way that schools implement faith-related oversubscription admissions criteria.

This is a restriction technically imposed by The School Admissions Code which allows the above scenario to occur, but it is also arguably caused by the schools themselves who choose to adopt faith-related criteria into their policies. Some critics have implied that certain faith schools use these tactics to "cream-skim" the most socio-economically advantaged children from the pool of applicants in an attempt to ensure that their school population has the highest chances of reaching the best attainment targets, thereby boosting the school's ranking and reputation.[398] However, this is difficult to prove and impossible to speak to from my dataset; it is possible that restricting certain parents' freedoms regarding the religious socialisation of their children is an unacceptable but unintentional outcome caused by a flawed system. My research also reveals other examples of instances where parents' freedoms in relation to their children's exposure to and engagement with religion appear to be more intentionally limited by schools; namely in relation to the content of school values lists and the parental right to withdraw from RE and collective worship.

I mentioned in the previous section that many schools appear to limit parents' knowledge of this right to withdraw their children from these parts of school life – 51.8% of those claiming to involve religious content in gatherings do not mention this right, nor do 74.1% of those who claim to teach RE. Furthermore, closer inspection of my dataset shows that significant proportions of those that *do* mention this right online, discourage parents from enacting it.

[397] Ibid., p. 235.
[398] Burgess and others, *School Places: A Fair Choice?* (2020), pp. 8-9.

This was found to be the case on 34.6% of school websites from my main sample that mentioned the right to withdraw in relation to collective worship, and 22.9% of schools from my main sample that mentioned it in relation to RE. Sometimes this discouragement was explicitly stated, for example:

> "Parents have the legal right to withdraw their children from Religious Education or collective worship. The Governing Body would be surprised and disappointed if any parent who had accepted a place in this Voluntary Aided Church of England High School were to do so."

> "Whilst parents have a right of withdrawal, they should have due regard to the Mission Statement and the faith ethos when applying for a place at [redacted] and know all that this entails."

Other times it was more subtle, such as schools not offering any information about how the withdrawal process works so parents are not clear on how to enact their right, or emphasising the tolerant and inclusive nature of school gatherings directly in connection with the announcement of parents' withdrawal rights. 12.9% of schools in my main sample who mentioned the right to withdraw from collective worship online, and 9.3% of schools that discouraged withdrawal from RE appeared to implicitly discourage parents from exercising these respective rights in these ways.

Where schools provide no information about withdrawal, it is *possible* that this is provided for all parents offline, and where they appear to discourage parents exercising this right, it is *possible* that parents receive more support in real life – my dataset cannot speak to actual goings-on in schools, only what they choose to publicise. However, given that most schools offer a wealth of information about RE and collective worship, and that they are legally required to make parents aware of this right, one might expect that schools who were concerned to fulfil this requirement would do so online. By extension, one therefore also might assume that those who choose not to make this clear online are less-concerned with publicising their adherence to this legal requirement protecting parents' rights and freedoms. We would need more research to be sure whether and how schools draw parents' attention to these rights offline, but if parents are not able to withdraw children from these religious elements of school life either through not being made aware that they can, not being sure how to do so, or for fear of negative repercussions, this arguably restricts parents' freedom to determine the religious socialisation and experiences of their children.

Interestingly, the Education (Assemblies) Bill, first introduced to Parliament in 2019 and currently awaiting a second reading in the House of Lords, proposes that this withdrawal clause be revoked in non-faith schools. Among other things, it recommends that the current requirement for all English

state schools to conduct daily religious collective worship only apply to institutions with official religious characters, and for non-faith schools to simply be required to conduct daily assemblies that promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of their pupils regardless of religious background – it goes on to argue that if these changes are made, the right to withdraw from these assemblies is no longer necessary.[399] Others, such as Clarke and Woodhead, have also suggested that the withdrawal clause be removed from RE lessons as the multi-faith and objective approach schools nowadays take to teaching this subject also render *it* unnecessary.[400] These are not calls for blatant infringement on religious freedoms as assemblies will no longer feature religion centrally and RE would only study religions objectively and academically, but it is an interesting example of how parental freedom of choice is not always prioritised above all else in school settings. In some instances, restricting parents' ability to determine exactly what their children do at school and even how they engage with religion and spirituality – assemblies may still touch on spiritual topics in promoting SMSC development and RE lessons will still teach about religious beliefs and practices – is not only acceptable but perceived as desirable.

If these changes are made, RE and school assemblies will be brought in line with other aspects of the school curriculum where parents are unable to dictate what their children learn about or experience while at school – except for in Relationships and Sex Education where the right of withdrawal will remain. Campaigners argue that this will give these activities a much-needed boost in terms of legitimacy and perceived importance, however this also highlights a third way in which parents' freedoms in relation to the religious socialisation of their children are limited in schools – they cannot withdraw their children from values education or from the obligation to adopt and embody the school's self-selected values.

Just as the previous section noted that pupils are not able to challenge or oppose their school's values – instead, they are expected to embody them and punished if they fail to do-so – so too, where schools associate their values with religion, the lack of a parental right to withdraw further limits parents' ability to determine if and how their children encounter religion. As was also highlighted in the previous section, this is likely for practical reasons – school values are usually closely enmeshed with the school's ethos and exploration or promotion of them is likely not confined to certain parts of the school day meaning that, practically speaking, it would be impossible to completely withdraw children from encountering them. Furthermore, I also noted in the previous section of this chapter that school values are often associated with, or appear to exist instead of,

[399] *Education (Assemblies) Bill 2024* < https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3769> [accessed 22 December 2024].
[400] Clarke and Woodhead, *A New Settlement Revised: Religion and Belief in Schools* (2017), p. 19.

school rules. Consequently, opting out of these values would pose further practical difficulties for schools, undermining their ability to enforce these attitudes and behaviours on those that are *not* withdrawn, and potentially struggling to discipline the behaviour of those that *had* been withdrawn.

Finally, while parents do not have complete control over *whether* their children encounter religion during schooltime, they also do not have complete control over *how* they encounter religion here as the content covered in collective worship, RE, and values education are not determined by parents. The choices schools make may be influenced by what they think parents of prospective pupils will approve of – what will make the school look appealing – but we would need further research with schools to confirm this and even then, the parents are not in complete control.

Clearly, though many schools appear to try to respect parents' rights in relation to the religious socialisation of their children, they do not grant these parents unlimited freedom to control every aspect of their children's religious education and engagement with religious activities while in school. That is, their rights and freedoms are respected; but only to a certain extent – they are not the ultimate determiner of how schools incorporate religion into their day.

Once again, the restrictions listed here appear to align with collectivist intentions. Failing to make parents aware of the right to withdraw their children from RE or collective worship, or even discouraging this, amounts to promoting collective gatherings and experiences over individualised ones – campaigns to make all assemblies in non-faith schools nonreligious and compulsory, arguing that any other system is exclusive when it should be inclusive, likewise reflects a preference for collective or shared experiences. Furthermore, focusing on baptism and church attendance over the personal beliefs of parents in faith-related oversubscription admissions criteria presents religious faith as a collective act that figures other than the individual in question can measure or provide information on, and preventing parents from having any say over the school's values, or being able to withdraw their children from having to fully adopt and act in accordance with these values shows a widespread expectation that personal values *should* be shared and not highly privatised or individualised.

Interestingly, these restrictions were never acknowledged within the discourse and discussions published on schools' websites; they were tacit restrictions. It is therefore unclear why they are imposed and whether or how schools navigate the apparent contradiction between trying to respect parents' wishes in relation to the education of their children – especially in relation to religious matters – and simultaneously infringing on these rights in various ways. We would need more research involving direct contact with teachers and school leaders to draw firm conclusions on these matters. However, academics have elsewhere noted that individualism and collectivism are not

mutually exclusive frameworks; people often draw on both. Therefore, as with the restrictions placed on pupils' religious freedoms, these findings could indicate that English state-schools are trying to balance competing desires for individualism and collectivism in multiple aspects of school life, including religious ones.

This might give the impression that schools are in ultimate control – deciding when pupils are able to exercise their agency regarding whether and how to engage with religions, and which beliefs and identities to adopt for themselves, and when to prioritise parents' freedoms concerning how their children are raised. However, a closer look at my dataset and the current educational situation shows that this is not accurate either.

Restrictions to schools' religious freedoms

In each of the four areas of school life where religion is likely to feature – RE, collective worship, faith-related admissions policies, and values education – schools have some element of freedom in determining exactly how they will approach these. However, they are not completely free to do whatever they wish; all schools must adhere to requirements outlined in official legislation while also meeting the expectations of other stakeholders such as academy trusts, governors and/or religious denominations with whom they are officially affiliated.

This combination of freedom and restriction is demonstrated in my dataset. The previous chapter of this thesis showed that institutions in my samples varied significantly in how they claimed to involve and explore religion in their regular operations and activities. However, it also highlights that *some* patterns exist in schools' descriptions – for example, the content covered in school gatherings could be relatively neatly categorised as either relating to Citizenship, School Matters, Doing Religion and/or Learning About Religion and the religions covered in RE lessons overwhelmingly centred around the six so-called "major world religions." Clearly, despite the variation, institutions are not featuring religion in *completely* unique ways. My dataset alone cannot shed light on why schools opted for one approach over another but comparison of the descriptions offered by different types of schools – namely the faith and non-faith schools in my two booster samples – indicates that the circumstances in which institutions operate are influential here; that is, their decisions appear to be reflective of, and likely influenced by, various elements of their aims, mission and context.

Though the websites of faith schools displayed a wide range of approaches to collective worship, RE, and school values, there were some trends that were more common among these schools than their non-faith counterparts. For example, faith schools were more likely than their non-faith counterparts to claim to involve religious content in their gatherings (96.7% and 56.2% respectively), and for this content to take the form of "doing religion" as opposed to "learning about religion"

(84% and 28.5% respectively). As for RE and school values, faith schools were less likely than their non-faith counterparts to teach about all six of the major world religions – 16.2% of faith schools who claimed to teach RE and provided curriculum information online, compared to 36.4% of non-faith schools respectively – and they were also more likely to explicitly associate their values lists with religious traditions and teachings (45.2% of faith schools who listed values online attributed religious labels to these, for example, compared to 0.2% of non-faith counterparts respectively).

While I cannot draw conclusions about the motivations behind schools' described approaches here without talking to them directly, the trends evidenced seem to match the differing expectations placed on both types of institution, and the differing contexts within which they operate. Consequently, though legislation grants schools freedom to choose how to feature and engage with religion in school gatherings, RE, school values and – for faith schools – faith-related admissions policies, the decisions they make are not entirely without external influence; no institution has *unlimited* freedom to involve religion in their operations and activities however they wish. They must take into account the expectations of the religious denomination to whom they are associated – if they are – as well as the pupil population they will be teaching – for example, their ages and diversity.

Regulations around the values that schools can promote are a little different. The Government offers no guidance on the characteristics or behaviours that should be included in schools' own values lists, preferring to allow institutions to formulate their own lists independently, however it *does* clearly outline what the Fundamental British Values (FBVs) are. While school values are not required to involve or reflect FBVs, they *are* often aligned with schools' duty to form pupils into positive future citizens and to promote community cohesion. Consequently, although institutions enjoy a substantial amount of freedom concerning the values that they choose as their own and promote to pupils, they are not *completely* free here – they must not contradict the FBVs and they must align with the values that wider society generally deems positive so as to help shape pupils into future active members of said society.

Furthermore, due to the marketized nature of education in contemporary English society, schools must also heed the expectations and preferences of their pupils' parents, and parents of prospective pupils in order to ensure that they secure enough applicants year-on-year. School values also act as key parts of the schools' marketing strategy, so they need to be values that make the school appeal to the type of parents that the school wants to attract. The question of if and how to involve religion in their values lists, as well as the actual values selected, is also, therefore, likely limited by parental expectations and preferences. This is more of a concern for some schools than others – those that

rank high on league tables and have a strong academic reputation are likely to be oversubscribed regardless of how they involve religion in their activities, so parental preferences will likely have less of an impact on their policies. However, those ranking lower might need to be more mindful of this, and those in rural areas where there are no other – or very limited – school options for families will likely be expected to be as inclusive as possible.

Consideration of parental preferences may indeed influence all instances where schools engage with religion – collective worship, RE and faith-related admissions too – so this is a broader limitation that schools face on top of those imposed by official guidelines and legislation. Ultimately, then, my findings show that the idea of imposing restrictions on individual freedom isn't just something that schools do to pupils and parents, but it is something that is also done to *them* by the governing authorities and by wider society more generally. Once again, the restrictions described here point to schools, in many ways, being built upon largely collectivistic frameworks as opposed to individualistic ones. The trends in schools' approaches to religious elements of school life – similar schools adopting similar methods – highlights that schools do not just operate as individual entities – teachers do not just please themselves, but aim to match their activities and operations to the needs of the broader pupil population. Where schools have similar contexts and pupil demographics, this results in them forming approaches to engaging with religion that are similar to each other. Government guidance allows for institutions to formulate their own approaches to religion, which might seem to be treating schools as individual entities, but it also expects them to demonstrate and promote shared values – both via the school's own values lists and the Fundamental British Values – in order to shape pupils into positive future citizens of this country and to engender community cohesion, both of which are inherently *collectivistic*; aiming to benefit the wider community as a whole by inducting pupils *into* this collective group. Consequently, though my dataset cannot confirm why schools decided to feature and engage with religion as they did, nor why state actors granted them freedom to form their own approaches in certain areas but imposed clearer guidance and expectations in others, it does provide evidence that schools are far from wholly individualistic entities promoting unfettered individualism to their students. Instead, in many ways they operate in accordance with collectivistic values.

Discussion – Contradictions, complexity and collectivistic ideals

At first glance, any evidence indicating that English state schools impose limits on pupils' and parents' religious freedoms and agency appears to pose a significant challenge to the core argument of this thesis – that notions of free choice in relation to religious matters are considered highly important, perhaps even "sacred" or "sovereign" in English state schools and, by extension, wider English society. However, if we consider the limitations outlined so far in this chapter alongside

broader academic understandings of how individualism and free choice are protected and exercised in everyday life in contemporary England this may not be the case.

The idea that individuals should be free to live as they wish may be popular in contemporary western societies[401], but in reality, it can never be as simple as just allowing everybody complete freedom to do as they wish. The third chapter of this thesis notes that individual rights and freedoms always have limits, even when enshrined in law, to prevent – or reduce the likelihood of – instances where one person's expression of their rights causes harm or infringes on another's ability to express *their* own rights. For example, while the 1998 Human Rights Act states that individuals in Britain have the right to "freedom of thought, conscience and religion"[402], it also states that this is subject to:

> limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.[403]

Similar qualifications are included wherever the law outlines individual freedoms. Ironically, they exist to *protect* individual rights and freedoms rather than cancelling out or undermining them – ensuring that they can be enjoyed, to some extent, by all members of society. Furthermore, research shows that while the British public perceive individual liberty to be highly important, they also accept the necessity of certain restrictions being applied to this[404], and a recent report by The Policy Institute concluded that this does not call into question the public's commitment to individual liberty, but rather it demonstrates the complexity and nuance involved in implementing this – and any other – value in real life.

In addition to the limitations consciously applied to rights and freedoms in modern western societies, literature also notes that these rights rarely exist in a vacuum and are usually balanced alongside other – sometimes conflicting – rights, freedoms, or values which can also lead to restrictions on how they are exercised. Multiple legal cases demonstrate that the right to freedom of religion and belief can come into tension with the co-existing right for any person to be free from discrimination on the basis of, for example, their gender or sexuality – such as *Lee v. Ashers Baking Company Ltd* and *Ladele and Macfarlane v. the UK*. In both instances one party exercised their

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[401] Linda Woodhead, 'Introduction', *Modern Believing*, 55.1 (2014), pp.1-5 (p. 4)
[402] *Human Rights Act 1998*, schedule 1, part 1, chapter 8, article 9, sub-section 1.
[403] *Human Rights Act 1998* schedule 1, part 1, chapter 8, article 9, sub-section 2.
[404] Kirstie Hewlett and others, *Shared social values*, (The Policy Institute, 2023), p. 6, <https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/202916619/Shared_Values_Final_2023.03.31.pdf> [accessed 17 December 2024].

religious freedoms in a way that was perceived as infringing on the other party's rights to be free from discrimination, and the only way of settling the disputes was for a court to decide whose rights should take precedence in these specific situations.

Another – more common – example of how different values can conflict and cause tension concerns those held by the same individual. Large-scale surveys show that modern-day British citizens hold several shared values, some of which appear to be rooted in opposing principles or ideologies. The Policy Institute reported on three particularly prominent "shared values" – tolerance, equality, and individual liberty – and while the latter is clearly rooted in individualistic principles, the two former values are more closely associated with collectivism[405] which can be defined as a set of "feelings, beliefs, behavioural intentions, and behaviours related to solidarity and concern for others."[406] In fact, the idea that these values are "shared" at all, across the majority of Britons – perceived positively, with expectations that others will abide by them too – also hints at acceptance of collectivistic undertones even if the values themselves are individualistic as is the case with "individual liberty". This confluence of individualism and collectivism in contemporary British values has been noted elsewhere too; a report based on the 2013 British Social Attitudes Survey states that "Britain takes a far more laissez-faire view of other people's relationships and lifestyles", indicating that society is much more liberal than it was previously, before going on to state that despite this, there has *not* generally been "a shift towards a less collectivist Britain" over the past 30 years.

Perhaps the instances, outlined in this chapter, whereby religious freedoms and choice appear to be restricted rather than protected in English school settings are not, therefore, irrefutable evidence that individual choice is *not* highly valued in schools and wider society; perhaps they are simply further evidence of the complexity and nuance involved in allowing or even encouraging such individualism. If we look again at the findings outlined in this chapter, the limitations applied to religious freedoms in school settings do not appear to stem from a single authority wilfully or secretly removing individuals' rights. Instead, they appear to be rooted in clashes between – and attempts to balance – different individuals' ability to exercise their values and rights, and their ability to act on multiple, sometimes contrasting values; particularly collectivistic and individualistic values.

First, some of the limitations to schools' religious freedoms, listed above, are rooted in legislation – for example, the law requires that where schools teach RE, this takes a multi-faith approach covering multiple of the "principal religions" in Great Britain, and that where applicants' religious

[405] Ibid., p. 14.
[406] C. Harry Hui, 'Measurement of individualism-collectivism', *Journal of Research in Personality*, 22.1 (1988), pp. 17-36 (p. 17).

backgrounds are considered as a basis for offering a school place this must not be as a result of practices such as interviews which may disadvantage families from less-privileged backgrounds. Rather than demonstrating that the State intends to openly limit individual religious freedoms and that, therefore, notions of choice in relation to religious matters are *not* considered "sacred" or "sovereign", these limitations instead fit the mould of those discussed above whereby limitations are necessary to prevent harm being caused by unlimited freedoms. Were schools completely free to teach RE – or not – as they wished, and to determine applicants' religious backgrounds and convictions through any methods of their choice, methods could be adopted that would disadvantage certain segments of the population in relation to admissions choices, and RE content could differ even more so between schools than it currently does, promoting certain viewpoints over others which would be particularly problematic in non-faith schools.

Second, where the State is *not* directly responsible for the restrictions to religious freedoms listed above, the direction of influence is far less linear. Instead of a single authority determining how pupils, parents and schools experience and engage with religion each of these actors appears to impact the others' choices almost as a by-product of exercising their own religious agency. Pupils' freedom to form their own views regarding religion, and to determine how they engage with religion in school, are restricted by parents in exercising *their* rights to choose how to raise their children, and by schools who ultimately choose how to include religion in their regular activities and whether or to what extent to encourage pupils to explore and form their own views during these. Parents' freedoms to raise their children as they see fit, including in guiding their exposure to religious traditions and beliefs, is limited by schools who have more control over how and when children experience religious beliefs and practices during the school day, and by the children who have the right to freedom of belief and conscience,[407] so cannot be forced to adopt the beliefs of their parents and as research attests, are often able to exercise these rights.[408] Finally, while schools are granted some agency over how they implement religious requirements such as collective worship and RE, and whether and how they involve religion in their school values and, if they are faith schools, in their faith-related admissions policies, the marketized nature of the current English education system means that their choices are likely influenced by the preferences of the parents to whom they are trying to appeal, and by the backgrounds and abilities of the pupils already on roll. The result is not a linear line of authority whereby one actor has ultimate power to determine how all others experience and interact with religious or spiritual matters, but instead a complicated web

[407] 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', United Nations [n.d.], article 14.
[408] Hopkins, Olson, Pain and Vincett, 'Mapping Intergenerationalities: the formation of youthful religiosities', (2011), pp. 322-325.

whereby all involved – my dataset only speaks to parents, pupils and schools but governments, school governors and multi-academy trusts are likely also implicated – can be seen to be limiting each other's religious agency in various ways through exercising their *own* freedoms.

We would need more research to fully understand how these groups interlink – how they exert pressure or infringe on each other's religious agency and freedoms of choice, which groups do so more than others, and how State or Governmental influence fits in to this complex web. Nevertheless, it appears that rather than one imposing limits on the others in a way that would indicate that they did not recognise the others' rights to religious agency and choice, each necessarily limits the other in the process of exercising their own freedoms. Perhaps, then, the "limitations" outlined in this chapter should not be understood as solely infringing on or restricting freedom of choice in relation to religious matters but as balancing the competing rights of different actors which ultimately ensures that no single actor is able to completely revoke the freedoms of another. They do not prevent individuals from exercising agency over their interactions with and attitudes towards religion, but prevent any single actor from being able to exercise *unlimited* freedom in this respect and therefore arguably these limitations arguably act to *protect* these individual freedoms.

Third, just as there is often no *single* authority imposing limits on everyone's religious agency in school settings, there is also no *single* value that is constantly revered above all others – many of the limitations that appear to be imposed on religious freedoms in English schools could also be understood as not just restricting or preventing individualism, but *promoting* collectivism. These two principles are often considered to be direct opposites and mutually exclusive however, research indicates that many people actually often reflect both stances in their actions and priorities[409] and in fact, Triandis states that balancing these tendencies leads to better "individual and societal health" than being too closely aligned with either one.[410] If it is possible to hold two ostensibly contradicting values simultaneously, that schools appear to promote both individualism and collectivism in different scenarios does not necessarily prove that their concern for either is disingenuous, but rather demonstrates how rights and values do not exist in a vacuum and exercising or acting in adherence with one can impact the extent to which another is exercised.

Clearly, there are boundaries around how and when religious freedoms can be exercised in school settings, and these vary between actors – pupils, parents and institutions. We would need more research to fully understand where these lie, and how they are implemented and experienced by

[409] Harry C. Triandis, *Individualism and Collectivism* (2018), p. 4.
[410] Ibid.

various stakeholders but their existence does not necessarily refute the argument put forward so far in this thesis, that schools' – and wider English society's – presentations of and interactions with religion tend to be heavily rooted in individual liberalism, emphasising the importance of free individual choice.

7. Summarising the FACTs of English state schools' engagements with religion

Research focus

The research questions underpinning this thesis are:

1. How does religion feature in the operations and activities of English state-funded schools – according to their websites?

2. What does this indicate about broader societal attitudes towards religion; specifically, the value supposedly placed on notions of "free individual choice" in relation to religious matters?

Over recent decades, the increasingly multi-faith *and* secular nature of contemporary English society has stimulated much debate about whether and how state-funded schools should teach about and encourage students to engage with religion. Vocal critique of long-standing religious requirements placed on such schools – daily Christian worship, for example – now come from many varied sources, though a common consensus on how best to improve the current situation is still lacking.

During this time, academic attention has also maintained a steadfast interest in exploring these largescale religious changes as they occur within contemporary British society; for example, how nonreligious identities are expressed and experienced,[411] how surviving forms of Christianity operate,[412] and how non-Christian faiths navigate the traditionally Christian and increasingly secular society that is contemporary Britain.[413] In particular, several well renowned sociologists of religion have suggested that individual agency and freedom of choice are highly valued – even "sacred" or "sovereign" – in the British public's perceptions of, and engagements with, religion and spirituality.

My research aims to bridge multiple of these ongoing discussions. Working on the basis that schools reflect the society in which they exist and for which they prepare pupils, and given the public nature

[411] Woodhead, 'The rise of no religion in Britain: the emergence of a new cultural majority' (2016); Lois Lee, 'Secular or nonreligious? Investigating and interpreting generic 'not religious' categories and populations', *Religion*, 44.3 (2014), pp. 466-482.

[412] Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead, *Congregational studies in the UK: Christianity in a post-Christian context* (Routledge, 2016); Rowan Clare Williams, 'What sweeter music: an examination of the development and popularity of carol services in cathedrals', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 45.3 (2024), pp. 299-313; Anne Richards, 'Are cathedrals the arks of today? Some reflections on cathedral mission and spiritual seekers', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 45.3 (2024), pp. 244-260; Martin Percy, *The Salt of the Earth: Religious Resilience in a Secular Age*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

[413] Jonathan Scourfield and others, 'The Intergenerational Transmission of Islam in England and Wales: Evidence from the Citizenship Survey', (2012); Kaye Haw, 'From hijab to jilbab and the 'myth' of British identity: Being Muslim in contemporary Britain a half-generation on', *Race, ethnicity and education*, 12.3 (2009), pp. 363-378; Tariq Modood and Albert Bastenier, 'A place for Muslims in the secular multiculturalism of Great Britain', *Social Compass*, 47.1 (2000), pp. 41-60.

of school websites, the ways that these institutions claim to interact with religion – if at all – arguably reflects the concerns and common practices surrounding religion and spirituality in wider English society. Therefore, I endeavoured to use schools' descriptions of whether and how religion features in their operations not only as insights into what schools are doing – or at least what they claim to be doing – but also to shed light on the opinions and attitudes of the broader English public towards religious and spiritual matters. Specifically, I intended explore the extent to which neoliberal values of individualism and religious agency were prevalent and powerful – even "sacred" – in schools', and therefore wider society's, perceptions of and interactions with religion.

This was an ambitious undertaking and an equally ambitious, and creative, methodology was needed to ensure that both of my research questions were explored in-depth and that enough schools were studied to allow for generalisations beyond my specific samples.

Research methods

I opted to collect information from the websites of English state-funded schools concerning their approaches to four areas of school life where religion is most likely to be involved: collective worship (also referred to as school gatherings in this thesis), RE, school values (part of the duty for schools to promote spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development) and, in faith schools, oversubscription policies. This was inputted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet where it was analysed via both quantitative and qualitative methods. The former aimed to measure the prevalence of various approaches to these aspects of school life – for example, to calculate how many institutions claimed to lead pupils in prayer during school gatherings – and the latter intended to explore broader linguistic trends and narratives embedded within schools' public statements.

The decision to use school websites as sources of information on this topic was partially influenced by the fact that I embarked on this project at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Stringent restrictions placed on social interactions and schools' operations, not to mention the impact of these on individuals' mental health, made the more conventional routes for research on schools – interviewing teachers or distributing questionnaires – much more difficult to implement than normal and less likely to successfully generate good levels of participation or meaningful insights. However, interacting with websites as opposed to individuals also had its benefits. Specifically, it offered a way for me – a lone doctoral researcher – to access large amounts of detailed information from three nationally representative samples of English state-funded schools:

- Main Sample – representative of all state-funded schools in England (*n=583*),
- Faith school booster sample – representative of all state-funded schools with official religious characters in England (*n=575*),

- Non-faith school booster sample – representative of all state-funded schools without official religious characters in England (*n=575*).

Findings

This website analysis process resulted in a comprehensive and complex database mapping the many varied and composite ways in which English state schools claim to involve and interact with religion; in fact, the findings generated here are more numerous than can be explored in sufficient detail in one doctoral thesis. Fortunately, the second of my research questions provides a much-needed focus for both my analysis and the discussion presented in this dissertation. Rather than simply listing all the ways that institutions in my samples appeared to approach religious elements of school life, this thesis focuses on the most prominent ones, and those most relevant to discussions of religious freedoms and the "sacred" value of individual choice.

In short, my findings neither unequivocally prove that these neoliberal, individualistic perceptions of religion are the most significant and powerful influence on English schools' – and therefore wider society's – interactions with religion, nor do they prove that these perceptions of religion are not influential at all. Instead, free choice and religious agency appears to be both highly respected and protected *and* necessarily limited in educational settings. The four "findings" chapters of this thesis – the titles of which spell out the acronym "FACT" – ultimately highlight the complexity and nuance of liberal individualism as it manifests in modern English society's perceptions of and interactions with religion.

'F' is for Free Choice

The most obvious way of exploring whether schools' interactions with religion are shaped by a desire to protect individual freedoms of choice is to measure how often schools' websites explicitly state that this is the case. The third chapter in this thesis, "'F' is for Free Choice", does just this.

Using Nvivo software, I scoured school websites' descriptions of collective worship, RE, school values, and, where relevant, faith-related oversubscription admissions policies for what I have termed "choice statements". These are explicit declarations of the school's intention to protect pupils' freedom to choose whether and how to interact with religion during these sessions, and their freedom to choose or form their own religious or spiritual beliefs and identities.

37% of schools in my main sample, who claimed to conduct what could be considered "collective worship" – school gatherings with religious content, whether they labelled this "worship" or not – published such statements online. For example:

> "We wish to reassure parents that our lessons and assemblies are not designed to convert pupils or urge particular beliefs but to promote understanding and respect for a wide variety of faiths and approaches."

And:

> "Weekly collective worship, allows the children to explore moral questions and current affairs, giving them a platform to voice their own ideas and opinions."

Many more schools published similar statements in their descriptions of RE – 71.9% of schools in my main sample, who claimed to teach RE, posted declarations like:

> "Our students learn to think for themselves about their view of the world they live in. Alongside this, students have the opportunity to learn about and from other people's views, opinions and faiths."

While there is clearly a stronger propensity for schools to explicitly state that RE lessons align with societal expectations that pupils will have the freedom to determine their own religious beliefs, the proportion making such declarations in relation to collective worship is not insignificant.

It is interesting that there appears to be a more concerted effort to explicitly state that RE is not intended to be an evangelising venture than to make similar declarations in relation to school worship, especially when the latter duty generally attracts more controversy and critique for its potential to lead to confessional teaching and even indoctrination. Unfortunately, my dataset cannot explain this situation – we would have to ask individual teachers to find out why this is the case – but this could be seen an early indication of the contrasting methods adopted by schools in relation to various religious elements of school life, explored in more depth in the fifth chapter of this thesis, "'C' is for Contrasting Approaches".

It is also interesting that though these show significant proportions of English state schools declaring an alignment with liberal individualistic perceptions of, and interactions with, religion, they also show significant proportions *not* doing so. Of schools in my main sample, "choice statements" such as those above were absent from the websites of 28.1% of schools who claimed to teach RE and 56.4% of those who claimed to conduct collective worship – regardless of whether they used this label. Furthermore, "choice statements" such as those quoted above were much rarer – or even non-existent – in website descriptions of religious school values and faith-related oversubscription admissions policies.

Where schools in my main sample clearly associated their values with faith and religion this was usually either by listing explicitly religious values in their list, referencing religion or belief in the label attributed to their values – "Christian values", for example – or justifying their selected values by linking them to religious teachings or figures. Among schools in my main sample that did this, over half (53.3%) indicated, in the discourse surrounding these lists, that pupils' individuality and independence was important to them. However, none stated that these same pupils would have any choice over their response to the school's religious values – they were expected to wholeheartedly adopt and act in accordance with them.

Moreover, none of the schools in my booster sample of faith schools who included faith-related criteria in their oversubscription policies made any such choice statements either; this despite the permission to allow faith schools to discriminate between applicants based on their religious background in this way is often presented as largely about improving parental choice. Again, this hints at something discussed in more-depth in the sixth chapter of this thesis ("'T' is for Tacit Restrictions") – namely that religious freedoms and opportunities to exercise agency and choice are not granted equally to all groups; sometimes one group's rights (in this instance, the parents') are more strongly protected and prioritised than those of others (the pupils).

At first glance, these findings appear to suggest that freedom of choice is not particularly significant in many schools' interactions with religion, however, closer inspection reveals that very few schools declared intentions to consciously limit pupils' religious agency by consciously shaping their beliefs and identities. Only twelve schools in my main sample made such declarations in describing collective worship, and only three did so in describing RE. For example:

> "We will continue to foster and deepen the children's personal relationship with God our Father daily in prayer. We do this by helping them become aware of God's Presence in their lives and of His love for them by leading them to respond to Him in a manner suited to their age."

Such declarations were more common in state-funded faith schools than non-faith schools – as is to be expected – but analysis of my booster samples also shows that even among the former, they were far from universally present. More-commonly, schools of all sorts – faith and non-faith – simply did not explicitly state a position either way. They did not openly declare intentions to respect pupils' religious freedoms of choice by encouraging them to form their own beliefs during religious elements of school life, *or* intentions to override such freedoms by instilling certain beliefs and identities in students.

This has confusing implications for the second of my research questions. On one hand, that significant proportions of schools publish "choice statements" in relation to collective worship and/or RE indicates that they expect these declarations of commitment to protect pupils' religious freedoms of choice to be positively received by those in wider society whom the websites are attempting to appeal to. However, that these statements were not present in relation to all elements of school life featuring religion, and that significant proportions of institutions did not publish any at all on their website, simultaneously indicates that many schools do *not* expect many of those reading their website to be concerned about the need to protect and promote pupils' religious freedoms of choice here. Furthermore, the few instances where schools openly declared intentions to shape pupils' religious views and identities suggests that the opposite may be true among some segments of the population – rather than wanting schools to give students complete freedom to form their *own* beliefs and determine their *own* interactions with religious practices, they are happy for schools to take a firm role in shaping students' beliefs and religious experiences. These findings therefore appear to both support and contradict the common perception that religion in contemporary English society is treated as highly privatised and individualised, and that free personal choice in this respect is a highly important, or even "sacred", value here. Clearly, notions of choice and agency in relation to religious matters are perceived differently, with varying levels of significance and desirability, among different segments of the English population and in different circumstances. Given this obvious complexity, it may be necessary to look beyond schools' explicit statements concerning pupils' choice to see if and how they demonstrated commitment to liberal individualism in other, more subtle ways. The next two of chapters of this thesis, "'A' is for Ambiguity" and "'C' is for Contrasting Approaches" do just this.

'A' is for Ambiguity

Although my dataset shows that choice statements were relatively common in relation to RE, they were less common in school websites' descriptions of their gatherings and values. However, the tendency to present these activities as religiously ambiguous was much more common across all these areas of school life. This is significant as, given the controversy and critique that often surrounds the inclusion of religion in English state-funded education, and the marketized nature of the education system here, we might expect that institutions would want to make clear exactly where and how religion features in their regular activities and operations. Alternatively, given the increasing prevalence of nonreligious identification among the British adult population, we might expect institutions to attempt to present these aspects of school life as clearly secular, and devoid of religious content or interaction. Instead, my dataset shows that many school websites' descriptions of their gatherings, RE, and their values lack clarity around if, how, and how centrally, religion

features in these. That is, they can often be interpreted as both religious *and* nonreligious aspects of the school's operations.

This ambiguity is reflected in the labels, focus and content of school gatherings. Two thirds of schools in my main sample, who claimed to include religious content in their school gatherings, used the term "assembly" to refer to these sessions over or alongside the more explicitly religious "collective worship". This may seem innocuous but the term "assembly" draws more secular connotations than anything to do with "worship", and therefore when used to introduce a session that clearly involves religious content such as singing hymns or saying prayers, it arguably confuses the intended aims and focus of these sessions. Furthermore, descriptions of the content occurring within these sessions often does not make things any clearer. Most institutions that I studied claimed to include both religious and nonreligious content in their gatherings with no clear indication of which would be granted greater significance, and of those claiming to involve religious practices ("Doing Religion"), vague references to "reflections" were particularly common – in fact, it was the second-most commonly-cited form of "Doing Religion" on websites' descriptions of school gatherings, surpassed only marginally by "prayers". This combination of religious and nonreligious content has been found in previous, smaller-scale studies,[414] as have references to 'reflective' practices rather than explicitly religious ones taking place during these sessions.[415]

A similar ambiguity was also evident in my analysis of school values. Of all schools who published values lists online, only 5% included explicitly religious values – those that openly referenced religious beliefs, traditions or practices – in these, 14% introduced their values lists with religious labels – for example, "Christian Values" or "Gospel Values" – and attempted to validate or justify their selected values by associating them with religious teachings or figures. No schools went the other way, explicitly presenting their values as nonreligious – humanistic, for example. Instead, school values were generally quite vague – concise lists of words with little explanation as to exactly what they pointed towards – and lacked connections with any moral authority, religious or otherwise, external to the individual school in question. Without asking schools it is difficult to ascertain why schools selected the values that they did, or how they promote them to their pupils –

[414] Richard Cheetham, 'Collective Worship: A Window into Contemporary Understandings of the Nature of Religious Belief?', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 22.2 (2000), pp. 71-81; Greg Smith, *Children's Perspectives on Believing and Belonging*, (National Children's Bureau for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005).

[415] Peter Cumper and Alison Mawhinney (eds), *Collective Worship and Religious Observance in Schools* (Peter Lang Ltd, 2018)

what exactly they are presented as meaning – but this apparent ambiguity means that they could be interpreted as either religious or nonreligious and in line with many varied worldviews. Strhan and Shillitoe's study of religion in three English primary schools notes something similar.[416] While they did not examine each institution's self-selected values in depth, they observed that schools tended to prioritise individual freedoms and religious agency, which they described as reflecting a framework of 'pervasive humanism' underpinning schools' approaches to religious aspects of school life. However, this framework was never explicitly identified as shaping schools' operations and was seldom made a focus of study or discussion with pupils and consequently, the values that they promoted could "cohere" with religion – institutions did not explicitly present themselves as aligning with either religious or nonreligious viewpoints.

Website descriptions of RE also appeared to employ ambiguity but in different ways. Unlike discourse relating to collective worship and school values, religions were almost always presented as the central and even sole focus of RE lessons. This is clearly demonstrated in the titles given to this subject. While many schools used the term "assembly" to describe school gatherings, injecting some ambiguity as to the centrality of religion within these sessions, over 90% of schools whose websites discussed a subject resembling RE titled this subject "Religious Education" or "Religious Studies", making immediately clear the religious focus of these lessons. While I did not conduct a thorough analysis of schools' RE syllabuses as provided online, I did explore which religions or worldviews schools claimed to teach about, and noted a significant trend towards uniformity here too. Most schools claimed to teach about one or more of the so-called major world religions – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism – in RE lessons; few claimed to teach about nonreligious views or non-traditional religions and spiritualities. Again, the central focus on traditional religions is clearly demonstrated in my research, however, analysis of my dataset did note a tendency towards ambiguity in schools' descriptions of the intended *impact* of these lessons on pupils' personal religiosity and spirituality. On one hand, the prevalence of "choice statements" in website descriptions of RE indicates that these lessons were intended to be non-confessional explorations of certain religious lifestyles – perhaps aligning with the phenomenological, World Religions approach popularised by Ninian Smart.

Yet, many such schools *also* stated that they intended for RE lessons to have some subjective impact on pupils' personal beliefs and attitudes either by stating that pupils would be encouraged to introspectively assess and form their own personal views during or as a result of RE lessons, or by presenting this subject as a part of schools' response to the legal duty introduced in anti-extremism

[416] Strhan and Shillitoe, *Growing Up Godless*, p. 198.

legislation, whereby schools must promote positive perceptions of, and respect for, various "other" religious groups. While these lessons clearly focus on religions, then, the intended impact on pupils' personal views is more ambiguous, appearing to straddle both objective and introspective elements.

These findings align with wider debates on Religious Education, which consistently highlight the dominance of the phenomenological "World Religions" paradigm in English schools.[417] This model, though presented as a non-confessional, descriptive study of major traditions – not an attempt to assess the veracity of truth claims but an exploration of what these claims are in each tradition – is widely seen as reductive and shaped by colonialist and Western Christian assumptions.[418] However, critics also suggest that the descriptive orientation of the paradigm also limits critical interrogation of religions, and its entanglement with community cohesion and counter-extremism agendas encourages presentations of religion as essentially benign, with negative outcomes dismissed as distortions.[419] Such essentialist framings restrict pupils' capacity for critical engagement and risk reducing, rather than enhancing, religious literacy.[420] Dinham further highlights the lack of clarity in RE's purpose, which oscillates between transmitting knowledge of "other people's religions" and cultivating tolerance or personal reflection. In response, scholars increasingly advocate a shift towards a 'worldviews paradigm', which seeks to move beyond Smart's descriptive framework by foregrounding pupils' own and others' worldviews, encouraging reflexivity, and better preparing students for engagement with diversity.[421]

As my research methods did not involve direct interaction with school leaders or teachers, it is difficult to ascertain why ambiguity appears to feature so commonly in website descriptions of elements of school life involving religion – whether this is an intentional or even conscious act, for example, or what it is hoped to achieve. However, previous studies that note similar trends in explorations of school worship sessions offer some suggestions for how the ambiguity that I found can be interpreted. In particular, Stern and Shillitoe reported that teachers often presented Prayer

[417] Suzanne Owen, "The World Religions Paradigm: Time for change", *Arts and Humanities in higher education*, 10.3 (2011), pp.253-268.
[418] Owen, (2011); Lewin et al., "Reframing curriculum for religious education", *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 55.4 (2023), pp. 369-387.
[419] David Smith, Graeme Nixon and Jo Pearce, "Bad Religion as False Religion: An Empirical Study of UK Religious Education Teachers' Essentialist Religious Discourse", *Religions*, 9.11 (2018), pp. 1-19.
[420] James Conroy, "Religious Illiteracy in School Religious Education", *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, eds. Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis (Policy Press, 2015), pp. 167-185; Adam Dinham, *Religion and Belief Literacy: Reconnecting a Chain of Learning* (Policy Press, 2021).
[421] Lucy Peacock, Matthew Guest and Kristin Aune, 'Worldviews, Religious Literacy and Interfaith Readiness: Bridging the Gap between School and University' (2024), https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/files/80979133/Worldviews_religious_literacy_and_interfaith_readiness.pdf [accessed 20/08/25].

Spaces as "straddle[ing] the Christian and non-Christian, religious and nonreligious"[422] rather than as openly and explicitly Christian as the initiative was apparently originally intended to be experienced. They argue that this ambiguous re-framing is an example of "subversive obedience"; schools intentionally undermine the intended nature of Prayer Spaces – promoting Christian prayer – to present them in a way that is more appealing to, and more inclusive of, a wider audience which paradoxically enables them to fulfil – or obey – the broader aims of the initiative. As the ambiguity demonstrated in my dataset is not clearly opposing legislation around school worship, school values, or RE – in fact, it appears in many ways to align with the vagueness and ambiguity found *within* such legislation – this explanation cannot simply be copied and pasted to explain my findings. Nevertheless, it is a useful concept as it highlights the perceived importance of making religious aspects of school life inclusive and accessible for all pupils, and how intentional ambiguity can aid in achieving this – something also noted in other academic studies.

Through this ambiguity, it appears that schools enable – or even encourage – pupils and their parents to inject their own interpretations of elements of school life involving religion; an approach that ultimately reveals an acceptance that individuals will have their own views on these matters, and that respects them enough to not try and unduly influence or change them – key elements of liberal individualism. Rather than the school presenting a particular worldview and expecting those who join them to adhere to this, my dataset indicates that many English state schools appear to present themselves as moulding their activities and approaches to fit the worldviews and preferences of the pupils and parents that join them.

Of course, my analysis of websites does not reveal how this inclusive ambiguity is experienced and responded to by these groups, or even how much it impacts their religious agency – how free they really feel to interpret events in line with their own beliefs, whatever these are. Yet, my research does provide insight into how institutions wish to present themselves and it appears that inclusivity is a common concern for many English state-funded schools, which by extension indicates that individualistic perceptions of religion and spirituality are also widespread among schools, and therefore, wider English society. It does not prove that they are universally present though – especially as my dataset also shows that some school websites do *not* imbue religious elements of school life with ambiguity. Small proportions of schools in my samples explicitly stated their intentions to instil specific religious beliefs and identities in pupils through gatherings, RE and/or school values. These exceptions do not necessarily falsify my argument here as they were not

[422] Julian Stern and Rachael Shillitoe, 'Prayer spaces in schools: a subversion of policy implementation?', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 40.2 (2019), pp. 228-245 (p. 11).

particularly common, but rather they demonstrate that there are some limits to the popularity and prevalence of liberal individualistic approaches to religion, and that implementing them is not always straightforward – it cannot always be prioritised above other factors and concerns. These boundaries erected around religious freedoms are more fully explored in the final chapter of this thesis, "'T' is for Tacit Restrictions".

'C' is for Contrasting Approaches

Another implicit indication of schools' commitment to liberal individualism in relation to religious matters is the diversity of ways that they approach collective worship, RE, school values and faith-related admissions criteria. The fourth chapter of this thesis outlines the contrasts and variations in schools' self-described approaches to these elements of school life.

Around two thirds of schools in my booster sample of faith schools included faith-related criteria in their oversubscription admissions policies, leaving one third that did not – the first indication that attitudes towards involving religion in this area of school life varied significantly. However, the closer we look at *how* schools assess applicants' religious backgrounds and commitments, the more variations become evident here. Institutions generally either considered applicants' baptism status, required that they submit a Certificate of Catholic Practice, or assessed the regularity of their attendance at church, though some took multiple of these into consideration and many of those implementing the latter criteria held widely varying definitions of "regular attendance." To complicate matters further, institutions also varied substantially in the level of significance they attributed to any faith-related criteria they included in their admissions policies.

Schools' approaches to involving religion in their gatherings also varies substantially, according to my dataset. Many schools did *not* appear to involve religion in their gatherings at all, but of those that did, some included educational content – "Learning About Religion" – whereas others led pupils in actual religious practices – "Doing Religion". Of those in the second camp, different institutions claimed to include different religious practices – prayers, reflections, reading the bible, and church services, for example – and digging deeper, the specific ways in which these were presented also appeared to vary significantly between schools.

As for school values, while only small proportions of schools in my samples explicitly associated their values lists with religion, my analysis of websites reveals that among those that did, a variety of methods were implemented. Some institutions attributed religious labels to their lists, others referenced religious teachings or figures in justifying or explaining their lists, and others still listed explicitly religious values such as "faith" or "belief in God". Among those adopting the latter method, there were no clear trends in the type of religious values listed – most identified in my dataset were

only listed in one school's values list – indicating that these are not generic, copy and paste affairs but individually curated. In fact, the general diversity of values chosen by institutions indicates that this individuality is true not only of whether and how religion is associated with school values, but of the values chosen and promoted altogether. From the 561 schools in my main sample, who provided school values lists online, I identified 735 different values in schools' lists. Even when these are grouped according to theme – for example, all values relating to "respect" are grouped together – schools in my main sample still selected and promoted over 250 different values themes in their official lists.

Variation was less immediately obvious in schools' self-described approaches to RE. The vast majority of school websites that I studied claimed that the subject was taught, and although I could not conduct a thorough analysis of the curricula they claimed to follow – this could be an interesting topic for a future study – a brief exploration of the religions that schools claimed to teach about indicated that most stuck to the six so-called major world religions. Christianity, Islam and Judaism were more commonly covered than Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism, but all were more commonly taught than less traditional religions or spiritualities and nonreligious worldviews, reflecting trends noted in previous studies on this topic. Nevertheless, the number and exact combinations of religions or worldviews taught did appear to vary between institutions. Legal requirements concerning RE are much clearer than those concerning collective worship or school values and therefore schools have less opportunity for individuality in how they approach this subject, however, my findings demonstrate that where they *are* able to express their own agency over the form and content of RE lessons, many schools appear to exercise this.

In fact, this appears to be true of all four areas that I studied – where schools are granted freedom to determine their own approaches to involving and engaging with religion, the variety demonstrated in my samples indicates that they often tend to take advantage of this and curate an approach that suits their particular circumstances as opposed to simply copying and pasting a generic approach. Furthermore, my dataset also indicates that – on their websites at least – schools generally do not provide justification or explanation for their chosen approaches here; they simply explain what they do. There is often no attempt to validate their decision by showing that it is recommended by an external state or religious authority. Consequently, not only does it appear that schools are concerned with ensuring that pupils are free, and encouraged, to form their *own* religious beliefs and identities, but they also seem to expect to be able to exercise this right for themselves. They appear to expect to be able to choose how they involve religion in the school day and activities, and for their choices to be respected by the parents to whom they are trying to attract. This, in turn, indicates that these parents – and broader English society – similarly assume schools to be capable

of determining whether and how they feature religion in their activities and operations, without expecting other authorities to be involved or referenced in the process; an expectation that points to a widespread understanding of religion and spirituality as something that individuals can make decisions about for themselves.

It is important to note, however, that while interactions with religion appear to vary between institutions, they are not completely unique from each other. My dataset also highlights that certain approaches to engaging with religion were more commonly adopted by faith schools than non-faith schools; for example, the former were more likely to include religious content in school gatherings and have this be in the form of "Doing Religion", than the latter. This is not surprising given that both types of school are subject to different expectations around how they engage with religion – the religious denominations with which faith schools are associated often expect them to feature their faith centrally in school life, for example. While we would need to conduct research *with* these schools to explore the specific factors that shape their decisions here, these trends remind us that schools are not in complete control over whether and how they engage with religion – they still must meet the requirements and expectations imposed on them by other authorities. This links to the topic of the final chapter of this thesis neatly – T is for Tacit Restrictions.

'T' is for Tacit Restrictions

Despite the many implicit indications that institutions' approaches to religious elements of school life are underpinned by respect for individual freedoms of choice and religious agency, my dataset also highlights many ways in which pupils', parents', and indeed schools', religious freedoms are *restricted* in educational settings.

In some cases, this is made clear – some faith schools explicitly stated that they intended to instil certain religious beliefs in their students. However, more commonly, these restrictions were not openly acknowledged on school websites at all. For example, institutions may emphasise that they do not intend to indoctrinate pupils during religious elements of school life, but they did not provide pupils with opportunity to withdraw themselves from such proceedings, or to challenge and reject school values – including those associated with religion in any way. Furthermore, RE curricula never attempted to provide pupils with intricate knowledge of *all* religions and spiritualities that exist so as to facilitate their ability to act as a completely free consumer in the religious marketplace, and, these lessons ostensibly guided pupils towards "tolerant" and "respectful" perceptions of religious groups as part of schools' duty to promote community cohesion. Finally, where faith-related criteria were included in schools' oversubscription policies, none of these acknowledged young people's religious agency by attempting to measure *their* religious commitment; criteria instead focused on the beliefs

and actions of their parents. Clearly, though most schools appear to present themselves as allowing pupils to explore their personal religious views without undue influence, in practice, it is clear that students' agency is not *completely* unlimited here, and sometimes it is not even acknowledged. However, pupils are not alone here, parents' rights relating to how they raise their children can also be seen as often being infringed upon in schools' approaches to collective worship, RE, school values and faith-related admissions criteria.

Though parents legally have the right to "ensure [that] education and teaching [of their children is] in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions"[423], and to "provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right [to freedom of thought conscience and religion] in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child,"[424] consideration of my dataset reveals that these freedoms, too, are far from unlimited. While parents do have a say over where their child is educated – meaning that they can try to send their child to a school that aligns with their personal worldviews – they have much less control over whether and how their child is introduced to, and experiences, religious and spiritual beliefs and practices when in attendance at said school. For example, parents cannot influence the content covered in collective worship or RE, and although they are legally able to withdraw their child from these elements of school life, my dataset indicates that large proportions of schools do not clearly state, online, that this possibility exists.

51.8% of schools in my main sample, who claimed to involve religious content in their school gatherings, and 74.1% of schools in my main sample that claimed to teach RE – whatever they called this subject – did not mention that parents had the right to withdraw their children from these sessions, anywhere online. Furthermore, 34.6% of school websites from my main sample that mentioned the right to withdraw in relation to collective worship, and 22.9% of schools from my main sample that mentioned it in relation to RE, also appeared to discourage parents from exercising these rights either by reassuring them that it was unnecessary because these sessions were inclusive and not indoctrinatory, or by outright declaring disappointment or displeasure with parents who enacted such a right.

If parents are meant to be granted the right to raise their children in line with their personal convictions, any attempt to prevent them from determining whether their children will participate in religious elements of school life where beliefs may be presented and practices engaged in that run counter to the parents' personal convictions – such as not making them aware of this possibility, or

[423] *Human Rights Act 1998*
[424] 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', United Nations [n.d.] <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> [accessed 16 December 2024].

outright discouraging anyone from exercising it – risks infringing this right. We would need to conduct further research to more fully understand whether and how schools' present information about the right to withdraw offline, and whether failing to provide such information meaningfully limits parents' religious freedoms in relation to raising and educating their children, but at the very least, these findings indicate that many English state schools do not always consider protecting parents' individual rights and freedoms to be a top priority – if they did, they would make sure to emphasise how they abide by and fully respect these rights.

Parents have even less say over the values that schools choose to promote and no option to prevent their child from being encouraged to adopt these. In most cases this is not a problem as school values generally consist of behaviours and characteristics that most individuals in modern western societies would deem to be positive things to teach children – "respect", for example, or "resilience." However, where school values are associated with religion as my dataset indicates is the case for a substantial minority of institutions in my main sample, this poses more of a problem; arguably limiting parents' ability to direct their children's views, or to ensure that their child is educated "in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions."

Finally, although the ability for faith schools to include faith-related criteria in their oversubscription admissions policies was originally introduced with the intention of improving parental choice – granting parents a say over where their child is educated – research demonstrates that the ways in which religious commitment is often measured often do not succeed in improving *every* parent's choice here. It has been argued that overly complex admissions policies,[425] and certain faith-related admissions criteria such as those requiring regular church attendance,[426] interviews, or ability banding are more difficult for socially and economically disadvantaged families to qualify for compared with more advantaged or privileged counterparts.[427] My dataset does not provide insights into how schools' admissions policies are experienced by parents – how easy or difficult they are to follow and qualify for – but it does clearly support that church attendance and baptism are the main ways in which applicants' religious backgrounds are measured here, and that substantial proportions of faith schools place a high level of significance on applicants' religious background in determining whether to offer them a place or not. Therefore, while these findings themselves do not prove that

[425] Levitt and Woodhead, 'Choosing a faith school in Leicester: admissions criteria, diversity and choice' (2020).
[426] Fair Admissions Campaign, "FAQs" (n.d) https://fairadmissions.org.uk/why-is-this-an-issue/faqs/ [accessed 20/08/25].
[427] Rebecca Allen and Anne West, 'Religious schools in London: school admissions, religious composition and selectivity', *Oxford Review of Education*, 35.4 (2009), pp. 471-494 (p. 489).

parental freedoms are limited in schools' inclusion of faith-related admissions criteria, they could be used to support arguments of this nature.

So far, the examples of limitations imposed on individual freedoms and religious agency in educational settings mostly appear to be imposed by schools. However, consideration of the context within which schools operate, and my dataset, indicates that these institutions are far from free to engage with religion and spirituality as they wish.

Schools must abide by the law, adhere to the stipulations included in their funding and governance agreements, and, due to the marketized nature of the English education system, ensure that the way they operate is appealing to parents of school age children in the hope of filling their pupil places. All of these factors are likely to impact schools' decisions regarding whether, where and how to involve religion in their activities and operations. This much is indicated in comparing the approaches adopted by faith and non-faith schools in my two booster samples; though there was much variation in whether and how these institutions included religious content in school gatherings, taught RE, and promoted values – religious or otherwise – there were *some* trends identifiable in both groups. Faith schools were more likely to feature religion centrally in these elements of school life – to call school gatherings "collective worship", for example, and involve religious practices in these as opposed to just "Learning About Religion" – than their non-faith counterparts. This is not a surprising finding but it does indicate that institutions are somewhat constrained by their specific circumstances and the various expectations placed upon them, in the decisions they make regarding the involvement of religion in these elements of school life.

If we consider the stipulations placed on schools, however, by the law and by religious authorities, these are not particularly stringent. In fact, common criticisms of the collective worship and RE duties are that guidance for schools on how these should be fulfilled is vague and open to interpretation.[428] This still does not mean that schools can simply do whatever they please, though, as instead of legislation or guidance laying down a single approach for every school to follow uniformly, it tends to instead compel institutions to curate approaches to engaging with religion that best meet the needs and preferences of their pupil population and local community.

Government guidance states that:

[428] Cheetham, 'Collective Worship: A Window into Contemporary Understandings of the Nature of Religious Belief?' (2000), p. 77; Revell, 'Religious Education in England' (2008), p. 222.

> The extent to which and the ways in which the broad traditions of Christian belief are to be reflected in such acts of collective worship should be appropriate to the family backgrounds of the pupils and their ages and aptitudes.[429]

While similar statements are not presented in relation to RE, the adoption of Locally Agreed Syllabuses instead of a national curriculum also indicates a preference for schools using their specific circumstances and context to inform how they approach engagements with religion, not just acting completely as they please.

The Church of England Board of Education's guidance on how their schools should conduct collective worship also reflects a similar desire; instead of outlining strict frameworks for schools to follow, they simply stipulate that these sessions must be "inclusive, invitational and inspirational" and that approaches should "gro[w] out of the local context and out of pupils' experience."[430] Therefore, successive governments' and religious authorities' avoidance of stipulating too clearly or strictly how schools should interpret religious requirements such as collective worship and RE is intended to allow institutions to adopt approaches that best suit their pupil population and local community, not to give them unlimited freedom to act as they wish.

Rather than my dataset indicating that a single authority imposes restrictions on others' religious freedoms in a linear, top-down manner, the findings presented in this chapter and particularly in this most recent point, indicate that there is actually a much more complicated web of influence here. Schools' approaches to religious elements of school life are shaped by official authorities but also parents and pupils' needs, pupils' experiences of religious elements of school life are determined by schools' decisions regarding how to approach these and their parents' decisions on whether to allow them to participate, and parents' ability to raise their children in line with their personal convictions is tempered somewhat by school proceedings and, significantly, pupils' ability to exercise personal agency. Consequently, the ways that religious freedoms and choices appear to be limited in school settings can be understood as, partially, a result of clashes that always occur when multiple groups or individuals attempt to exercise their own individual rights and, ironically, they therefore contribute to *protecting* these rights.

Another explanation for the restrictions apparently imposed on religious freedoms and choices in education settings that does not challenge schools' commitment to individualistic notions of free

[429] Department for Education, *Religious Education and Collective Worship 1/94* (DfE, 1994), p. 22.
[430] Church of England Education Office, *Collective Worship in Church of England Schools: Inclusive Invitational Inspiring* (Church of England, 2021), pp. 2-3, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/collective-worship-guidance-18052021.pdf> [accessed 15 December 2024].

choice, is that, as well as multiple groups' rights having to be balanced in the inclusion of religion in educational settings, multiple different principles or values are also being necessarily balanced in this process. Most of the examples of "restrictions" placed on religious freedoms discussed in this thesis reflect schools' commitment to collectivistic principles. As educational "communities" or "families", whose purpose is partially concerned with forming children into positive citizens of wider society, schools simply cannot operate in a completely individualistic way – in some instances, they need to offer shared experiences and encourage shared values. While collectivism and individualism are often considered opposing and mutually exclusive values, literature indicates that individuals and societies often actually hold both simultaneously, and this appears to be the case with English state schools' engagements with religion too. While engagements with religion appear to be built upon respect for individual free choice, this is not the only value upon which schools act and therefore, is not the only notion that is reflected in their chosen approaches; individualism and free agency are not revered to the same extent among all segments of the population, or in all situations.

Consequently, this thesis does not necessarily falsify sociologists' claims that notions of "free choice" are "sacred" or "sovereign" in relation to religious matters in English state schools, or indeed, wider English society – in fact in many ways it indicates that this is indeed an accurate portrayal of the extent to which schools' approaches to religion are shaped around, or presented as being shaped around, the desire to protect and promote individual freedoms of choice and avoid forcing any particular views on others. However, it also highlights the complexity and nuance of individualistic perceptions of religion and how these are enacted in real life, in contemporary English society – rather than schools being either wholly individualistic or wholly collectivistic, they are more accurately "both-and", reflecting each principle in different ways to serve different purposes.

A similar complexity has been noted previously by sociologists in describing the religious landscape in contemporary Britain.[431] While society has in many ways become increasingly secular and indeed "nonreligious", it is not completely so; religion and spirituality continue to manifest in complex, creative and sometimes confusing ways. Perhaps the simultaneous influence of individualism *and* collectivism, identified in this thesis, highlights another layer of complexity to this situation – not only are Britons rarely clearly "religious" or "nonreligious," their expression of these identities is likely rarely built upon *solely* individualistic or collectivistic principles. Secularization theorists often point to increased individualism as an example of how and why traditional religious commitment and practice has declined so much in contemporary western societies such as Britain, and while I do

[431] David Voas, 'The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe', *European Sociological Review*, 25.2 (2009), pp. 155-168 (p. 164); Linda Woodhead, 'Liberal Religion and Illiberal Secularism', in *Religion and the Liberal State* eds., Gavin D'Costa and others (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 93-116 (p. 108).

not suggest that they are incorrect, the findings outlined and explored in this thesis do caution against sweeping generalisations as to the extent and impact of individualism on institutions and, by extension, ordinary citizens' perceptions of and interactions with religion and spirituality. Individualism and notions of free choice may well be highly significant for many, but should not be assumed to exist completely apart from collectivism or desires for shared experiences and beliefs, and institutions and individuals cannot be assumed to solely align with one over the other.

This being said, even if schools reflect the concerns and values of the society in which they operate, and even if the information provided on their public websites are valuable reflections of what they expect wider society to consider acceptable and, in fact, appealing or desirable, my analysis of school websites alone cannot provide *firm* conclusions about the views and attitudes of individuals in said society. Further research would be necessary to confirm that this individualistic-collectivistic dualism is indeed present and influential outside of educational settings, and to shed light on how ordinary people navigate it. Additionally, there is also plenty of scope for further analysis of school websites; the research design that underpins this thesis has proved a valuable way of identifying large-scale but detailed societal trends as a lone researcher working in a relatively short timeframe. These methods can be easily replicated with schools in different countries or with different types of schools – nationally representative samples of primary and secondary schools, for example, or Church of England and Roman Catholic schools – to further investigate how religion is explored and experienced in educational settings, and by extension, to identify possible trends in wider society. In fact, the dataset generated for this present thesis was of such a size, and containing such detail, that there is also plenty of scope for further quantitative and qualitative analysis of *this* as the focus of a future research project with similar aims in mind.

Statistics may indicate that Britain is becoming increasingly nonreligious but religion has not yet been wholly excluded from the public sphere – a quick glance at the English education system proves this. Furthermore, religion is also not completely irrelevant – the social unrest and riots that took place this past summer (2024) drew on a complex mixture of racial, political and religious tensions following suspicions that the individual who attacked and killed three young girls at a dance workshop in Southport was a Muslim migrant.[432] There will likely be a renewed emphasis on the promotion of community cohesion, Fundamental British Values, and religious literacy in English schools as a result of these events which, along with the re-introduction of the *Education (Assemblies) Bill* to the House of Lords this year – the third time it has been introduced since 2019 –

[432] 'Teen accused of UK Southport murders faces new 'terrorism' charge', *Al Jazeera*, 30 October 2024 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/30/teen-accused-of-uk-southport-murders-faces-new-terrorism-charge> [accessed 23 December 2024].

suggests that research into religion's involvement in English state education will continue to be of interest within and beyond academia for some time to come. It is my hope that this present research – and any future studies generated from this – will provide valuable contributions to both these discussions and broader sociological explorations of contemporary religiosity and non-religiosity.

Appendix 1:
Data points collected for each school in each of my samples

Demographic data – much of this information was drawn not from the school websites themselves but from other official sources.

. School name

. Ofsted rating

. Local authority

. Phase of education

. Type of school – community, academy, voluntary aided etc.

. Religious character

. Postcode

. Deprivation rank – as generated by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation

. Deprivation level – as generated by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation

. Percentage of pupils eligible for Free School Meals

. Whether the school's location is characterised as "urban", "rural", or anything in-between

. The proportion of non-white residents in the school's local authority – an indication of the ethnic diversity in the area.

Faith-related admissions criteria data

. Oversubscription policy – copied and pasted in full from the school website

. Are faith-related criteria listed in this?

. If yes, how are applicants expected to qualify for this – baptism, church attendance etc.

. If church attendance, how regularly applicants are expected to attend church and for how long

. Does the policy acknowledge applicants of faiths or denominations different to those of the school?

School values data

. School values and ethos – any reference to these, copied and pasted in full from the school website.

. School values lists, copied and pasted directly from the website but without any other filler words.

. Where are these values lists mentioned on the website.

. What label is attributed to the values – “our school values”, for example, or “Christian values”.

. Are Fundamental British Values mentioned in close connection with school values – if so, how/where?

Collective worship data

. What do schools call gatherings – “collective worship”, “assemblies” etc.

. All information given about school gatherings – copied and pasted from the school’s website. This was often taken from multiple pages on their website.

. What sort of content is covered – citizenship, school matters, doing religion or learning about religion?

. What religious practices are conducted during gatherings – the specific ways that schools “do religion”

. Who leads these sessions – teachers, religious visitors etc.?

. How regular are school gatherings?

. Do schools mention the right to withdraw from collective worship/gatherings with religious content?

. Do schools mention teachers’ right to withdraw?

. Do schools discourage parental withdrawal?

. How do they discourage withdrawal?

. What is the process by which parents can withdraw their children?

. Where on the website is this information published?

Religious Education data

. Do schools mention RE? – or a subject that appears to be RE.

. What do schools call RE?

. What do schools say about RE? – everything mentioned about the subject on the website, copied and pasted in full.

. What do schools say about the legal requirements around RE?

. Do schools offer GCSE RE? – only applicable to secondary schools.

. Is GCSE RE compulsory? – only applicable to secondary schools.

. What syllabus do schools claim to follow?

. RE syllabus overview – copied and pasted in full from the website.

. Does the school claim to teach about more than one religion?

. Does the school claim to teach about Christianity?

. Does the school claim to teach about Islam?

. Does the school claim to teach about Judaism?

. Does the school claim to teach about Hinduism?

. Does the school claim to teach about Buddhism?

. Does the school claim to teach about Sikhism?

. Does the school claim to teach about any other religion/spiritual tradition?

. Does the school claim to teach about nonreligion/nonreligious views?

. Which nonreligious views does the school claim to teach about?

. What do schools say about teaching nonreligion in RE – anything they say on this topic, copied and pasted in full.

. Do schools mention the right to withdraw from RE?

. Do schools mention teachers' right to withdraw from RE?

. Do schools discourage parents from withdrawing their children from RE?

. How do schools discourage withdrawal?

. What is the process by which parents can withdraw their children?

. Where on the website is this information published?

Appendix 2: A typology of faith-related oversubscription admissions criteria implemented by English state-funded faith schools

I created the following typology to demonstrate the variation in levels of significance attributed to faith-related admissions criteria across English state-funded faith schools. The position of the faith criterion in relation to other common criteria – looked after children (LAC), siblings, and distance – denotes how strongly schools prioritise religious applicants over others. This is discussed in more depth on pages 136-140 of this thesis.

Category	Meaning	Example
A	The faith criterion features above non-faith Looked-After Children (LAC) and all other criteria.	1. Faith criterion 2. All LAC 3. Children with siblings at the school 4. Children who live in the catchment area 5. Any other children
B	The faith criterion features after non-faith LAC, but before non-faith children with siblings at the school **and** who live nearby – i.e. in the catchment area/closest distance.	1. All LAC 2. Faith criterion 3. Children with siblings at the school 4. Children who live in the catchment area 5. Any other children
C	The faith criterion features after non-faith LAC, but before non-faith children with siblings at the schools **or** who live nearby – i.e. in the catchment area. - These two non-faith criteria are often positioned interchangeably.	EITHER: 1. All LAC 2. Children with siblings at the school 3. Faith criterion 4. Children who live in the catchment area 5. Any other children OR 1. All LAC 2. Children who live in the catchment area 3. Faith criterion 4. Children with siblings at the school 5. Any other children
D	The faith criterion is mentioned after non-faith LAC, after non-faith children with siblings at the schools **and** after non-faith children who live nearby – i.e. in the catchment area.	1. All LAC 2. Children who live in the catchment area 3. Children with siblings at the school 4. Faith criterion 5. Any other children

A separate category, "Category E," was created for schools who reserved a portion of their places to be allocated on the basis of applicants' religious backgrounds, and ensured that all other places would be allocated based on non-faith-related criteria such as if applicants have siblings at the school or live nearby:

Category E	The faith criterion/a is/are only considered in a certain proportion of places. Usually these are Free Schools and their funding agreement requires them to employ this technique. Essentially, these schools do not prioritise faith above non-faith applicants because they are not competing for the same places.	Foundation places: 1. Baptised Catholic LAC 2. Baptised Catholic children 3. Baptised Catholic children with siblings at the school 4. Baptised Catholic children who live nearest 5. Any other Catholic children Open places: 1. LAC 2. Children with siblings at the school etc. 3. Any other children

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