Introduction

Considering the relationship between gender and religion naturally prompts questions and reflections on issues related to socialisation, meaning making and identity construction. However, within the field of religion and gender, research on childhood, processes of socialisation and experiences of religion in relation to both childhood and gender are sorely missing. The attention placed on how religion is implicated in the shaping of gender identity (and vice versa) often overlooks the period of childhood and marginalises the experiences of children in favour of a more adult-centric focus, with adults talking about or reflecting on memories of childhood.

In this chapter, we seek to begin a conversation about religion and gender in childhood by briefly outlining some of the main theoretical contributions that can underscore our thinking about the interrelations between religion, gender and childhood within a mainly European and North American context. We argue that through researching childhood in relation to gender and religion, we can advance our knowledge and understanding of the processes of formation and negotiation of both gendered and religious identities. To begin with, we provide a brief overview of childhood in the study of religion, outlining the historical marginalisation of children’s voices and the problematic assumptions that can arise as a result. We then move on to the concept of socialisation and transmission of religion within the family and the school contexts, as these are, currently, the main areas of scholarly attention in research regarding childhood, religion and the interplay with gender. Finally, we outline a new research agenda, which we advocate to scholars who are interested in religion and gender in childhood in order to enable insights into what is otherwise a much-overlooked area of the study of religion in contemporary society.

Fore grounding children’s voices

Research with children in the study of religion, social sciences and the humanities has often been marginalised, with greater focus traditionally being afforded to the lives, ideas and experiences of adults (Ridgely 2011; Strhan, Parker and Ridgely 2017). When children and childhood have been the focus of academic attention, this has typically been from the perspective of adults writing about children or their memories of childhood (e.g. Frisk, Nilsson and Åkerbäck...
2018), with little focus on the lived experiences of children themselves. Even the lived religion approach (McGuire 2008) that seeks to rebalance accounts and experiences of religion—which thus far have heavily relied on elite perspectives—still largely neglects children’s voices and focuses on the lived experiences of adults. Studies on contemporary religion in society, for the most part, draw on data from adults, have research questions centred on the concerns of adults and investigate the religious landscape through the lens of adulthood (Orsi 2005; Frisk, Nilsson and Åkerbäck 2018). Even when children are included within research agendas and questions, this predominantly focuses on childhood as a means to understand transitions into adulthood, with children being viewed as little more than adults in becoming, rather than social beings in their own right with the ability and capacity to shape the world around them (Lee 2002; Uprichard 2008). When research is conducted on non-adult populations, childhood often remains marginalised—the focus on adolescents or young adults (e.g. Taylor and Snowdon 2015) resulting in early and middle childhood (children under 12) being rarely included (Scourfield et al. 2013). This trend can be explained by the fact that researchers tend to pay more attention to the stages when children become more aware of their religious and gendered identities. For example, Østberg (2003) found that it was when her participants reached puberty that differences in attitudes and practices towards her participants’ faith began to emerge. Similarly, Scourfield et al. (2013) found that although Muslim children during middle childhood (age 5–10) were aware of gendered practices in Islam (e.g. segregation during worship), this was not seen as important and made little difference to their experience. As a result, little attention is paid to how younger children navigate religion and gender. This marginalisation of childhood has its roots in the adult-centred assumptions of children—especially younger ones—as having little or no agency, only responding to the actions of adults and structures around them (Ridgely 2005, 2011, 2012). Concerns over the feasibility of being able to conduct research with young children also has resulted in children being overlooked in research agendas.

Yet, recent research shows that children’s agency should not be underestimated, demonstrating children’s ability to reflect and discuss their encounters and experience of religious identity, practice and belief (e.g. Ridgely 2012; Scourfield et al. 2013; Hemming 2015; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020; Benoit 2021; Shillitoe forthcoming). Such research, in conversation with the new paradigm in childhood studies which sees children as social actors and childhood itself as socially constructed (e.g. James and Prout 1997; James, Jenks and Prout 1998), found that children are able to exercise their agency in relation to the adults around them, even when such agency is constrained and limited (Oswell 2013). These findings, which will be discussed later, disrupt the often-held assumptions about children’s lack of agency or reflection when it comes to matters of religious identity and belief, demonstrating that children do not simply or passively accept the thoughts and beliefs of adults but rather reconstruct those and tactically negotiate their encounters with both religion and non-religion. Other studies also show that children may adopt identities with the same religious labels as their parents/wider communities, but they may not share the same understandings of the religion. For example, Gu (2015) explores how parents may use Islam to promote arranged marriages, while children, on the other hand, tend to view this practice as embedded in ethnic or cultural traditions rather than religion, and instead use Islam (which for them transcends ethnicity) and discourses of equity to challenge parental values.

This sidelining of childhood as a period of human experience in its own right began to change in the 1990s with the aforementioned new paradigm of childhood. Researchers, policymakers and educationalists began to view childhood as a social variable worthy of study in and of itself and, crucially, view children as social agents with the ability to act and shape their own lives, the lives of others and broader social structures (Qvortrup 1994; James and Prout 1997; James and James 2012). This has led to a burgeoning of studies focusing on childhood
and the lived experiences of children across a range of disciplines within the social sciences and humanities, seeking to redress the ‘missing third’ which to date has skewed our social analyses and understanding of the world (Alderson 2016). Although there is an existing body of literature within the study of religion that seeks to examine youth and childhood (e.g. Orsi 2005; Ridgely 2005, 2012; Catto and Eccles 2013; Scourfield et al 2013; Hemming 2015; Madge and Hemming 2016; Strhan 2019; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020; Benoit 2021), work which explores this in relation to gender is sorely missing.

While there is a substantial body of literature looking into how religious categories are used in the construction of gender (and vice versa), few studies seem to take children’s voices into consideration. Scholarship on religion and gender has focused on differences in religious identity, attendance, belief and practice between men and women. A number of studies find that women are more likely to attend religious services, hold religious beliefs and engage in religious practices than men (Davie 2001; Woodhead 2008; Day 2017). In their study on childhood, youth and religion, Hemming and Madge draw on the work of Kay and Francis (1996), Francis (2001) and Smith et al. (2003) and discuss how ‘quantitative research has generally shown that girls tend to demonstrate higher levels of religious observance than boys’ (2012, 41) and how qualitative studies (e.g. Erricker et al. 1997; Levitt 2003; Ramji 2007) evidence similar gender differences across religious attitudes, behaviours and experiences. In their research on American adolescents, Smith et al. (2003) find that girls were more likely to pray daily and say their faith is very important than boys were, concluding that American adolescent girls appeared to be somewhat more religious than adolescent boys. Age therefore seems an important variable to take into consideration when considering religious identification and affiliation.

In her ethnographic study of young Norwegian-Pakistani people, Østberg (2003) examines the changes young people experience between childhood and adolescence and the interplay of religion and the construction of childhood during this transition. One participant spoke of the decision-making process of deciding whether to wear the hijab. During Østberg’s fieldwork, one participant, Saima, initially wore a hijab at home while reading the Qur’an, but did not do so outside or anywhere else and did not speak about it. However, a year on, Saima began to wear the hijab outdoors and at school. Østberg reflects the double meaning behind Saima’s decision, one which spoke to her faith and the other which reflected her transition from childhood to adolescence and how she constructed femininity. In her work, Østberg (2003) also reminds us that children ought not to be viewed as a homogeneous group, as she shares the story of Saima’s sister, who was less comfortable wearing the hijab. Østberg notes how the individuality of young people also shapes their construction and lived experiences of gender and religion.

The little research that is available shows that children internalise religious and gender identities through not only verbal but also bodily and sensory experiences. While boys’ and girls’ experiences may at times be similar, they often differ, especially when it comes to bodily aspects (Østberg 2003; Gu 2015). Østberg’s research demonstrates that children become aware of their religious and gendered identities from an early age. Their sense of identities in turn shapes their sense of belonging (or not) within the family, the local community and/or wider society. Østberg’s (2000, 2003) research demonstrates the need to take the embodied experience into consideration when understanding children’s lived experiences and how they negotiate the complex interplay between religion and gender.

While limited, the research available demonstrates that both age and gender are important variables to consider in relation to one another when examining religion and society. Hemming and Madge conclude that it is ‘clear that both gender and age identities are closely entwined with an individual’s religious identity’ (2012, 41). However, we know little of the formation of such beliefs and practices in childhood and how such differences may or may not be forged.
in early to middle childhood. Similarly, little research has paid attention to how religion and gender in childhood intersects with other social variables such as race, ethnicity and social class. Although there is a growing body of literature that investigates the interplay between religion and ethnicity or race in religious transmission in childhood (e.g. Nesbitt 2000, 2001, 2008; Østberg 2000, 2003; Park and Howard Ecklund 2007; Agarwal 2006; Arweck and Nesbitt 2010), the role of gender remains under-assessed.

Drawing on feminist post-structuralist theory, MacNaughton argues, ‘early childhood traditions and “truths” . . . rely[r] on understandings of childhood that present simplistic images of how children learn, know and live gender’ (2000, xiv). We can observe similar patterns in relation to religion, whereby children’s engagement with religion often (re)produces oversimplified negotiations and reconstructions of religion in the lives of children (Ridgely 2012). Adopting a child-centred approach, MacNaughton explains how we need to search ‘children’s storylines to identify the discourses through which children are making sense of themselves and of others’ (2000, 129). She dispels the myths that pervade understandings of childhood, such as ‘gender doesn’t matter to young children’ and ‘good early childhood practice produces equity for all’ (MacNaughton 2000, 1), as she shows that children (re)create patriarchal gender relations and (re)produce gendered social practices in play. Further research also shows that children modify their behaviours or play activities depending on the gender attached to their parent/carer (Lindsey and Mize 2001), demonstrating that from a very young age children are sensitive not only to their own gendered identity, but to others’ as well.

Another commonly held myth in relation to the lives of children pertains to education and the place the school occupies in challenging stereotypes and inequalities. All too often, tackling gender inequalities in school is reduced to closing the attainment gap between girls and boys (Forde 2008), rather than addressing gendered roles and practices in society. The idea that the school is a neutral space where children from all backgrounds are treated equally can be easily challenged through the way schools actually reproduce gendered stereotypes and discourses (Gray and Leith 2004; Heyder and Kessels 2015; Islam and Asadullah 2018). In fact, research shows that teachers themselves are imbued with social representations and may hold stereotypical views regarding pupils’ abilities depending on their gender, and how such views can determine children’s performances (Tiedemann 2000, 2002; Cvencek, Meltzoff and Greenwald 2011). This is why, for example, girls on average are less likely to feel confident in mathematics (stereotypically a male domain) and are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards religious education (Francis 1992; Cvencek, Meltzoff and Greenwald 2011). In order to truly understand the role gender plays in children’s construction of identity and their experiences of inclusion/exclusion, it is important to move past idealised and romanticised images of childhood and the spaces children inhabit. Attention needs to be paid to the construction of gender as an identity marker and to gendered practices to understand children’s socialisation, marginalisation and sense of belonging. For example, MacNaughton (2000) shows that children are able to understand gendering through traditional discourses and in everyday activities such as block play. She demonstrates how children as young as four or five years old learn to navigate a social world that is imbued with gendered practices. Taking the example of block play, she shows how boys tend to manifest dominating behaviours, and girls are more likely to leave them unchallenged, adopting a more subordinate role.

The liberal myth of the ‘neutral’ school not only applies to gender but also religion. In the same way as dominant discourses about gender are reproduced in the school context, the same can be said about religion. Indeed, while the liberal discourse frames the school space as a neutral ground for children of different religious backgrounds, research shows that schools may serve to reproduce structural inequalities and/or stereotypes through acts of collective
worship and religious education (Benoit 2020, 2021). The literature on childhood and gender, and emerging work on childhood and religion, both critically reflect on this imagined sense of neutrality while acknowledging and reflecting on children’s agency. Such work also dispels the myths of the neutral, bias-free environments in which children grow up.

The transmission of religious and gendered identities in childhood

Having established the need to pay more attention to children’s voices when researching the interplay between gender and religion as social factors in identity construction, we now engage with work on childhood and religious transmission in the home and school contexts. While some of the research below engages with gender as a variable, all too often it focuses on its role in religious transmission and religious socialisation and ignores how children navigate the interplay between religion and gender. In this section, we outline the nature of religious transmission in relation to gender and religion. We identify two themes to investigate this interplay in more detail: the family and educational settings. Through focusing on the family and education specifically, we can focus on two of the key areas in childhood socialisation and how children in relation to their parents/carers, teachers and peers encounter and experience religion and gender across the different spaces and places they inhabit.

Focusing on the processes of socialisation and the transmission of beliefs and identities in childhood is an important way of examining the interplay of religion and gender. For example, Hemming (2015) and Smith (2005) have both focused on children’s socialisation in school and the role of religion, but neglect the impact of gender in such processes. Other research looks at informal education and socialisation within the home context (e.g. Boyatzis and Janicki 2003), but little research examines processes of transmission and socialisation occurring across both the school and home (Ridgely 2005, 2012; Scourfield et al. 2013; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020). In their research on parent-child communication and religious transmission, Boyatzis and Janicki (2003) demonstrate that a bidirectional reciprocal communication style is more likely to occur, meaning that religious socialisation is not a top-down parent-to-child transmission. They remind us that we need ‘to view children as active participants in socialization rather than as more passive recipients of parental influences’ (Boyatzis and Janicki 2003, 252). For instance, Østberg shows how young adolescents found themselves constantly negotiating with parental values, religious doctrine and gendered practices, revealing ‘the complex relationship between internalized family values and individuality’ (2003, 166). Unfortunately, research on religious identity making in childhood often overlooks gender as a factor. Yet, Hemming and Madge (2012) argue that research on children, young people and religion has highlighted the significance of other social identities (such as gender) for religious identity formation (and vice versa).

Mothers, fathers and the family

Often, research on religion and gender in childhood is limited to the role of fathers and mothers in religious transmission, and children’s voices remain silenced. Research that focuses on childhood also largely tends to focus on families who identify as Christian or non-religious (e.g. Bader and Desmond 2006; Baker-Sperry 2001; Voas and McAndrew 2012; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019). Drawing on UK Census data and results from the British Social Attitudes survey, Voas and McAndrew (2012) examine the growth of non-religion in Britain, the reasons why more men identify as non-religious than women and, perhaps even more puzzling, why baby boys are more likely to be identified by their parents as non-religious than baby girls. As might
be expected, Voas and McAndrew (2012) find that women in European Christian cultures are
more likely to attend church services, self-identify as religious, believe in God and identify with
a denomination. However, the point of interest for this chapter is in relation to the authors’
analysis of parental transmission and childhood religiosity. Although Voas and McAndrew (2012)
discuss by proxy reporting, this is only referenced as a methodological issue in relation to adults
reporting on behalf of other adults (i.e. a spouse completing a survey on behalf of their spouse).
The issue of proxy reporting in relation to adults reporting on behalf of children is not reflected
upon. Again, this points to assumptions about children’s agency which pervade the academy in
relation to children being empty vessels that follow parental choices, and that children do not
have the capacity to respond to or reflect on questions of religious identity.

In their research, Voas and McAndrew (2012) also find that affiliation to Christianity in the
UK tends to drop during adolescence and early adulthood, usually around the time partici-
pants are able to complete their own survey or census. Woodhead (2017), using British Social
Attitudes survey data, also finds that 45% of children raised as Christian will identify as non-
religious in adulthood. As a result, scholars have tended to focus on teenagers and young adults
when it comes to understanding religious identity construction and have largely ignored early
and middle childhoods. It is also worth noting that the data used in these studies is limited, as
they rely on data by proxy. As children’s voices have been ignored, it is difficult to conclude
whether children indeed identified as religious and then changed when entering adolescence or
adulthood or whether children never identified as religious in the first place.

Although Voas and McAndrew (2012) found that in the UK most Christian parents, perhaps
unsurprisingly, were likely to list their children as being religious, they also found that many
religious/Christian parents of young infants were reluctant to ascribe any particular affiliation
to their child. While in some families infants were labelled as non-religious regardless of
their (non-)religious backgrounds—something the authors connect to a Protestant emphasis
on individual choice—it remained more usual to find that children were assigned their parents’
religion. Though small, the authors also observed differences in young infants in relation to
gender and religious identification, and found that some parents were slightly more likely to
identify baby girls as ‘Christian’ than baby boys. Voas and McAndrew (2012) warn against the
risk of drawing sweeping generalisations and note that these findings need to be considered in
relation to other relevant variables such as social class, race and ethnicity of the households and
hypothesise that the labels attributed to baby girls and baby boys are related to those of their
mothers and fathers respectively.

Yet, Voas and McAndrew (2012) found that in two-parent families, where both parents
identified as Christian or as not religious, more baby girls were identified as Christian—with
a modest gender gap of 1.2%. However, in families where the mother identified as Christian
and the father as ‘none’, the difference between baby girls and baby boys jumped to 2.4%. The
authors also found that in cases whereby the father (and not the mother) identified as Christian,
the inverse happened and baby boys were more likely to be labelled as religious. In short, the
authors found that infants tended to be associated with the religious or non-religious identity
of their parent with the same sex. Here, the gender gap varies when accounting for single-
parent households, social class and employment status of parents, and they argue that in order
to explore the transmission of religious and non-religious identity across generations, we need
to think of gender differences in relation to other social variables such as race, class, ethnicity,
education and geographical location. For instance, Bengtson, Putney and Harris (2013) found
that mothers in the US were not more influential than fathers in terms of religious socialisation,
and that a child having a close relationship with their father was important for the internalisation
of religious beliefs and practices. However, it should be noted that this research did not use data
from children, but relied on adolescents (participants aged 16 and above) or adults reporting on their memories of childhood.

Reflecting on the higher rate of intergenerational transmission in Muslim and non-Christian faith communities, Scourfield et al. (2013) note in their study of Muslim childhood in Britain that in some cases religion may be used to foster a sense of cultural distinctiveness, and that it should not be disentangled from ethnicity. In this sense, it would be helpful to think of intergenerational transmission in relation to Hervieu-Léger’s (2000) notion of religion as ‘chain of memory’ and the importance of memory in terms of both religion and culture (Arweck and Nesbitt 2010). Hervieu-Léger’s (2000) construction of religion as ‘chain of memory’ implies that religion ‘acts as an ideological, symbolic and social device that creates an individual and collective sense of belonging. As such, organised religion can provide a framework for collective identities and social cohesion’ (Benoit 2020, 58). In her work, Hervieu-Léger (2000) also speaks of ‘ethnic religions’ or ethno-religions, ‘where religious identities rather than faith become symbols of national and ethnic heritage’ (Storm 2011, 837).

The changing nature of parenting cultures and roles of mother and fathers in child-rearing practices have shaped and informed how gender and religion have been constructed and imagined in society (Baker-Sperry 2001). Historical research has explored how religiosity in Britain, mainly in relation to Christianity, has become feminised since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ‘as separate spheres emerged for men and women’ (Levitt 2003, 63) with women ‘placed at the fulcrum of family sanctity’ (Brown 2001, 59, cited in Levitt 2003, 63). Levitt explains, ‘women with a family-centred role, rather than the economic role of the father, [have been] expected to be more church-oriented because of the continuing bonds between church and family’ (2003, 63). The family and changing nature of child-rearing can help us understand the changing religious and non-religious landscape of Britain, while also enhancing our knowledge of why more women identify as religious. However, parenting cultures in the UK have shifted dramatically over the past 50 years with women increasingly taking an economic role in households and policy changes creating greater opportunities for fathers to take on more caring responsibilities for children (Lee et al. 2014). In fact, Baker-Sperry suggests, ‘[f]athers have been devalued concerning religious transmission in the literature for decades’ (2001, 194).

Yet, research shows how a heavy reliance on mothers during child rearing continues to have a significant impact on children’s engagement and encounters with religion. Focusing on a small number of parishes in the diocese of Chester, UK, Levitt (2003) gathered data on church and Sunday school attendance and used a questionnaire to survey young people’s attitudes towards religion and gender. Levitt (2003) found that two-thirds of children attending were girls, and most children were accompanied by both parents or their mother. Again, this imbalance towards mothers regarding church attendance speaks to the bias found within Voas and McAndrew’s (2012) research. Levitt (2003) also found that despite changes in the roles of women regarding childcare, baptisms and weddings were still viewed as ‘women’s work’, as is the education of young children, a discrepancy which has been further emphasised during the Covid-19 national lockdowns in the UK (Adams 2020). Furthermore, Levitt also found that ‘women were more easily engaged or re-engaged in Church activities when they had young children’ (Levitt 1996, 95–96, cited in Levitt 2003, 74). These findings show how religious organisations can also play an active role in reaching out to children.

In the case of the Church of England, contact is made with young families primarily through mothers, with church activities for mothers and young children such as Messy Church2 (Paulsen 2012). Although dated, Francis’ (1997) research found that women not in employment attended church more frequently than working women, therefore highlighting the need to take economic factors into consideration. Walter and Davie found that while older middle-class women
were likely to attend church, ‘relatively deprived groups, urban working-class white men, [we]re the least likely to participate in religion’ (1998, 647). As mentioned earlier, these findings demonstrate the need to think of gender and age in relation to other variables such as race, ethnicity and social class. Scourfield et al. remind us of the importance of this in their research and how social class and employment can impact child-caring responsibilities and observe, ‘what is important to note in relation to gendered patterns of religious nurture is the impact of racialised occupations of family life’ (2013, 79). In their study of Muslim childhood in Britain, Scourfield et al. (2013) highlight how fathers who work in restaurants tend to work during after-school hours and children’s bedtime, and as a consequence this may have an impact on their involvement and on their child’s religious nurture. The authors also reflect on how employment can, at times, intersect with ethnicity with many Indian restaurants being run by Bangladeshis—one of their participants commenting ‘that “Bangladeshi dads, they don’t really interact” with the family’ (Scourfield et al. 2013, 79). The authors, who also warn against sweeping generalisations, point to the differences that occupation, economic status and ethnicity can make when considering how parents’ availability throughout children’s everyday lives may impact the formation of religion and gender in childhood. These findings further demonstrate the need to attend to class and parental occupation when considering the intersections of gender, religion and childhood.

Education

In addition to the transmission of religious identity and the construction of gender and religion in family life, school is a key vehicle in children’s socialisation and a space whereby gender and religion are continuously encountered. In his research on young people’s attitudes towards religious education, Francis (1992) found that religiosity was an important predictor of positive attitudes to English, music, mathematics, religious education and assemblies. Francis’ (1992) findings also showed that girls were more likely to hold positive attitudes towards English, music, religious education and assemblies (and school more broadly), while boys demonstrated more favourable attitudes toward physical education lessons. Such findings speak to the need not only investigate how practices and lessons are gendered within schools, but also how religion features within such processes.

Fader’s ethnography of Hasidic girls in Brooklyn reveals how religious practices are gendered by promoting particular ideals of Jewish femininity. Fader’s (2016) research provides a unique and helpful insight into non-liberal ideals as well as parenting cultures, and observes how current research ‘does not address how age or gender shape access to religious language, text and literacy’ (2016, 177). In her research, Fader (2009) explores how gender divisions in Hasidic girls’ experience of language and labour implicate the socialisation of both secular and religious literacies. Fader describes the limited access to sacred texts Hasidic girls in Brooklyn have and how their education involves more exposure to secular texts than boys have. In this way, Fader finds how literacies ‘mediate[d] the boundaries of the secular and the religious’ in schools and that mainstream English books are in ‘easy reach of girls in contrast to boys’ (2016, 185). In exploring how these literary practices produce particular gendered divisions and identities, Fader also finds how the girls’ practices such as writing in English emphasise ‘values of Hasidic femininity: neatness, following directions and conforming the body. . . [and that] for girls, the qualities of being clean, organised and unmaterialistic are valued for the type of housekeeper girls will become’ (2016, 184). Fader (2009, 2016) demonstrates the importance of attending to children’s everyday lives in relation to religion and gender and how practices such as reading and writing can help to construct boundaries between the religious and the secular while also
cultivating particular values and ideas of personhood. This also speaks to Østberg’s (2003) findings, further highlighting the need to explore children’s embodied practices in this area.

In her research on gender and religious education (RE), O’Dell (2009) also found gendered attitudes towards RE with her participants describing the subject as ‘girly’ as it was viewed as a subject where pupils talk about their opinions and feelings. Her participants also felt that it was for this reason that girls were better equipped to respond to activities in RE lessons and perform better in this subject overall. In response to this, O’Dell argues,

> [A]ttention should be brought to the negative effects of homogenous concepts of gender and how these can restrict personal development and learning. Boys in particular should be led away from simple gender comparison. Pedagogies which motivate boys and engage them with religious education will not perpetuate gender stereotypes; teaching strategies should not be based on essentialist views of difference between boys and girls.

*(O’Dell 2009, 69)*

Levitt (2003) found that both boys and girls thought that boys were less likely to enjoy Sunday school, and that activities within Sunday school reflected the girls’ rather than the boys’ leisure interests. Girls found that Sunday school activities complemented their existing interests, for example playing a musical instrument or singing in a choir. In Levitt’s research, twice as many girls reported playing an instrument or singing than boys, and this proportion increased to three quarters for older girls. Levitt reflected that this interest in music may have contributed to continuing in a church activity. Resonating with Francis’ (1992) research, Levitt also found that the boys’ favourite activity was sport and noted that this was less easily accommodated in churches. In line with Levitt’s and O’Dell’s findings, in her research on children’s experience of worship and assemblies in schools, Shillitoe (forthcoming) spoke to a 7-year-old boy in the UK, who shared his dislike of assemblies as they ‘were girly’ due to the focus on singing and dancing. Although Shillitoe’s participant was unable to elaborate further on why he felt this way, it nevertheless spoke to the need for scholars to uncover how practices are gendered and in what ways this then informs children’s understandings and attitudes towards religion and gender.

Although large-scale quantitative research can alert us to patterns in the transmission of religion and non-religion across lines of gender amongst others, it does not tell us of how or why this is happening. Strhan and Shillitoe (forthcoming), in their examination of non-religious childhoods, observe how the visual and material cultures of children’s belief are also gendered. In their ethnographic study of non-religious children, Strhan and Shillitoe (2019) interviewed children (aged 6 to 11 years old) who did not believe in God or identified as non-religious, and found that some children rejected or questioned certain beliefs due to the way they were gendered, commenting that God is usually represented as a man which they saw as unfair, as this spoke to the broader inequalities experienced by women. This also shows how liberal ideals are implicated in children’s attitudes to both religion and gender, speaking to Benoit’s (2020) findings of the construction of liberal values within religious education in school. Benoit (2020; 2021) also found differing attitudes towards the pupils’ perceptions of the aims of RE. Girls were more likely to refer to the importance of RE in relation to community relations, whereas some boys adopted a more utilitarian view of the subject and saw its relevance mainly in terms of ‘extra knowledge’, or in case it was required to get into university. For example, when Benoit asked Year 6 pupils (aged 10–11), again in the UK, whether they thought RE should be taught in French schools, Ben’ said yes, because ‘like, [if] you went to university in England but someone, like a teacher, asks you a question about RE and you don’t know the answer’.
Toward a new research agenda?

Taking account of the existing research that intersects both religion and gender in childhood, we can observe that there are significant processes of socialisation, transmission and identity making occurring across both home and school, which are worthy of further examination. Practically speaking, we invite scholars to adopt a child-centred approach when considering the interplay between religion and gender in family life and education in future research. For example, this can be through taking a child-centred approach when investigating the lives of women to consider girlhood or conducting intergenerational data collection. Adopting a child-centred approach means more than just listening to children and including their voices in research. It means situating the child, their experiences and the construction of childhood more broadly at the centre of research designs, questions, methods and analysis. This also entails taking a reflexive approach; for example, ensuring that any adult-centric biases or assumptions (e.g. perceptions over children’s lack of agency) are considered and critically examined. It also means that we focus on childhood as an important area of our social worlds in its own right, and not just as a means to answer and address adult concerns and anxieties. This is not to diminish the importance of adult (e.g. parents/carers and teachers) perspectives in such research but to centre our analytic gazes from a purely adult-centric focus. Alderson explains the importance of intergenerational research and the danger of separating children from our research agendas:

Yet childhood, like adulthood, is not a discrete specialist topic to be flattened, sliced and squeezed into a distinct sub-sociology. Instead, children and adults exist and interact across practically all social concerns, and are understood through multidisciplinary research . . . By default, neglect of children in political and economic research confirms misleading notions of children as apolitical beings and non-economic agents, just as women used to be misrepresented.

(Alderson 2016, n.p.)

As such, we propose a twofold approach for future research agendas, one that considers the formation of gendered and religious identities in the home, and another that focuses on educational and learning environments.

In relation to the family, researchers should consider how parenting cultures and family life broadly are implicated in the socialisation and transmission of particular beliefs and worldviews in relation to gender and identity and, in turn, how children experience and respond to such processes. The quantitative research—although demonstrating small biases in religious affiliation across lines of gender—does indicate that parental religiosity for mothers and fathers impacts the identity that is attributed to baby girls and boys. However, as Voas and McAndrew (2012) and Scourfield et al. (2013) observe, the patterns that emerge regarding the interrelation between religion and gender in childhood need to be thought of with regards to class, race, ethnicity and geographical context, as findings suggest that the interplay between religion, gender and socialisation/marginalisation is complex. Scourfield et al. (2013) also interestingly show how during middle childhood their participants experienced little difference or awareness of bias in terms of gender, therefore raising important questions that merit scholarly attention: Is gender implicated in the shaping and experience of religion? When does this happen? How does this differ across religions? There is also little data that speaks to the diversity of family life, with limited representation of single-parent families, same-sex parents and households with carers or nonfamily members as the primary carers within current research on religion and children. This is also an important area that merits attention and which should be considered in future research concerning religion, children and family life.
Our second suggestion is for researchers to focus on school-level learning and teaching and to consider the strategies deployed in schools which serve to reproduce particular ideas and understandings of both religion and gender as well as the relationship between them. There is currently not enough literature that explores how children negotiate and navigate gender and religion in the school context. The small and insightful work we do have, such as Fader (2009, 2016) and Scourfield et al. (2013), tells us that there is more to be looked at here. Fader’s examination of Hasidic girls’ literary practices demonstrates the gendered practices experienced early on in childhood and how particular dispositions towards the religious and secular are cultivated along lines of gender difference. Initial findings (O’Dell 2009; Strhan and Shillitoe forthcoming; Benoit 2020) also suggest gendered attitudes towards religion in the school context—these need further uncovering. Is RE indeed perceived as a ‘girly’ topic? If so, what can teachers and educationalists do about it? And how does it impact children’s identity making? Are boys less likely to want to identify as religious, or not? We specifically do not suggest a focus only on formal education in schools, noting how educational environments also take place outside of the classroom, including through the ‘hidden curriculum’. As well as a focus on the formal school context, researchers should also attend to lesser-studied spaces such as after-school clubs and faith groups, as these will often provide other spaces where children engage in and encounter different ideas and constructions of religion and gender.

Additionally, as will have been noted throughout this chapter, the scholarship reviewed here has mainly focused on a European and North American context. We therefore also invite scholars to engage with international perspectives which move past this Western, mainly anglophone focus as it will greatly enhance our understanding of religion and gender in childhood and how this is lived across different geographical locales.

Conclusion

Although literature on religious socialisation and religious transmission is crucial in enhancing our understanding of how religion is implicated in the formation of gender identities (and vice versa), we have shown throughout this chapter that in order to have a more inclusive understanding of the interrelations between religion and gender, a focus on childhood in its own right is crucial. This chapter calls for social scientists to start paying more attention to children’s constructions of religion and gender and how they negotiate their religious and gendered identities in their everyday lives. This entails working with children and not solely relying on data by proxy. Children’s voices are sorely missed, and we urge scholars to start listening to their stories rather than relying on adult-generated accounts or data by proxy. Listening to the voices and experiences of children in the home and educational contexts is pivotal and would serve to advance our scholarly thinking and understanding of our social worlds and the place of religion and gender within it. It would also help us escape essentialist narratives that tend to (re)present children as a homogeneous group. The research agenda we have outlined will go some way to filling in the current lacuna we have in research exploring religion and gender. Through attending to children’s voices (e.g. Ridgely 2005; Hemming 2015; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020; Benoit 2020), we can add further depth and diversity to our knowledge and understanding of both religious and gendered identities and everyday lives across the life course. Attending to both the spatial and relational dynamics of these (Strhan 2019) would also allow for greater insight into not only how such identities are formed, contested and negotiated across different age groups but also how the environments in which children encounter gender and religion work together and/or against each other in shaping and creating particular narratives and ideas about our social worlds.
Notes

1. An activity where children use blocks, which encourages creative and imaginative play.
2. Messy Church is a movement supported by the Bible Reading Fellowship where families and children gather together for food, activities, play and worship (see www.messychurch.org.uk).
3. All names have been anonymised.

Bibliography


Levitt, M. 1996. ‘Nice When They Are Young’: *Contemporary Christianity in Families and Schools*. Aldershot: Avebury.


