

No Religion in the UK: A Scoping Survey

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“Heather [a US crystal healer] says that Brits are particularly open-minded. ‘When I visited the UK recently, I noticed this real openness. There seems to be less stigma, and more and more people are waking up to different healing possibilities...’

---Heather Askinosie, ‘These Stones will Change your Life’, *You* magazine, the *Mail on Sunday*, 10th Nov 2019, p.24)

This survey presents the main quantitative and survey-based evidence available on ‘no religion’ in Britain, and gesture towards its significance and further avenues for research.

Part 1: The non-religious population of the UK: overview of the evidence available

There are a number of surveys and censuses that chart religion and non-religion in contemporary Britain, of which the following are the most notable:

British Social Attitudes Survey

The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey¹ has explored the views and experiences of those living in Britain, annually since 1983. It asks a question on religious identity every year, and every ten years dedicates a larger effort to exploring more specific aspects of religious – and non-religious – beliefs and practices. The BSA is an invaluable source of information for our present discussion due to its longitudinal nature, robust methodology and sample size ($n=c.3000$).

The data shows clearly that non-religious identification has become vastly more common in Britain over the last 30 years – from 34.1% of the population in 1983 to 52% in 2018. In fact, if we break the ‘Christian’ affiliates down into their various denominations and compare levels of identification with that of ‘no religion’, the BSA makes clear that ‘no religion’ has been Britain’s largest single ‘religious’ grouping for over two decades.² It also breaks down these figures by region, revealing the variety in levels of nonreligious affiliation across Great Britain – 58% of those in South Eastern England are nonreligious compared to 31% of Londoners – though most regions have a nonreligious majority.³

BSA data also provides insights into individuals’ upbringing, with data from 2015 showing that three fifths of the population were brought up Christian – excluding Catholics – and only 20% nonreligious. However, 92% of individuals raised nonreligious retained this identification in adulthood, and nonreligion is the only category to have more current

¹ <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/british-social-attitudes/>

² Stephen Bullivant, *The no religion population of Britain*, p. 8.

<https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/no-religion-population.aspx>

³ Stephen Bullivant, *The no religion population of Britain*, p. 7.

<https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/no-religion-population.aspx>

adherents than individuals who were raised with it; it is 'sticky in a way that Christianity is not'.⁴ Those who had a Christian upbringing have tended to navigate towards nonreligion as they grow up and start to make their own choices, and although non-Christian religions generally maintain numbers of adherents, losing far fewer to nonreligion as they age, the category of non-Christian religious – though growing to around 9% in 2018⁵ – is not large enough to counter the rise to a majority of the nonreligious.

The last BSA survey, conducted in 2018, contained the in-depth ten-yearly module exploring more specific aspects of religion and belief. It shows that two-thirds of Britons never attend religious services except for on special occasions;⁶ half never pray⁷; and 46% do not believe in God - up from 10% in 1998. Nevertheless, it also reveals that attitudes towards religion are on the whole positive, or at least tolerant.

National censuses

There have been official national censuses of the population every ten years since 1801, but questions concerning religion have only been included in three censuses – those of 1851 (as a separate element of the Census), 2001 and 2011 (partly as a result of campaigning by Muslim organisations). Since 2001 there has been a single religion question that asks about affiliation and takes a slightly different form on the censuses for England and Wales, for Scotland, and for Northern Ireland. In 1851, the religion questions mainly explored church attendance, which was found to be between a quarter and 40% (there is dispute about the methodology). The 2001 and 2011 censuses consider only religious affiliation. Although they confirm that nonreligious identification is rising in modern Britain, their figures differ from those of the BSA.

According to Census data for England and Wales, British nones increased from 14.5% of the population in 2001 to 25.1% in 2011 (lower than the BSA data from these years which put nones at 39.7% and 45.2% of the population respectively). The Censuses also find higher levels of Christian identification - 71.7% of the population of England and Wales in 2001 and 59.3% in 2011 compared to BSA's 41% and 45% respectively.

The discrepancies between these surveys appear to be due to different wording and placement of questions. In addition, censuses are completed by one person on behalf of the whole household, perhaps imputing affiliation erroneously to others. Nevertheless, the Census data confirm that the 'no religion' is rising extremely rapidly in Great Britain (less in Northern Ireland, where it was 13.9% in 2011), even if it does not yet constitute the majority – the findings of the Census planned for 2021 will be interesting.

Gallup polls

⁴ 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. 249).

⁵ British Social Attitudes *Religion* <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-36/religion.aspx>

⁶ BSA, 36, 2019, p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Gallup was once the biggest and most famous polling agency in Britain. Founded in 1937 as an overseas affiliate with George Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion, Gallup Polls provided insight into public attitudes on a range of topics. Clive Field has helpfully collated all such data relating to British religion in *'Religion in Great Britain, 1939-99: A Compendium of Gallup Poll Data'*.⁸ Topics covered include levels of self-reported religiosity, a variety of religious and supernatural beliefs, and the extent to which these were perceived as 'fashionable' or not.

None of the polls explore non-religion specifically, but in many instances its rising popularity over recent decades is evident in the increasing proportion of individuals giving negative answers to questions about attitudes and beliefs. For example, one poll spanning 1981-1993 reveals how the proportion of respondents claiming that God was 'not at all' important in their life increased from 14% to 24%.⁹ Similarly, the proportion who self-identified as 'not religious' increased from 34% of respondents in 1985 to 46% in 1993, and individuals who did not believe in God increased from 11% in 1968 to 27% in 1999.¹⁰

European Values Study

The European Values Study was created in 1981 to explore the extent to which Europeans from different countries shared values, and whether these were changing – in particular they explored whether Christian values still 'permeated European life and culture', and if not, whether a 'coherent alternative meaning system' was replacing them.¹¹ The EVS consists of interviews in a large number of European countries carried out in four waves – 1981, 1990, 1999 and 2000. A fifth wave of interviews was initiated in 2017, the findings of which are expected to be published later in 2019.¹² Although intended as a resource for comparing various countries, it also reveals trends within individual countries. Britain's participation means that the EVS is a useful tool in our exploration of rising non-religion.

Across each wave of this study, belief in God, religious service attendance, and assuredness that the church could provide answers to issues in modern life decreased among the British population. The percentage of people identifying as 'not religious' increased from 37% in 1981 to 47% in 2008, and the proportion who claimed to 'get comfort and strength from religion' declined from 48% in 1981 to 39% in 2008.

European Social Survey

The other relevant Europe-wide survey is the European Social Survey (ESS). This is an 'academically driven cross-national survey' which measures stability and change in European attitudes, beliefs, and the 'social, political and moral fabric'. Established in 2001, it

⁸ Clive Field, *'Religion in Great Britain, 1939-99: A Compendium of Gallup Poll Data'*, *British Religion in Numbers*, (Manchester: University of Manchester, 2015).

⁹ Field, 2015, p. 18.

¹⁰ Field, 2015, p. 4.

¹¹ <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/about-evs/history/>

¹² <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/methodology-data-documentation/survey-2017/>

has interviewed nationally representative samples from over 30 countries – including Britain – every other year.¹³

Stephen Bullivant has collated ESS findings pertaining to nonreligion in his article ‘The “No Religion” Population of Britain’.¹⁴ In 2008 four in ten nones said they did not believe in God, 43% said they are ‘not at all religious’, one quarter said that they attend church at some point throughout the year, and 11% pray with some regularity – 4% on a daily basis.

Linda Woodhead’s YouGov Surveys

In order to drill down deeper into the nature of religion and non-religion in Great Britain (not Northern Ireland), Linda Woodhead designed and commissioned three YouGov (internet polling) surveys between 2013 and 2015.¹⁵ over sixty questions on religion and belief were answered by around 4,000 GB adults, providing a richer snapshot of British nones than has previously been available. The data tables and analyses are available on the ‘Westminster Faith Debates’ website.¹⁶ Woodhead used this data combined with that from surveys and censuses mentioned above to offer an analysis of no religion in Britain in ‘The rise of “no religion” in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority’ in the *Journal of the British Academy* (2016).¹⁷

This work highlighted the steady rise of ‘no religion’ with each generation, with ‘no religion’ in a minority amongst over 50s and a minority amongst under 40s. Nones are more likely to be young than old – 60% of 18-24 year-olds say they have ‘no religion’ and 27% say Christian, but the figures reverse for those aged 60 and above.¹⁸ In terms of ethnicity, 93% of British nones are ‘white British’ compared to 86% of the population in general – though non-religion is high among Chinese and mixed-race Britons.¹⁹ The growth of ‘no religion’ to become a cultural majority is shown to be chiefly the result of children not adopting their parents’ Christian commitments. The fact that nonreligious upbringing is more likely to be maintained into adulthood than Christian means that as these nones age and have their own children, their nonreligion is likely to be passed on, leading to an apparently inexorable rise in the proportion of those reporting ‘no religion’.

Aside from their age, British nones tend not to stand out as a clear and defined group, separate from wider society. There are no obvious predictors in terms of gender, class, education, political inclination or geographical location. Like the society around them, nones tend to possess a ‘liberal spirit’,²⁰ emphasising the importance of individual choice and consulting their own conscience on moral matters rather than looking to external authorities – such as God or the Bible – for guidance. They are, however, more likely than Christians to possess cosmopolitan rather than patriotic or nationalist attitudes.²¹

¹³ <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/about/>

¹⁴ Stephen Bullivant, *The “No Religion” Population of Britain* (London: St Mary’s university, 2016).

¹⁵ <http://faithdebates.org.uk/>

¹⁶ <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/>

¹⁷ Woodhead, *The Rise of ‘No Religion’*.

¹⁸ Woodhead, *The Rise of ‘No Religion’*, p. 247.

¹⁹ Woodhead, *Towards an Explanation*, p. 6

²⁰ Woodhead, *Towards an explanation*, p. 9.

²¹ Woodhead, *The Rise of ‘No Religion’*, p. 252.

'No religion' has become 'the norm' in British society – a factor that further contributes to its success. Woodhead argues that the shift to majority status leads to a deepening of social influence on the part of non-religion, seeping into practices and expectations that had long been rooted in Christian traditions – 'many aspects of a non-religious worldview...have now become taken for granted in the way Christian teaching used to be'²². For example,

When everyone used to have a Christian funeral...that was just what you did when someone died; you did not have to choose, you did not even have to think about it. When non-religious funerals started to occur they were regarded as odd and deviant; people used to feel uncomfortable and to mock. These days they are the new normal, and it is *religious* funerals which have to be justified.²³

Woodhead's surveys confirm that 'no religion' cannot be simply equated with atheism. Less than half (41.5%) of British Nones are sure that God or a higher power does not exist. The remaining 58.5% either believe or don't know – but only 5.5% are certain that God exists.²⁴ A quarter of nones take part in regular, at least monthly, personal religious or spiritual practices such as praying, but hardly any participate in communal practices such as worship. Only 13% of British nones adopt the sort of secularist beliefs espoused by Richard Dawkins, and those that do are more likely to be male.²⁵ Most Nones are tolerant of organized religion and its leaders, but pay little attention to anything that they say.²⁶

Spirituality and 'no religion'

Staying with the theme of 'spiritual' or at least 'post-secular' belief amongst nones, various polls attest to the fact that substantial proportions of Britons believe in life after death (66%), guardian angels (40%) and the ability to communicate with the dead (53%), and that these numbers have been growing even though belief in God has been falling.²⁷ Research by Theos shows that such beliefs are held by significant minorities of British nones, concluding that though Britain as a nation is clearly less religious now than in the past, it is 'no less spiritual'.²⁸ This conclusion should not obscure the fact that atheism is growing steadily, but a proportion of the nones nevertheless leave room for spiritual experience and explanations, and reject more dogmatic forms of both belief and unbelief. More research needs to be done.

Explanations for the rise of 'no religion'

We know that 'no religion' in Britain has grown steadily by inter-generational more than intra-generational changes, but wider explanations are still under discussion. Here, existing

²² Woodhead, *The Rise of 'No Religion'*, p. 259.

²³ Woodhead, *The Rise of 'No Religion'*, p. 259.

²⁴ Woodhead, *Towards an explanation*, p. 29.

²⁵ Woodhead, *Towards an explanation*, p. 12.

²⁶ Woodhead, *Towards an explanation*, p. 12.

²⁷ Clive Field, *Hereafter*, 2011 <http://www.brin.ac.uk/hereafter-report/>

²⁸ Theos, *The spirit of things unseen*, 2013, p. 25 <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2013/10/17/the-spirit-of-things-unseen-belief-in-post-religious-britain>

secularization theory remains a resource. For example, growing cultural pluralism and religious diversity in modern British society undermines religious groups' universal truth claims and is reflected in nones' affirmation of respect for diversity as a core value.²⁹ Similarly, the high value placed on individual choice may people to 'shop around' for identification(s) of their choosing rather than accepting ascribed and transmitted identifications and belongings.³⁰ Woodhead argues that not the British have become more tolerant of choice in areas like abortion, homosexuality and assisted dying over the same period (1970s on) that the churches have become more conservative and narrowly 'religious', leading to a 'values gap' and a plausibility gap: 'it is not just that Britain has become less religious but that religion has moved away from [British people]'.³¹

Part 2: The rise of 'no religion' in the social domains highlighted by the SSHRC grant, and religion-'no religion' relations

We begin with the domain of education and schools, using this as our main case (it's also our focus in the Ottawa programme), then offering shorter overviews for the other domains.

Education

Around a third of state-funded schools in Britain today are faith schools, mainly Christian (CofE and Catholic in particular) but also some Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh schools.³² This is entirely different to the US model of separation, but has historic roots and is strongly defended by religious groups and government. As 'no religion' grows, there are growing tensions.

Historically, the Anglican and free churches were the main providers of education in Britain, with Catholic provision growing quickly once toleration was extended in the 19th century.³³ By the latter part of that century the state was increasingly prominent in establishing a universal system of free compulsory education for children aged 5-13 under the Forster Education Act (1870). The Education Act of 1944 was a major initiative to bring all schools, save private ('public') schools, under greater state control and in receipt of state funding. The aim was universal education of a more consistent and higher standard for all children. The Protestant churches acceded, but secured safeguards for Christian provision in all state schools: a daily Christian act of worship, compulsory religious education, and the right of some schools to select on the basis of faith. The Catholic church also accepted state funding, but secured a greater degree of control over its schools. All the provisions of the 1944 Act are still in force, fuelling growing criticism, partly from nonreligious groups, but also from RE

²⁹ Woodhead, *Towards an explanation*, p. 16.

³⁰ Woodhead, *Towards an explanation*, p. 17.

³¹ Woodhead, *cultural majority*, p. 12.

³² Theos, *More than an educated guess*, 2013

³³ Theos, *More than an educated guess*, 2013

<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/More%20than%20an%20educated%20guess.pdf>

professionals and some politicians. There is an ongoing national debate around the topic. Former Secretary for Education.³⁴

Faith schools

The third of state schools that have a religious character are popularly termed 'faith schools'. They must adhere to all education legislation just like non-faith schools (often termed 'community schools') but when selecting pupils to attend, and some staff, they can discriminate the basis of parental religious affiliation and practice. Opponents, both religious and nonreligious, argue that this increases religious segregation and reduces social mobility.³⁵ But the continued existence of faith schools is justified as increasing choice for parents and respecting the rights of minority and majority faiths. In fact, faith schools may prioritise pupil applicants with *any* religious belief over those with none meaning that as it currently stands, poorer children from nonreligious families are often at a significant disadvantage in terms of gaining admission to faith schools.³⁶

Religious Education

According to the 1944 Education Act, all schools must offer religious education. Unlike all other academic subjects, there is no national curriculum that all schools must follow, instead some schools are free to create their own, and others are encouraged to follow locally-agreed syllabuses. This often leads to inconsistency in RE quality and content between schools. Many religious as well as nonreligious groups are unhappy with this,³⁷ though most agree that when taught well, RE is important in preparing children for life in a multi-cultural and multi-faith society. (include non-religion being included in the curriculum)

Collective Worship

Under the 1944 Act, modified but still in force, schools are expected to further pupils' spiritual, moral and cultural development by gathering them daily for a 'collective act of worship' that is 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'.³⁸ This is often fulfilled in

³⁴ Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead, *A New Settlement: Religion and belief in Schools* and Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead, *A New Settlement Revised: Religion and Belief in Schools*. <http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/A-New-Settlement-for-Religion-and-Belief-in-schools.pdf> ; <http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Clarke-Woodhead-A-New-Settlement-Revised.pdf>

³⁵ National Secular Society <https://www.secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/>; Humanists UK <https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/faith-schools/>; Accord Coalition <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/research/>

³⁶ Woodhead and Levitt, 'Choosing a faith school in Leicester: admissions criteria, diversity and choice' *British Journal of Religious Education* (2018)

³⁷ All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education *RE: The Truth Unmasked: the supply of and support for Religious Education teachers*, (2013) <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/resources/documents/religious-education-the-truth-unmasked/>; Religious Education Council, *The State of the Nation: A report on Religious Education provision within secondary schools in England* <https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/SOTN%20RE%202017%20Report%20web%20CURRENT%202.pdf>

³⁸ Clarke and Woodhead, *A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools*, p. 20.

the form of an assembly, though the out-datedness of the duty and lack of practical advice from the government means that many schools do not comply.³⁹

That schools – including those with no faith designation – are duty-bound to offer Christian worship to all pupils is, according to many non-religious voices, inappropriate given that only a minority of individuals in Britain now identify as religious. It is worth noting that parents have the right to withdraw their children from collective worship if they desire, but few do for fear that their children will feel excluded. Humanists UK (HUK)⁴⁰ and the National Secular Society (NSS)⁴¹ both campaign for the statutory duty regarding collective worship to be abolished on these grounds.

An interesting current legal case:

Humanists UK (which now claims to speak for Britain's non-religious majority) is in the process of bringing a test case against a community primary school in the town of Burford, Oxfordshire.⁴² Lee and Lizanne Harris' two children attend Burford Primary School and were withdrawn from attending school assemblies after voicing discomfort with witnessing re-enactments of Bible stories such as the crucifixion. Rather than provide them with alternative education provision during daily assemblies, the Harris' children were left to play with iPads. At a later date, the children were forced to attend an assembly led by TV 'Gladiator' turned conservative evangelist, 'Ace'.⁴³ The grounds for the action are that as the school does not have a faith designation, that the explicitly religious assemblies it has provided as part of the legally imposed 'collective worship' go against their children's rights to receive 'an education free from religious interference', and that the lack of alternative provision is unacceptable.

This case will be heard in the High Court on 29th November 2019 and has the potential to be a pivotal moment, with the future of statutory collective Christian worship in English schools hanging in the balance. It serves as an example of how the new majority 'no religion' comes into conflict with the old Christian majority, especially where the latter takes a more conservative religious form. It is a good example of a situation where religion was traditionally central, but its place is increasingly questioned.

Law

The UK's Equality Act (2010) prohibits discrimination on the basis of a range of 'protected characteristics:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment

³⁹ The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/apr/21/ofsted.schools> [accessed 12/09/2019]; BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35161361> [accessed 12/09/2019]

⁴⁰ <https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/collective-worship/>

⁴¹ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/end-compulsory-worship/>

⁴² <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/07/29/high-court-grants-parents-permission-to-challenge-school-worship-law/>

⁴³ <https://aceactive.org/>

- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation.

The inclusion of ‘religion or belief’ in this list is important for our current discussion. In theory it prohibits discrimination against both religious and non-religious beliefs, though there are limits on what qualifies – judges recently ruled that vegetarianism does not constitute a protected belief⁴⁴ and a tribunal is yet to decide on veganism.⁴⁵ However, environmentalism was counted as a belief in another ruling.⁴⁶

Some limited exemptions from the law are granted to religious groups where their religious beliefs give a legitimate reason to discriminate, for example in not ordaining women and not conducting same-sex marriages. Non-religious organisations lobby against this. The Church of England (and in some ways the Church of Scotland) are still legally established churches, with 26 Bishops still sitting in the House of Lords.⁴⁷ Research by *Theos* found that most Britons want future coronations to remain Christian; identifying as non-religious and favouring the expulsion of religion from the public sphere – at least in relation to centuries-old traditions – are not synonymous.⁴⁸

However, in some instances, British law has begun to take non-religion and non-religious views more seriously. Legislation outlawing blasphemy was repealed in England and Wales in 2008 (though it remains in Scotland and Northern Ireland),⁴⁹ humanist marriage ceremonies became legally recognised in Northern Ireland in 2018 (though they are not yet recognised in England and Wales),⁵⁰ and non-religious beliefs were included in the Religious Education GCSE curriculum from 2015.⁵¹ Another interesting progression concerns the granting of ‘religious asylum’ to atheist refugees, demonstrating the growing tendency to perceive non-religion as a ‘thoughtful and seriously-held philosophical position’.⁵²

These changes fuel fears of unfair treatment and even persecution among some religious groups. Woodhead and Catto note a sense among participants in their research that ‘to be actively religious is to be in a minority position [in modern Britain]...some religious people view the [Equality and Human Rights] Commission and the ‘equality and human rights

⁴⁴ Mr G. Conisbee v Crossley Farms Ltd and others <https://www.gov.uk/employment-tribunal-decisions/mr-g-conisbee-v-crossley-farms-ltd-and-others-3335357-2018>

⁴⁵ <https://www.crowdjustice.com/case/help-a-discriminated-ethical-vegan/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/tim-nicholson-a-green-martyr-1648388.html>

⁴⁷ Humanists UK - <https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/>; National Secular Society - <https://www.secularism.org.uk/campaigns/>

⁴⁸ Nicholas Spencer and Nicholas Dixon, *Who wants a Christian coronation?* (London: Theos, 2015).

⁴⁹ <https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/freedom-of-speech-and-expression/repealing-northern-irelands-blasphemy-laws/>

⁵⁰ <https://humanism.org.uk/ceremonies/non-religious-weddings/>

⁵¹ <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/R-Fox-v-SSfE-2015-EWHC-3404-Admin-251115.pdf>

⁵² ‘Atheist Afghan granted religious asylum in UK’ *BBC* (2014) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25715736>

industry' in general with suspicion, and believe that far from protecting religion, it has a bias against it'.⁵³ Some cases in recent years where individuals have been fired for expressing their faith at work do little to quell such concerns. *Christian Concern* is a conservative evangelical organisation with a Legal Centre that aids Christians facing these issues. Their website contains a list of past and current legal cases of this sort.⁵⁴ The cases include:

- *Eweida v British Airways plc [2010]* and *Chaplin v Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital NHS Foundation [2010]*; both claimants lost their jobs for refusing to remove crucifix necklaces in customer/patient-facing jobs.⁵⁵
- *London Borough of Islington v Ladele [2009]* and *McFarlane v Relate Avon Ltd [2009]*; individuals were fired for refusing to provide services to homosexual couples. Ladele was a Christian registrar who refused to conduct same sex marriages and McFarlane a relationships counsellor who refused to counsel same-sex couples.⁵⁶

Each of these individuals lodged claims of unfair dismissal based on religious discrimination – invoking the Equality Act 2010 – but only one was upheld. For *Chaplin [2010]* it was decided that the crucifix necklace breached health and safety regulations in the hospital setting and she should not be permitted to wear it, and for *Ladele [2009]* and *McFarlane [2009]* protecting the rights of the homosexual individuals to express their sexuality was considered more important than protecting the claimants' rights to manifest their religious beliefs. For *Eweida [2010]*, British Airways' argument that the crucifix negatively impacted their image was deemed insufficient and therefore her claim was upheld. These cases and their outcomes are discussed in depth in this government report.⁵⁷ A more recent case worthy of attention is *S Kuteh v Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust [2017]*; the claimant, a nurse, lost her job because she prayed with patients though they had asked her not to.⁵⁸ Her claim of unfair dismissal based on discrimination against her religion or belief was dismissed, as was her appeal earlier this year.⁵⁹

Tensions ultimately arise when more than one of the Equality Act's 'protected characteristics' clash. Where 'religion and belief' is involved, it is sometimes deemed less worthy of protection than other characteristics such as sexual orientation. Cases brought on

⁵³ Linda Woodhead with Rebecca Catto, *'Religion or belief': Identifying issues and priorities*, (Manchester, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009) p. 27.

⁵⁴ <https://christianconcern.com/cases/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/Case%20Summary%20Eweida%20and%20Others%20v%20UK.pdf>

⁵⁶ <https://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2013/01/17/chaplin-eweida-ladele-and-mcfarlane-the-judgment/>

⁵⁷ *Religious discrimination in the workplace: the case of Eweida and Others v the United Kingdom*

<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06533#fullreport>

⁵⁸ 'Christian nurse sacked for offering to pray with patients was just showing 'compassion', tribunal hears', *Telegraph* (2017) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/30/christian-nurse-sacked-offering-pray-patients-just-showing-compassion/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2019/05/14/article-9-echr-promotion-of-religious-belief-by-employees-kuteh/>

grounds of discrimination against religious beliefs have very low success rates – lower, in fact, than discrimination cases brought on other protected characteristics.⁶⁰

For comprehensive explorations of the tensions between religion and non-religion in British law see Woodhead and Catto's *'Religion or belief': identifying issues and priorities*⁶¹ and Edge and Vickers' *Review of equality and human rights law relating to religion or belief*.⁶²

Migration

Inward migration to Britain increased considerably after the Second World War – huge war damage and high mortality rates among soldiers meant that many industries were severely understaffed – and as a result, society rapidly diversified culturally, ethnically and religiously. Most migrants entering Britain in this period were Christians from the former British Empire.⁶³ A second phase of high migration from within the EU has continued to see Christianity – particularly Catholicism continue to be the most common migrant religion. Islam is the second largest migrant religion, and has become the second largest religious affiliation in Britain (around 5% of the population).

As discussed above, religion has dramatically declined in recent decades. Generally speaking, where this narrative is challenged, migrant communities are often involved: African Christians with thriving versions of Christianity, Eastern European Catholics with regular worship attendance, and adherents of non-Christian religions – particularly Islam – whose numbers are growing due to successful inter-generational transmission of religious identities, youthfulness of the population and higher average birth rates.

Non-Christian forms of religion have not always been welcomed by British society, with anti-Semitism being a longstanding problem, and Islamophobia a new one.⁶⁴ Although many studies explore issues such as Islamophobia and multi-culturalism in British society as a whole, there is little work on relations with 'no religion' as such.

Health

Healthcare in the UK is provided, in the main, by the National Health Service (NHS). Established in 1948, the NHS is publicly funded and provides free, comprehensive health care for UK citizens. Religion, particularly Christianity, has been entwined with healthcare for centuries. The advent of the NHS altered this, though religious elements were not completely removed. For example, chaplains continue to be employed by the NHS to provide spiritual and religious support to patients, their families and staff. As Britain's

⁶⁰ Linda Woodhead with Rebecca Catto, *'Religion or belief': Identifying issues and priorities*, (Manchester, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009) p. 23.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Peter Edge and Lucy Vickers, *Review of equality and human rights law relating to religion or belief*, (Manchester: Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015)

⁶³ Woodhead, *Towards an explanation*, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Orla Lynch, 'British Muslim youth: radicalisation, terrorism and the construction of the "other"', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 6, 2 (2013), pp. 241-261; Ingrid Storm, "'Christian Nations?' Ethnic Christianity and Anti-immigration Attitudes in Four Western European countries', *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 24, 1 (2011), pp. 75-96.

religious landscape changed, chaplains' jobs have had to adapt accordingly⁶⁵ and they now minister to individuals of many different faiths, or none, providing pastoral as well as specifically spiritual religious support.⁶⁶

NHS nurses are expected to care for patients' spiritual needs in their endeavour to provide 'holistic, person-centred' care.⁶⁷ Use of the term 'spiritual' evidences a conscious step away from language of 'religion'. In a 'no religion' majority society where many are sympathetic to spiritual beliefs,⁶⁸ and in environments like hospitals where individuals are forced to face their own mortality, this language of spirituality is essential for ensuring that this element of care is accessible to a wide range of patients: Swift claims that 'spirituality often functions as a neutral territory for exploring existential concerns'.⁶⁹

Some non-religious groups oppose the NHS' employment of chaplains, claiming that it is inappropriate given that 'no religion' is currently the majority identification in Britain.⁷⁰ More commonly, however, it is chaplains themselves who complain about the current system, claiming that hospital trusts downplay the importance of their work by ignoring their requirements in planning decisions,⁷¹ under-funding them,⁷² and in some cases trying to get rid of them altogether.⁷³

Conclusion

'No religion' is generally well evidenced and documented in Britain. Besides the datasets and analysis presented here, there are a number of important qualitative, conceptual and theoretical studies. Although time-series data on 'no religion' affiliation/self-identification only goes back to the 1980s, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that it has been growing steadily for over a century. The fact that it has recently overtaken Christianity gives it heightened importance, and is leading to tension in a number of areas of society between 'minority' religion and 'majority' no-religion. In some instances, the privileges and 'establishment' of Christianity and the churches remains, even though the number of followers is now small – we have mentioned schools as a particularly clear example.

⁶⁵ Peter Collins et al, 'NHS hospital 'Chaplaincies' in a multi-faith society: the spatial dimension of religion and spirituality in hospital' Project Report. NHS Durham (2007).

⁶⁶ Mark Newitt, 'Chaplaincy Services Are Not Only for Religious Patients', *British Medical Journal*, 338, 7699 (2009), p. 893.

⁶⁷ Royal College of Nursing, *Spirituality in nursing care: a pocket guide* <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-003887>

⁶⁸ British Religion in Numbers <http://www.brin.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Belief-After-Life-1939-2008.png>; <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/belief-in-britain-1939-2009/alternative-religious-belief/belief-in-ghosts-and-communication-with-the-dead/>; <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/belief-in-britain-1939-2009/conventional-belief/belief-in-the-afterlife-1939-2008/>

⁶⁹ Chris Swift, 'A State Health Service and Funded Religious Care' *Health Care Analysis*, 21, 3 (2013) pp. 248-258 (p. 257).

⁷⁰ National Secular Society <https://www.secularism.org.uk/chaplaincy/>; Humanists UK <https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/chaplaincy-and-pastoral-support/>

⁷¹ Peter Collins et al, *NHS Hospital 'Chaplaincies' in a Multi-faith Society: the special dimension of religion and spirituality in hospitality* NHS Estates.

⁷² Chris Swift, 'A State Health Service and Funded Religious Care'

⁷³ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1525904/Hospital-trust-sacks-team-of-chaplains.html>

Although it is now a commonplace, it bears repeating that 'no religion' is mainly (though not entirely) a survey artefact rather than a living term, and that it hides as much as it reveals. The fact that there is no simple relationship between no-religion, atheism and secularism means that there is a lot of work still to be done in forging better concepts for talking about how non-religious people make meaning, locate themselves in the cosmos, articulate what is sacred, and engage – or not – with supernatural entities, powers and forms of healing.

There is clearly a great deal of scope to research (a) the growth (or not) of non-religion amongst the children of Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, and other religious minorities in Britain (b) religion-'no religion' tensions in all the social domains listed above (c) the lack of religion-'no religion' tension in these same domains, despite the growth of 'no religion' – or, to put it another way, how and why religious and non-religious people get along in practice (d) the growth of beliefs and practices that might seem incompatible with 'no religion' but which have been rising since the 1950s in Britain: belief in ghosts, angels, the soul, an afterlife and (more recently) astrology, tarot and crystal healing. What sort of worldview(s) and lived practices are implied?

Annotated Bibliography

- Allen, Chris., “Doing God” According to David Cameron: Evangelism and Christian Britain’ (2017)** <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/doing-god-according-to-david-cameron/> Chris Allen, Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Birmingham explores the context and possible political motivations behind David Cameron’s, public invocations of his Christian faith while serving as Prime Minister from 2010-2016.
- Brierley, P., *Pulling out of the nose dive: a contemporary picture of churchgoing: what the 2005 English church census reveals* (London: Christian Research, 2006)** Brierley contributes to discussions of declining Christian affiliation and practice by analysing responses to the 2005 church census and comparing results with previous decades. Although not specifically discussing the rise of non-religion, his detailed exploration of declining religiosity is significant for understanding this phenomenon.
- Brown, C., *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006)** Brown uses stories from people and churches to provide a comprehensive history of the religious landscape of Britain during the twentieth century. He argues that the social changes of this period led to secularisation in the latter half.
- Brown, C., *Death of Christian Britain: understanding secularisation, 1800-2000, 2nd edn* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009)** Argues that the secularisation process responsible for declining Christianity and rising nonreligion in Britain took place rapidly in the form of a cultural revolution beginning in the 1960s.
- Brown, C., *Becoming atheist. Humanism and the secular west* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017)** Brown aims to show how a number of modern societies have become atheist using personal stories recounted by volunteers from 6 such countries – including Britain. He shows that among all demographic groups in all countries analysed, religion has clearly decreased in the importance attributed to it and explores the very process of becoming and staying an atheist in modern societies.
- Bruce, S., *God is dead: secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002)** A strong supporter of the secularization theory, Bruce explains and defends the theory in relation to the West, generally, and Britain specifically.
- Bruce, S., Glendinning, T., ‘When was secularization? Dating the decline of the British churches and locating its cause’, *British Journal of Sociology* (2010) 61, 1, (pp. 107-126)** Bruce and Glendinning challenge Brown’s assertion that declining Christianity in Britain can be traced to social and cultural changes of the 1960s. They claim that non-religion has risen exponentially not because adults have defected from the faith, but because children have not been inducted into it in the first place.

Bullivant, S., 'Introducing Irreligious Experiences', *Implicit Religion* (2008) 11, 1, (pp.7-24)
Bullivant explores irreligious experiences – 'instances of emphatic awareness of the absence of God or unexplainable feelings of elation or despair at the thought of God's non-existence.'

Bullivant, S., 'Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain: A Quantitative Overview', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2016) 31, 2, (pp. 181-197) Using British Social Attitudes data, Bullivant discusses Catholic disaffiliates in Britain – individuals who were brought up, but no longer identify as, Catholic.

Bullivant, S., *The "no religion" population of Britain: Recent data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (2015) and the European Social survey (2014)* (London: St Mary's University, 2018) A compilation of findings specifically relating to nonreligion from two nationally representative surveys, providing figures evidencing nonreligion's rising popularity as well as insight into the demographic of British Nones.

Bullivant, S., *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) Despite the significant reforms resulting from the Second Vatican Council, statistics of Catholic belief and practice in the USA and Britain are dire. In this book Bullivant lays out the figures and explores possible reasons behind the clear downwards trajectory.

Bullivant, S., Farias, M., Lanman, J., Lee, L., *Understanding Unbelief: atheists and agnostics around the world* (2019) <https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/2019/05/UUReportRome.pdf> The Understanding Unbelief research programme aims to advance scientific understanding of 'unbelief' around the world and has produced a wealth of research on this subject – some specifically focusing on Britain. This report presents data on atheists and agnostics – who they are, what they believe - in 6 countries including the UK, challenging common misconceptions.

Catto, R., Eccles, J., '(Dis)Believing and Belonging: Investigating the Narratives of Young British Atheists', *Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* (2013) 49, 1, (pp. 37-63)
Presents data about young people who identify as atheists in terms of what they value and their attitudes to certain things. It also investigates how they come to identify in this way, suggesting that becoming an atheist in modern Britain is still a conscious effort, not inevitable and unavoidable.

Clements, B., Gries, P., "'Religious Nones" in the United Kingdom: How Atheists and Agnostics Think about Religion and Politics', *Politics and Religion* (2017) 10, 1, (pp. 161-185) The authors explore whether and how UK Nones differ from those who identify as religious in terms of religiosity, ideology and policy preferences.

Crockett, A., Voas, D., 'Generations of Decline: Religious Change in 20th Century Britain', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2006) 45, 4, (pp. 567-584) The authors analyse findings from major British social surveys to describe and explain declining religion in Britain. They highlight the generational nature of this decline, noting the significance of parental belief transmission – or the lack thereof – in facilitating this.

Davie, G., *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd edn (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishers, 2015) An updated edition of Davie's book, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, which suggested among other things that declining religious affiliation and practice were not necessarily evidence of the British people turning away from religion. Particularly relevant are chapters exploring how Christianity has been influential in shaping modern Britain, and how the churches therefore continue to play important roles in certain situations but no longer hold authority over the majority of the population.

Day, A., *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) In contrast to Grace Davie's 'believing without belonging' theory for explaining declining church attendance, Day's research suggests that modern Britons consider social belonging to be more important than religious belief. She explores why so many respondents to the national census identify as Christian but so few regularly attend church, approaching the concept of 'belief' away from the usual dichotomies of religious and secular, belief and non-belief.

Day, A., Lee, L., 'Making sense of surveys and censuses: Issues in religious self-identification', *Religion* (2014) 44, 4, (pp. 345-356) Discusses why religious identification is so much higher in Census responses than other nationally representative surveys such as the BSA.

Field, C., *Hereafter Report* (2011) <http://www.brin.ac.uk/hereafter-report/> On the release of a supernatural thriller to British cinemas, a survey explored Brits' spiritual beliefs. Field compiles the main findings, providing links to *British Religion In Numbers* polls exploring similar topics. Despite declining religious affiliation and attendance, many Brits still appear to believe in the supernatural.

Field, C., *Religion in Great Britain, 1939-99: A Compendium of Gallup Poll Data* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 2015) Opinion poll data pertaining to religious and nonreligious beliefs in Britain, collected over 60 years, compiled to facilitate the spotting of emerging trends and comparison of results across years.

Hemming, P. J., 'Childhood, youth and non-religion: Towards a social research agenda', *Social Compass* (2017) 64, 1, (pp. 113-129) Explores how non-religion has risen so dramatically by focusing on children and young people – figures show that in Britain, at least, 'Nones' tend to be younger than 'Somes'. Lays out some directions for future research in this area.

Lee, L., 'Secular or nonreligious? Investigating and interpreting generic 'not religious' categories and populations', *Religion* (2014) 44, 3, (pp. 466-482) Qualitative research based on UK Nones to explore what they mean when they tick the 'non-religious' box in surveys.

Lee, L., *Recognizing the non-religious: reimagining the secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) Scrutinises the popular understanding of 'secularity' and 'non-religion',

and the relationship between the two in light of recent research. Lee defines vocabulary to be used in discussing the two, explores explanations regarding their growth in popularity, and investigates how they manifest in various elements of public and private life.

McLeod, H., *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) The author explores key moments from the 1960s such as Vatican II and Martin Luther King, and how they were experienced in England. This decade is often credited with sparking the secularisation that characterises the latter part of the twentieth century, and here McLeod explains how.

Office for National Statistics, *Religion in England and Wales 2011* (2012) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religioninenglandandwales2011/2012-12-11> Exploration of findings pertaining to religion and nonreligion from the latest national census. Clear evidence that nonreligion is rising and religion declining throughout Britain, though methodological limitations lead them to generally overreport the percentage of Britain's religious population.

Scourfield, J., Taylor, C., Moore, G., Gilliat-Ray, S., 'The Intergenerational Transmission of Islam in England and Wales: Evidence from the Citizenship Survey', *Sociology* (2012) 46, 1, (pp. 91-108) Explores how worldviews are passed down from one generation to the next in the context of secularization. This project focuses on Muslim families in Britain but also explores Christian and non-religious families too; their methods of and success in belief transmission.

Spencer, N., Dixon, N., *Who wants a Christian coronation?* (London: Theos, 2015) Quantitative research exploring Britons' attitudes towards the inclusion of religion – specifically Christianity – in a future British coronation ceremony. Interestingly, the figures suggest that most Britons prefer the idea of continuing explicitly Christian traditions rather than creating a new multi-faith or non-religious ceremony.

Strhan, A., Shillitoe, R., 'The Stickiness of Non-Religion?: Intergenerational Transmission and the Formation of Non-Religious Identities in Childhood', *Sociology* (2019) 33, 1, (pp. 1-17) Draws on ethnographic data to shed light on how, when, where and with whom children learn to be non-religious, taking into account the influence of the family, the school, and the child's own personal reflections.

Theos, *The Spirit of Things Unseen: belief in post-religious Britain* (London: Theos, 2013) Presents evidence that despite religious identification declining throughout modern Britain, many still hold spiritual beliefs and participate in spiritual practices.

Voas, D., Bruce, S., 'Religion: Identity, behaviour and belief over two decades' *British Social Attitudes 36*, ed. by John Curtice, Elizabeth Clery, Jane Perry, Miranda Phillips and Nilufer Rahim (London: The National Centre for Social Research, 2019) Discusses religious change that has occurred in Britain over the last two decades,

informed by the most recent BSA data, with particular emphasis on the rising popularity of nonreligion and what this means.

- Voas, D., Bruce, S., 'Research note: The 2001 census and Christian identification in Britain', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2004) 19, 1, (pp. 23-28)** Explores high levels of Christian identification in the 2001 national census despite high levels of nonreligion evidenced elsewhere. Links Christian affiliation with anxiety about national identity, not with the religion's lingering importance in modern Britain.
- Voas, D., Crockett, A., 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging', *Sociology* (2005) 39, 1, (pp. 11-28)** Challenges Davie's 'Believing Without Belonging' theory for explaining declining church attendance in Britain, arguing that belief has declined at the same rate as affiliation and attendance, concluding that decline is generational and reliant on the extent to which parents transmit religion to their children.
- Voas, D., McAndrew, S., 'Three Puzzles of Non-religion in Britain', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2012) 27, 1, (pp. 29-48)** Explores gender, geographical and educational differences in Britons identifying as religious and non-religious.
- Voas, D., Storm, I., 'The Intergenerational Transmission of Churchgoing in England and Australia', *Review of Religious Research* (2012) 53, 4, (pp.337-395)** Explores the impact of parental and grandparental influence on the beliefs of younger generations. Though primarily talking about religiosity and churchgoing, the findings are also significant for understanding how young nones come into existence.
- Voas, D., 'The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe', *European Sociological Review* (2009) 25, 2, (pp. 155-168)** Voas investigates the 'fuzzy' European majority who are neither regular churchgoers nor avowed atheists on the basis of European Social Survey results. It places UK-specific statistics in their European context, allowing comparison between countries.
- Woodhead, L. and Catto, R., ed., *Religion and change in modern Britain* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012)** The most up to date anthology of research findings exploring the religious landscape in contemporary Britain, and how it developed into what it is today.
- Woodhead, L., 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority', *Journal of the British Academy* (2016) 4, (pp. 245-261)** Presentation of new evidence that nonreligious identification is rivalling Christian identification in modern Britain, and swiftly becoming the new cultural norm.
- Woodhead, L., 'The rise of "No Religion": Towards an Explanation', *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*, (2017) 78, 3, (pp. 247-262)** A lecture given in 2016 exploring the nature of rising nonreligion in Britain and reasons for it.