

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE NON-RELIGIOUS? HOW MANY ARE HUMANISTS?

ACCORDING TO THE BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES SURVEY (BSAS) OVER HALF THE POPULATION OF THE UK ARE NON-RELIGIOUS (52% IN 2018)¹. THIS FIGURE HAS GROWN STEADILY OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS.

The BSAS also reveals significant diversity between age groups, with a greater proportion of young people describing themselves as non-religious (64% of those aged 18-24 years). This might lead some people to the conclusion that people become more religious as they get older, but other research does not appear to show that. For every person brought up in a non-religious household who becomes religious, 19 people travel in the opposite direction². Each generation is becoming less religious than the one before.

In the UK between 1983 and 2018:

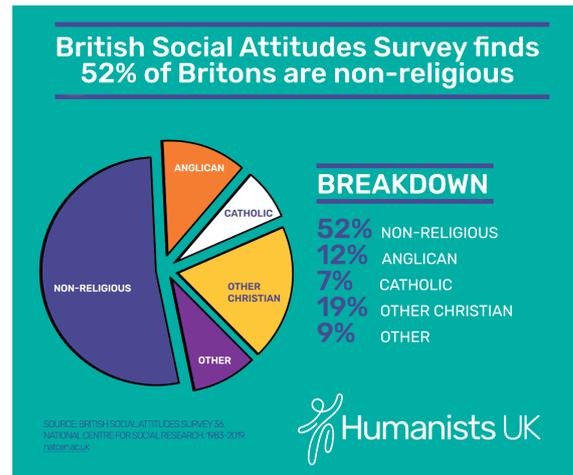
- The number of people saying they belong to no religion has risen from 31% to 52%.
- The number of people who describe themselves as Church of England has fallen from 40% to 12% (non-denominational Christianity has risen from 3% to 13%).
- The number of people saying they belong to non-Christian religions has risen from 2% to 9%.

Fig. 3.5: Nonversion ratio



¹ British Social Attitudes Survey, NatCen (2018); www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1_bsa36_religion.pdf

² The no-religion population of Britain, St Mary's University (2017); www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2017-may-no-religion-report.pdf



HOW MIGHT WE EXPLAIN THIS SHIFT?

Richy Thompson, Director of Public Affairs and Policy at Humanists UK, describes three possible explanations for the drift away from religious identification:

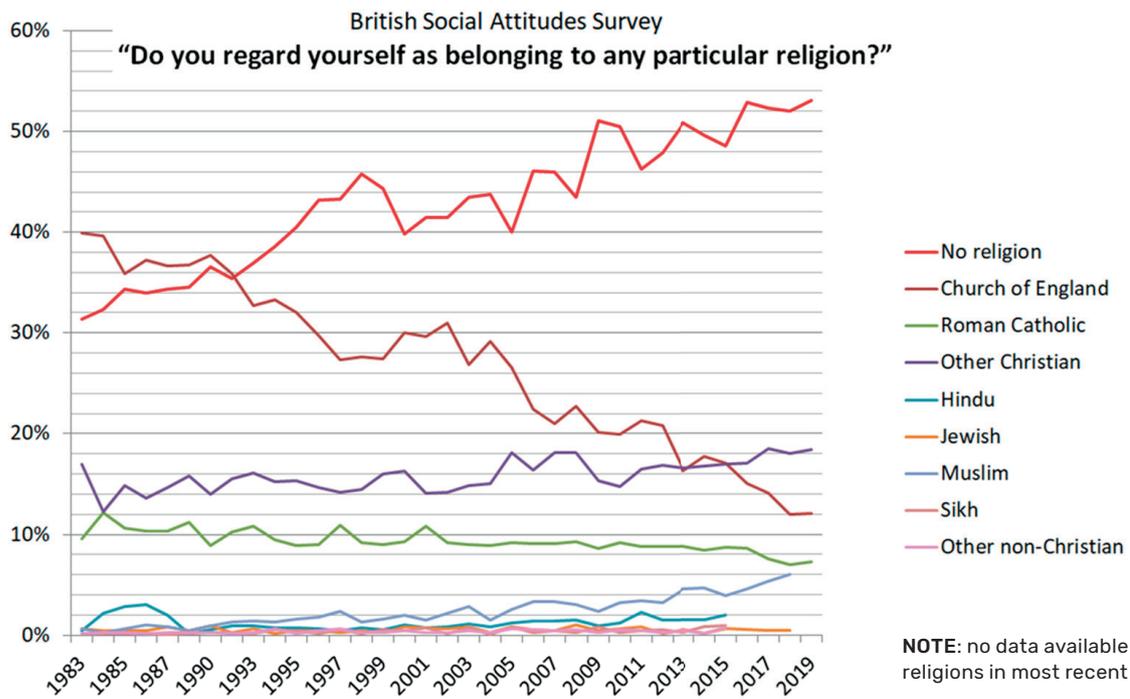
1. Science has left a smaller space for religious explanations of how we came to be.
2. Many religious groups today are out of step with the public's positions on issues such as abortion, assisted dying, and LGBT rights.
3. The welfare state has taken over many of the community and support needs that religious groups historically used to provide.

Another potential explanation is that today it has become much more acceptable to describe oneself as non-religious. Thirty years ago some people may have ticked the 'Church of England' box (even if they did not believe in god or never went to church) perhaps because of a sense of cultural or national identity. Today people feel much more comfortable identifying as 'non-religious'.



QUESTION:

- What might the future landscape of religion and belief in the UK look like?



SECULARISATION

The process where a society becomes less religious is called **secularisation**. It can refer to individuals becoming less likely to hold religious beliefs, follow religious guidance, or carry out religious practices. But it can also refer to a society becoming less influenced by one particular religion – the bonds between that religion and the country’s laws and culture begin to disappear. This could be caused by a population becoming less religious, but it could also be caused by the public becoming more religiously diverse. Both are happening in the UK, and many humanists believe that the state needs to adapt to become better able to deal with the changes taking place.

TOLERANCE

We have become more tolerant of each other over time. In 2018, people were asked ‘Would you accept a person from a different religion or with a very different religious view from yours marrying a relative of yours?’. 39% said definitely yes, and 82% said definitely or probably. This has risen from 24% and 74% ten years earlier³.

³ British Social Attitudes Survey, NatCen (2018): www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1_bsa36_religion.pdf

The **secularisation thesis** is the claim that as societies become more modern, secularisation is inevitable. The argument was popular in the second half of the 20th century, but today some people think the picture is more complicated. Globally, the number of religious people is projected to grow⁴ as a share of the population between now and 2050. However, it is worth noting that a large part of this growth in religious identity will be located in places with a poor record on freedom of religion or belief, where education about alternative worldviews is limited, and where one can be punished for declaring oneself non-religious. These parts of the world are those currently seeing the biggest rise in population. Secularisation continues to be the trend across the Western world, and this trend is predicted to continue.

“There is now no nation in the Western world, including former Eastern Europe and Central and South America, in which measures of religiosity per capita are not in decline.”

CALLUM BROWN, *Becoming Atheist*

With greater freedom of belief and freedom to be open about your beliefs, would we see movement towards a less religious world?

⁴ Pew Research Center(2017): www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/

THE THREE 'B'S

People who describe themselves as non-religious are not all the same. Some may even hold religious beliefs (such as believing in a god or an afterlife). However, most don't. It's important to recognise that there is also diversity within those who identify as religious (some don't believe in a god or an afterlife).

When thinking about religion it's often helpful to think separately about the three 'B's:

- People can feel that they **belong**: they identify with a particular religion (perhaps because they were born in a particular country or because of their family history).
- People can share **beliefs** associated with a particular religion (e.g. they believe in a god).
- People can carry out certain **behaviours** or practices associated with a religion (e.g. they attend a mosque or follow particular rituals at Hanukkah).

It is possible to be religious in one of these ways but not in another. Labels and how people identify themselves can sometimes hide a lot about people's beliefs.

“I am an atheist, and this confuses some people... For me, Jewishness, and I would say for an awful lot of Jews, is nothing to do with believing in God... For me, Jew is an identity. It's an ethnic and cultural identity, which I feel very strongly... My Jewish identity is to do with food, and comedy, and family, and literature, and a way of being, and, incredibly importantly, anti semitism.”

DAVID BADDIEL,
Patron of Humanists UK



Credit: Amnesty International

The BSAS revealed that over 70% of those who describe themselves as 'non-religious' said they don't believe in a god or don't know whether there is a god or not. So did 10-20% of those who identify as 'religious' (and others said they only believe some of the time).

HOW MANY HUMANISTS ARE THERE?

Around 5% of the UK population self-identify as humanist⁵. However, many more hold humanist beliefs when asked whether they believe in a god, how they make ethical decisions, and whether they look to science or religion to understand the universe around them (surveys show this could be around 20% of the population).

“Around a quarter of the UK population have a worldview that is mainly humanist, and... humanism likely plays a role in the beliefs and outlooks of others too.”

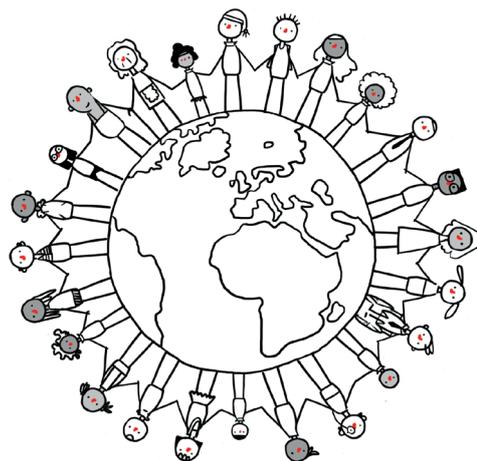
DR LOIS LEE, University of Kent,
Understanding Unbelief programme

Many of those who hold humanist beliefs and values don't use the word 'humanist' to describe themselves because they are unaware of the label or what it means. When the meaning of the label is described to them, many, but not all, are happy to apply the label to themselves.



QUESTION:

- Is it possible to be a humanist and not know it?



Humanists can be found all over the world – in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Humanists International has member organisations in over 60 countries.

⁵ YouGov (2017): [humanism.org.uk/2017/06/15/new-poll-shows-one-in-five-are-humanists-and-a-third-hold-humanist-beliefs](https://www.humanism.org.uk/2017/06/15/new-poll-shows-one-in-five-are-humanists-and-a-third-hold-humanist-beliefs)