Counting Religion in Britain

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OPINION POLLS

Coronavirus chronicles: multinational study of the pandemic's impact on religious faith

A 13-nation study by YouGov, undertaken online on 2–11 November 2020, has revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a negligible net religious effect in the UK, where 2,078 adults were interviewed. Asked what changes to their religious faith had occurred as a result of coronavirus, 52% of UK respondents said they had no religious faith at all during the pandemic (the largest number of any of the surveyed countries), while 36% reported no impact on their faith. The 5% who had found faith or seen it strengthened during the crisis were almost offset by the 4% who had either lost their faith entirely or seen it strained. Not much sign of religious revival here, then, unlike in some other nations (generally with substantial Catholic or Muslim populations) where a significant increase in the proportion finding faith or experiencing it strengthened was recorded: 11% in Poland, 13% in Italy, 13% in Australia, 13% in Hong Kong, 19% in the USA, 26% in Singapore, 51% in Indonesia, and 52% in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Loss or weakening of faith was greatest in Indonesia (11%), Singapore (12%), and the UAE (16%). Topline data only are accessible via the blog at:

 $\frac{https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/12/10/impact-coronavirus-personal-lives}{}$

YouGov study on Christianity in Britain: a mid-pandemic snapshot

In the UK, YouGov ended the year by releasing (on 29 December) the results of a substantial study of public attitudes to Christianity, with particular reference to the celebration of Christmas and Easter, for which 2,169 adults aged 16 and over were interviewed online on 27–30 November 2020. Full data tables for this research can be found at:

https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/2isqp28jmv/YouGov%20-%20Christianity%20study.pdf

A series of six blogs about the poll by YouGov's Milan Dinic are also available at:

- https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2020/12/29/yougov-study-christianity-britain
- https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2020/12/29/what-do-christmas-and-easter-mean-britain
- https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2020/12/29/how-britons-celebrate-christmas-and-easter
- https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2020/12/29/jesus-his-birth-and-resurrection-fact-or-fiction
- https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2020/12/29/how-religious-are-british-people

 https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2020/12/29/britain-stillchristian-country-say-most-britons

Although a majority (56%) of the sample still regarded the UK as a Christian country, only 34% professed to be Christians themselves, with 55% not belonging to any religion. Just 27% claimed to believe in a god (with a further 16% thinking there was a higher spiritual power), and no more than 28% accepted Jesus Christ as the Son of God (41% regarding him as merely an historical figure and 15% as a fictional character). Under one-quarter (23%) of respondents considered religion to be very important in their life, with 32% saying it was somewhat important and 42% unimportant. Most paid no attention at all to messages from the Pope (71%) or Archbishop of Canterbury (66%).

Turning to Christmas, 83% agreed that it was celebrated more as a secular event nowadays, ten times the number (8%) who said it was observed more as a religious event. A similar proportion (82%) sensed the religious aspects of observing Christmas in Britain were declining significantly (48%) or somewhat (34%), but only 34% sought a greater emphasis on the religious side of the festival. Although Christmas was personally important to 86% of interviewees, 61% of them celebrated it in an entirely secular way against 4% doing so in an entirely religious way, with 31% combining religious and secular approaches. One-fifth claimed usually to go to church over Christmas, while 14% prayed and 16% reflected on the birth of Christ. Almost everybody (95%) considered themselves very or somewhat familiar with the Christmas story, but the majority (52%) doubted the historical accuracy of the Bible's account of it, just 6% declaring it completely accurate and a further 25% somewhat accurate. Notwithstanding, 78% approved of schools organizing nativity plays.

Relative to Christmas (38%), Easter (41%) was judged marginally the more important event in the Christian calendar. Even so, 59% felt that Easter was celebrated more as a secular festival in contemporary Britain (29% describing it as more of a religious event), 72% perceiving the religious element of marking Easter to be in decline, and only 31% wishing to see greater emphasis placed upon it. At the personal level, Easter was celebrated by 54% of YouGov's panellists (of whom 56% did so in an entirely secular fashion) and regarded as important by 46%. Some familiarity with the Easter story was claimed by 93% of the whole sample, among whom usual Easter activities included churchgoing (14%), prayer (12%), and reflecting on the meaning of Easter (19%).

On 28 December 2020, the day before YouGov released all the foregoing data and reports, *The Times* published an article by Kaya Burgess, the newspaper's religious affairs correspondent, variously headlined 'Teenagers turn to God during pandemic' (online version) or 'Young becoming more religious as others lose faith' (one of the print versions). It concerned the extent to which, according to YouGov, Britons believed in a god or gods or some kind of higher spiritual power. It combined the answers to the relevant question in the Christianity study, above, with recent tracker statistics from YouGov, which BRIN has been able to extend even further back, to 2012 (see Table 1, below). The article suggested that members of Gen Z are now more likely to believe in God than millennials, the figure for Gen Z believers having risen from 21% in January-February to 23% in November 2020, and no fewer than three academic sociologists of religion were lined up (and quoted) to help explain why 'the trend for younger people being less religious is changing'. In fact, too much significance should not be read into a variation from one data point to the next among a sub-sample numbering just a few hundred, especially when the age bands were not consistent. More noteworthy, perhaps, is the continued overall slide in the proportion believing in some kind of life-force at all, down from 58% in

2012 (and 49% on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic) to 43% today, a further indication that coronavirus is not turning the nation to religion. Online subscribers to *The Times* can read the coverage at:

https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/teenagers-turn-to-god-during-pandemic-clndd3b5t

Table 1: Belief in a god or spiritual greater power, Great Britain, 2012–20 (% across)

Year	N =	Believe there is a god	Believe there is some sort of spiritual greater power	Believe neither in a god nor in a spiritual greater power	Don't know
2012, Nov	1,642	37	21	29	13
2013, Mar	1,918	38	21	30	11
2015, Feb	1,552	32	20	33	14
2015, Apr	1,906	35	20	34	11
2016, Dec	1,595	28	20	38	14
2017, Dec	1,682	29	23	36	12
2018, Dec	1,660	29	24	33	14
2019, Aug	1,931	26	22	41	11
2020, Jan-Feb	1,958	28	21	40	11
2020, Aug	1,965	28	23	38	11
2020, Nov	2,169	27	16	41	14

Festive traditions: planned attendance at a Christmas religious service in 2020

Asked about their planned activities during the festive period in 2020, 71% of the 2,199 Britons interviewed online by YouGov on 8–9 December said they did not normally attend a Christmas religious service and had no plans to do so in 2020 either. Of the remainder, 6% claimed they normally attended a Christmas service and intended to do so in 2020, 16% normally attended such a service but would not be doing so in 2020, 2% did not normally attend but expected to do so in 2020, with 4% undecided. Therefore, under pandemic conditions, 8% of the population aspired to worship in person at Christmas. In reality, the number must have been very much less than this, given the even tighter restrictions imposed by all four UK governments in the immediate run-up to Christmas, and after fieldwork for this poll, in response to the worsening Covid-19 situation. Full data tables are available at:

https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/3b3zk4jn01/YouGov%20Christmas%20traditions.pdf

Coronavirus chronicles: Bible sustains churchgoers in the UK and Republic of Ireland

More than three-fifths (63%) of regular (monthly or more) churchgoers in the UK and Republic of Ireland claim the Bible has been vital in helping them think about challenging situations in their lives since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the same proportion saying that it had helped them feel more encouraged and motivated throughout the crisis. This is according to an online survey conducted by Savanta ComRes on 9–12 October 2020 among 1,095 practising Christian adults and commissioned by WordGo, a new scripture app from the Bible Study Fellowship (BSF). Three-quarters (74%) of respondents also agreed the Bible was important in having a personal relationship with God. Unfortunately, Savanta ComRes has not yet posted data tables for the study to its website, nor has BSF made its press release available (although it appears to have been brief). The foregoing details have been extracted from secondary reporting by various online news sites.

Coronavirus chronicles: attitudes of religious communities to vaccines

The rapid development and regulatory approval of vaccines against Covid-19 for deployment in the UK has triggered a spate of polling about public attitudes towards vaccination to combat the virus. A recent study by Yonder (formerly Populus), for which 2,103 UK adults were interviewed online on 16-17 December 2020, included breaks of the results by the main faith groups. Several questions about vaccines were asked, of which only the answers to willingness to take a vaccine are shown in Table 2 (excluding individuals who preferred not to give their religion). It will be seen that Christians are disproportionately anxious to receive vaccination, probably because they are concentrated in age cohorts most at risk from Covid-19. On the other hand, religious nones, who have a youthful profile, and are often perceived as less vulnerable to the virus (at least in terms of mortality), are no less desirous than Britons overall of taking a vaccine, even though they are the most avid users of social media where anti-vaxxer conspiracy theories proliferate. Non-Christians record the highest number (17%) of persons wishing to avoid vaccination, with only a plurality (41%) positively wanting it; if a genuine reflection of the situation (the sub-sample is relatively small), it would be a worrying trend, not least considering the higher risk to which BAME communities are known to be exposed. For more information, see tables 302-306 of the dataset at:

https://yonderconsulting.com/poll/covid-19-vaccine-recovery-survey/

Table 2: Willingness to take a vaccine against Covid-19, Great Britain, December 2020 (% down)

	All Britons	Christians	Non-Christians	No religion
Want to take a vaccine	57	62	41	56
Don't particularly want to but will if asked	21	20	28	21
Don't want to and will avoid	13	13	17	12
Uncertain	9	5	13	11

Pew Research Center's International Science Survey, 2019–20

The majority of adults in the UK (55%, ranging from 49% of Christians to 65% of the religiously unaffiliated) believe there is generally a conflict between science and religion, according to the Pew Research Center's 'International Science Survey, 2019-20', for which probability samples of 1,508 landline and mobile telephone users in the UK were successfully contacted by Langer Research Associates between 14 October and 2 December 2019. This proportion matched the worldwide (20-country) median of 53%. Two-fifths (41%) in the UK considered there was no such clash. However, in practice, only 30% of UK respondents (albeit 51% of Christians and 57% of religiously affiliated individuals for whom religion was very important in their lives) said their own religious beliefs conflicted often or sometimes with science, this rarely or never happening to 65% of the whole sample. When it came to evolution, 73% of all adults in the UK (rising to 81% of persons educated to a high level and 88% of the religiously unaffiliated, but falling to 55% in the case of Christians for whom religion was very important in their lives) agreed that humans and other living things had evolved over time, against 21% suggesting they had existed in their present form since the beginning of time. Moreover, 58% contended that scientific and religious explanations for the origins of life on earth cannot be compatible, whereas 36% judged that they could be. The study also covered attitudes to the appropriateness of scientific research on gene editing and animal cloning, which the religiously unattached favoured more than professing Christians. Pew's report, released on 10 December 2020, can be found at:

https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/12/10/biotechnology-research-viewed-with-caution-globally-but-most-support-gene-editing-for-babies-to-treat-disease/

Ipsos Global Advisor predictions for 2021: ghosts and aliens

An Ipsos Global Advisor survey, conducted online in 31 countries between 23 October and 6 November 2020, asked respondents (among them, 1,000 adults aged 16–74 in Britain) about their predictions for 2021, including the likelihood of discovering that ghosts really exist and of aliens visiting the earth. Only 9% of Britons thought it likely the existence of ghosts would be confirmed, four points below the 2018 figure and seven points less than the 2020 global mean, with 78% saying it was unlikely and 13% undecided. The same proportion in Britain considered it likely that aliens would visit the earth, three points fewer than in 2018 and also three points less than the world mean in 2020, with 82% deeming it unlikely and 9% uncertain. Topline data only are reported at:

https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/ipsos-mori-britons-predictions-for-2021

Perceptions of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia as problems in the UK

For the seventh consecutive month, the Savanta ComRes political tracker has asked its respondents whether they regarded anti-Semitism and Islamophobia as problems in the country. Online fieldwork was undertaken on 11–13 December 2020 among 2,026 UK adults, 49% of whom said that anti-Semitism was a problem and 54% Islamophobia (both figures unchanged since November), with, respectively, 14% and 20% thinking they were big problems. On the Labour Party's handling of the anti-Semitism issue since the December 2019 general election, just 25% of the sample judged it had performed well and 37% badly, with 38% neutral or undecided. Data tables are available at:

https://comresglobal.com/polls/savanta-comres-political-tracker-december-2020/

FAITH ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Fourth edition published of Peter Brierley's triennial UK Church Statistics

One of the religious statistical highlights of the year will undoubtedly prove to be the publication in November of Peter Brierley's *UK Church Statistics 4*, 2021 Edition (Tonbridge: ADBC Publishers, 2020, 188 pp., ISBN: 978–0–9957646–4–4, £35 paperback, £30 e-book). This represents another herculean effort and hugely impressive achievement by an ecclesiastical statistician with a track record stretching back half a century. It is a handsome (if, in places, rather miniscule) compilation of tables (often heavily annotated) and figures in colour, interspersed with explainer and analytical articles, and rounded off with a detailed index (with over 2,000 entries). Copies can be ordered online at:

https://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/shop

For the most part, the work adheres to the arrangement and sources of information of earlier editions of this title, and of predecessor titles. At the book's core (sections 1–11) is a presentation of the results of a questionnaire sent in 2019 to all 228 Trinitarian denominations in the UK (non-Trinitarian and non-Christian bodies are excluded from scope), requesting their actual numbers of members, attendances, churches, and ministers for each of the four home nations for the years 2015–19, together with estimates of the same for 2020 and 2025. These were supplemented by Brierley's own estimates for any missing data (of which there must have

been a considerable amount). Statistics of members (sometimes, as with Roman Catholics, based on attendances), churches, and ministers are tabulated for each denomination separately but are also aggregated in various ways, particularly by nine broad denominational groupings. The introduction (section 0) provides an overview of the findings. In membership terms, the overall picture remains one of net decline, by 6.7% since 2015, according to tables 0.2.3, 0.2.5, and 1.1.1 (table 0.2.1 suggesting –6.2%), with growth in 113 denominations more than offset by decline in 89 others, a further 26 being static. Among the home nations, by far the biggest drop in membership was in Wales (–15.7%) and the smallest in Northern Ireland (–3.8%).

Section 12 offers an historical perspective on the data, not really seen in this depth since Brierley's *UK Christian Handbook, Religious Trends, No. 2, 2000/01 Millennium Edition* (1999). The section sets out, for the nine denominational groups and selected individual denominations within those groups, the number of members, churches, and ministers between 1900 and 2025, at quinquennial intervals to 1990 and annually thereafter to 2020. The statistics are drawn from Brierley's earlier publications, 'adjusted and revised as necessary by later figures' in ways that are not always adequately explained, and which sometimes seem at variance with scholarship on church history (which is not cited). Users should be wary of the potentially spurious accuracy pertaining to some of the estimated data. Moreover, as Brierley himself points out, all the 2020 figures were actually estimates given in 2019, before Covid-19 struck, which has had such a devastating impact on the institutional Church; as he says, 'when the pandemic is over, [they] may well prove very incorrect'. Projections for 2025 and beyond are doubtful for the same reason.

Section 13 of the book is devoted to UK church attendance since 1980, the quinquennial data mainly taken or extrapolated from the various home nation church censuses that Brierley has conducted, notably in England and Scotland. Section 14 concerns a range of UK social statistics, including time series of varying lengths for faith schools, GCSE and A Level Religious Studies examinations, baptisms, mode of solemnization of marriages, and the religion of prisoners. Section 15 focuses on international religious statistics, derived from the work of others. Section 16 reprints five essays previously published or distributed by Brierley, dealing with, respectively, coronavirus and the Church, the missing millennials, Gen Z, samesex changes, and the gender alarm in churchgoing.

Statistical profile of British evangelicalism in the early 2010s

Temple Tracts, Book 21, from the William Temple Foundation, is Greg Smith's 33-page *Trans-Atlantic Evangelicalism: Toxic, Fragmented, or Redeemable?* Notwithstanding a brief introduction reflecting on evangelicalism and the 2020 US election, this mainly (pp. 12–26) concerns research on British evangelical identity and attitudes, drawing especially upon the online surveys of a self-selecting panel of UK evangelicals that were conducted by Smith on behalf of the Evangelical Alliance between 2010 and 2016. The tract (which incorporates a link to a 43-page working paper presenting eight data tables, as well as links to further documents, relating to the surveys) can be downloaded from:

https://williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/temple-tracts/

Coronavirus chronicles: attendance at Mass by Roman Catholics during the pandemic

During the course of early December 2020, the *Catholic Herald* ran an online survey about Mass attendance by Catholics during the Covid-19 pandemic, receiving responses from 800 individuals who either read the magazine or followed it on social media. Of this self-selecting sample, 64% lived in the UK, 25% in the US, and 11% in other countries. The vast majority

(86%) of these Catholics claimed to have attended Mass in person at least once since the crisis began, with 15% attending daily, 44% weekly, and 26% less regularly. An even bigger proportion (91%) said they had participated in Mass virtually, either online or on television, during the pandemic. More than 70% planned to attend Mass in person on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, although the tightening of restrictions in all four nations of the UK in the runup to Christmas must have made that impossible for most, notwithstanding 52% objecting to governments imposing restrictions on places of worship. A blog about the survey is at:

https://catholicherald.co.uk/survey-70-of-catholics-plan-to-attend-in-person-christmas-mass/

Coronavirus chronicles: more evidence of disproportionate UK Jewish mortality

The European Jewish Demography Unit, hosted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR), has published an important 36-page report by Daniel Staetsky and Ari Paltiel on *Covid-19 Mortality and Jews: A Global Overview of the First Wave of the Coronavirus Pandemic, March to May 2020.* With regard to the UK experience of Covid-19, at least during the first wave, this confirms the disproportionately elevated mortality suffered by Jews, as already noted in several previous studies featured in *Counting Religion in Britain.* For example, using the excess deaths method and data gathered by the various Jewish burial societies, the authors calculate the ratio of Jewish observed to expected deaths between March and May 2020 as 2.0 in London and Scotland and 2.7 in Manchester (table A1, p. 34), while in and around London Jewish mortality was 3.7 times greater in April 2020 than during the same month in 2016–19 (figure 4, p. 18). Other countries covered are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, The Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States of America. The report is available at:

https://www.jpr.org.uk/publication?id=17693

The foregoing JPR report provided the springboard for Jonathan Boyd's latest monthly column in the *Jewish Chronicle* (25 December 2020, p. 38). In it, he suggested that the disproportionately high mortality from Covid-19 of the UK's Jewish community could be traced to the start of the first wave of the pandemic. He offered two principal explanations for transmission of and infection by the virus: a) one-quarter of UK Jews claimed to have travelled abroad during February or March, before lockdown; and b) two-fifths said they had been to a bar mitzvah, wedding, large communal gathering, or Purim celebration in those months. 'In short, we picked it up early – at least in part through widespread international travel – and then we shared it among ourselves doing what Jews love to do, even have to do, spending time together.' The column can be read at.

https://www.thejc.com/comment/columnists/our-way-of-life-put-us-in-danger-from-the-virus-1.510124

Meanwhile, the Board of Deputies of British Jews has continued to monitor the number of UK Jews who have died from Covid-19 and who subsequently received a Jewish burial. The most recent cumulative death toll figures are: 556 on 13 November, 579 on 4 December, 599 on 11 December, and 616 on 18 December 2020.

Coronavirus chronicles: study of the impact of Covid-19 on Jewish wealth and health

The Jewish press (*Jewish Chronicle*, *Jewish News*, and *Jewish Telegraph*) have recently reported some headline findings from a survey (whose methodology is unclear) undertaken by Work Avenue, the employment and business support charity, into the impact of Covid-19 on UK Jewish wealth and health. Replies were received from 500 Jewish employers and

employees, three-quarters of whom said their employment or business situation had been adversely affected by coronavirus, including 50% who considered they were financially worse off, 52% who had suffered work-related mental health issues, and 40% who had already retrained or were actively considering doing so. As many as 15% of the employees had been made redundant, with a further 6% losing their job through other circumstances, 7% having their hours reduced, and 6% taking a pay cut. One-fifth of the bosses stated their companies had lost clients and contracts, 3% had laid off staff, and 3% had ceased to trade. Half of respondents had received no government support during the crisis. No press release has appeared on Work Avenue's website as yet, but the *Jewish Chronicle*'s coverage of the research is available at:

https://www.thejc.com/community/community-news/revealed-the-devastating-impact-of-pandemic-on-uk-jews-health-and-wealth-1.509519

OFFICIAL AND QUASI-OFFICIAL STATISTICS

UK government diversity statistics, 2020

UK government diversity monitoring now routinely extends to religious profiles. Reports published during November and December 2020 comprise:

- Civil Service: Christian 49.8%, non-Christian 11.8%, no religion 38.4% https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/civil-service-statistics-2020
- Ministry of Defence (civilian personnel): Christian 61.0%, non-Christian 5.6%, no religion 33.4%
 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/mod-diversity-dashboard-2020
- Ministry of Defence (military personnel, regulars): Christian 64.0%, non-Christian 3.4%, no religion 32.6%
 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2020
- HM Prison and Probation Service (prisoners, England and Wales): Christian 46.8%, non-Christian 22.5%, no religion 30.6%
 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-offender-equalities-annual-report-2019-to-2020

ACADEMIC STUDIES

Coronavirus chronicles: BRIC-19 research project on digital congregations

A new research project has launched at Manchester Metropolitan University, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and with Joshua Edelman as principal investigator. Entitled 'Social Distance, Digital Congregation: British Ritual Innovation under Covid-19', it 'aims to document, analyse, and understand the new ways that religious communities are coming together, and to use those findings to help make religious communities stronger and more resilient for the future.' The focus of the study is on collective rituals and acts of worship

(whether held regularly or in connection with festivals or life-cycle events), and the impact of Covid-19 regulations on them, and both leaders of, and participants in, these rituals, from all faith and belief communities, are being invited to take an online survey to share their experience. A final report on the project is scheduled for July 2021. More information is available at:

https://bric19.mmu.ac.uk

Some recent articles in academic journals

Please note, in each instance access is dependent upon a personal or institutional subscription or is on a pay-per-view basis:

• Paul Tromp, Anna Pless, and Dick Houtman, "Believing without Belonging" in Twenty European Countries (1981–2008): De-Institutionalization of Christianity or Spiritualization of Religion?', Review of Religious Research, Vol. 62, No. 4, December 2020, pp. 509–31: stress test of Grace Davie's theory of 'believing without belonging' on the basis of longitudinal (four waves) and multinational data from the European Values Study, including for Great Britain, rejecting the argument for the deinstitutionalization of Christianity but validating a spiritualization of religion, accessible at:

https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13644-020-00432-z

- Leslie Francis, 'Churchgoing and Christian Ethics: An Empirical Study among 13- to 15-Year-Old Students in England and Wales', *Journal of Empirical Theology*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2020, pp. 197–219: investigation of the effect of churchgoing on sex- and substance-related values held by 23,714 students self-identifying as Christian or of no religion as part of the Young People's Values Survey during the 2010s, accessible at: https://brill.com/view/journals/jet/33/2/article-p197_3.xml
- Andrew Village, 'Psychological and Theological Predictors of Environmental Attitudes among a Sample of UK Churchgoers', *Journal of Empirical Theology*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2020, pp. 220–44: examination of the factors predicting concern for the environment, and willingness to make sacrifices to preserve it, among a sample of 825 churchgoers from a range of denominations in 2015–17, accessible at: https://brill.com/view/journals/jet/33/2/article-p220 4.xml