

Counting Religion in Britain

A Monthly Round-Up of New Statistical Sources

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OPINION POLLS

Coronavirus chronicles: multinational Pew poll on Covid-19's impact on religious faith

The Pew Research Center has released further results from its summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey, which was undertaken by telephone in fourteen advanced economies, including in the UK on 10 June–28 July 2020 (where 1,003 adults aged 18 and over were interviewed by Gallup, just as the nation was emerging from its first coronavirus lockdown). Respondents were asked whether the Covid-19 pandemic had strengthened or weakened their own religious faith, to which 10% in the UK answered their faith had become stronger, 4% weaker, and 81% unchanged. The net strengthening of +6% in the UK was comparable with the 14-nation median (+7%) but notably lagged behind Spain (+11%), Canada (+11%), Italy (+12%), and the USA (+24%). When it came to perceptions of the religious faith of people overall, a similar proportion (+6%, against a global median of +7%) in the UK thought that there had been a net strengthening of religious faith during the pandemic, although 17% were unable to say. The survey also included a recurrent Pew question about the self-rated importance of religion in the lives of respondents. In the UK, 21% answered that religion was very important to them, 19% somewhat important, 22% not too important, and 36% not at all important; these figures were much the same as in 2019. Pew's 18-page report is available at:

<https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/27/more-americans-than-people-in-other-advanced-economies-say-covid-19-has-strengthened-religious-faith/>

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

For the eighth 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 15–17 January 2021 among 1,914 UK adults, 49% of whom said that anti-Semitism was a problem and 54% Islamophobia (both figures unchanged from November and December last), 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 24% of the sample judged it had performed well and 34% badly (against 25% and 37% in December 2020), with 42% neutral or undecided. Data tables are available at:

<https://comresglobal.com/polls/westminster-voting-intention-22-jan/>

Campaign against Antisemitism/King's College London *Anti-Semitism Barometer, 2020*

The Campaign against Antisemitism (CAA) has just published *Antisemitism Barometer, 2020*, the fourth in the series, albeit the underlying opinion research is now in its sixth year. The report, prepared in collaboration with King's College London, summarizes the topline findings

of online fieldwork which was carried out across Great Britain in 2020, comprising a YouGov cross-section of 1,853 adults on 16–17 December, and a survey of a self-selecting sample of 1,830 self-identifying Jews between 21 November and 22 December. The report is at:

<https://antisemitism.org/barometer/>

The YouGov study measured the public's endorsement of twelve anti-Semitic statements, six of a Judeophobic nature and six anti-Zionist. Although the results are given for each statement individually, they are also combined into a Generalized Antisemitism Scale, revealing that 45% of the population subscribed to at least one anti-Semitic opinion, with 12% affirming four or more and thus regarded by the CAA as having 'entrenched antisemitic views'. The most popular statement, agreed with by 23%, was 'Israel treats the Palestinians like the Nazis treated the Jews.' Among Jewish respondents, there was far more optimism about their future in the UK than in previous years, attributed by the CAA to the end of 'the Corbyn era' in British politics, albeit the number declining to display visible signs of their Jewish identity due to anti-Semitism was at a record high and confidence in the criminal justice system was relatively low.

Coronavirus chronicles: public attitudes to early medical abortion at home in Scotland

The Scottish Government has recently conducted a public consultation on future arrangements for early medical abortion at home in Scotland. These arrangements were put in place in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Scottish Government is now considering whether they should be made permanent. They permit eligible women to take both pills required for an early termination in their own homes after a telephone or video consultation with a doctor or nurse, and without the need for an in person appointment at a hospital or clinic. Scottish public opinion on the subject has now been tested by Savanta ComRes, on behalf of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC, which opposes the arrangements), by means of online interviews with 1,042 Scottish adults on 16–23 December 2020. SPUC's press release on the poll headlines the concerns voiced by 84% of Scots that what SPUC describes as 'DIY home abortion' could result in women being coerced by a partner or family member into having a termination, which SPUC regards as tantamount to domestic abuse. The proportion expressing concern was slightly higher among professing Christians (87%) than nones (81%), the only two religious groups with a viable sample size (regrettably, there was no differentiation of Christians, so it is impossible to isolate, say, Catholic attitudes). Other perceived risks and issues raised by early medical abortion at home were explored in the rest of the questionnaire, with similarly high levels of concern or agreement, with all data disaggregated by religious affiliation. Tables are available at:

<https://comresglobal.com/polls/spuc-scotland-polling/>

The onward march of religious nones: trend data from Populus/Yonder

BRIN's annual aggregation of data from a total of 176 polls conducted online by Populus (latterly rebranded as Yonder) between 2011 and 2020 highlights the rapid pace of change in religious affiliation in Britain. Asked 'Which of the following religious groups do you consider yourself to be a member of?', the Christian share has fallen by just over 10 points during the last decade and the proportion of religious nones has risen by more than 11 points; the latter group seems poised to overtake the former at some point during 2021. The detail is shown in table 1, below:

Table 1: Self-assigned religious affiliation, Great Britain, 2011–20 (percentages across)

Year	N =	Christian	Muslim	Other non-Christian	No religion	Prefer not to say
2011	44,551	56.1	2.0	5.3	34.1	2.5
2012	68,486	55.4	2.0	5.0	35.4	2.2
2013	80,302	54.7	2.6	4.7	35.7	2.3
2014	147,142	53.2	2.3	4.5	37.7	2.2
2015	67,698	52.0	2.3	4.3	39.1	2.2
2016	52,092	51.8	2.4	3.8	40.0	2.0
2017	64,725	51.3	2.4	3.7	40.9	1.7
2018	57,956	48.8	2.6	3.6	43.0	2.0
2019	39,771	46.8	2.6	3.7	44.7	2.2
2020	25,766	45.9	2.9	3.9	45.2	2.0

Source: Populus/Yonder.

FAITH ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Coronavirus chronicles: Religion Media Centre briefing on faith in lockdown

‘The coronavirus pandemic and lockdowns could see increasing numbers of more nominal religious believers abandon their faith.’ That was the view of experts (among them BRIN’s David Voas) and faith leaders taking part in a recent Religion Media Centre (RMC) Zoom panel discussion on the impact of Covid-19 on religious attendance and affiliation in Britain. Although no new research was unveiled, current knowledge suggested that the series of lockdowns and restrictions during the pandemic might well be sufficient to break the habit of religious practice among the more cultural followers of some faiths. Voas added that the evidence of history provided little support for the notion that times of national crisis prompted a resurgence of interest in religion. A report of the briefing can be found at:

<https://www.religionmediacentre.org.uk/news/locked-down-lost-faith-non-attendance-is-weakening-connection/>

A video recording is also available on the RMC’s YouTube channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnqKfgxyO-M>

Coronavirus chronicles: Peter Brierley’s estimate of churchgoing after the pandemic

In the latest issue (no. 73, February 2021, pp. 1–2) of *FutureFirst*, the bimonthly newsletter of Brierley Consultancy, Peter Brierley makes some fascinating (if, in his own words, ‘probably futile’ and ‘totally speculative’) calculations about the likely long-term effect of Covid-19 on churchgoing in England. Taking account of coronavirus deaths, reluctance to return to in-person worship (especially given the much greater availability and acceptability of online services), and conversions, Brierley forecasts a net decline in physical attendance of 14% on pre-Covid levels (from 4.9% to 4.2% of the population), which seems remarkably optimistic. To read his assumptions and workings in full, contact Brierley for a copy of this issue of *FutureFirst* (or request a free subscription) at:

peter@brierleyres.com

In this connection, it is also worth noting a report in the *Sunday Times* on 31 January 2021 that ‘The damage inflicted on the Church of England by the pandemic is revealed in a leaked internal document which warns up to 20 per cent of its regular worshippers may never return.’

Coronavirus chronicles: anticipating a religious revival?

According to his website, ‘Nigel Paterson has had such memorable brushes with moves of the Holy Spirit that he set himself the task back in 2010 to put together a book on how God has broken into the UK in the past. Lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 provided the opportunity in which to write a brief and readable version of the narrative.’ The end result, released last autumn, is his *Change of the Tide: Revivals in the UK* (Southampton: Regeneration Publications, 2020, 240 pp., ISBN: 978–1–8382660–0–4, paperback, £10 including postage from Amazon). This offers an overview of revivals, both national and regional, from the Reformation to the present day, with occasional glimpses of statistics to measure their scale and impact but with little apparent recourse to the extensive scholarly literature on historical UK revivals.

Paterson’s penultimate chapter (pp. 197–217) is devoted to the twenty-first century and the coronavirus pandemic. This outlines ‘some remarkable works of God’ that have already taken place, such as 24-7 Prayer, Soul Survivor, Christians Against Poverty, the food banks movement, Street Pastors, and Healing on the Streets; and mentions some recent and current champions of revival, such as Terry Virgo, Nicky Gumbel, Michael Green, Brian Edwards, Tony Cauchi, and Michael Marcel. It also summarizes ‘the state of the nation in figures’, which is ‘a mixture of good news and bad news from a Christian standpoint’; and locates ‘the coronavirus pandemic in spiritual perspective’. Although Paterson contends that ‘comparable traumatic occasions in UK history’ have helped to turn people towards God, he regrets that ‘church leaders of any persuasion did not succeed more than they did in capturing the imagination and attention of the public during the lockdown. Perhaps that could be put down to the rest of us not praying hard enough for such a great breakthrough to occur.’ The chapter closes with a series of past prophecies about coming revival and ends with a prayer that they be turned into reality in our day. Nowhere in this chapter does Paterson claim that Covid-19 is actually ushering in religious revival in the UK.

Coronavirus chronicles: more findings from ‘Coronavirus, Church, and You’ survey

A further tranche of findings from last summer’s ‘Coronavirus, Church, and You’ survey, completed online by a self-selecting sample, was published by Andrew Village and Leslie Francis in the *Church Times* for 1 January 2021 (p. 11). The replies of 231 ministry-active retired clergy in the Church of England were compared with those of 748 full-time stipendiary clergy, and four conclusions were reached about their similarities and differences. The article (‘Different Angle on the Pandemic’) is available at:

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/1-january/comment/opinion/different-angle-on-the-pandemic>

In the *Church Times* for 22 January 2021 (p. 2), and with a commendation from the Bishop of Manchester, Village and Francis launched a second online survey, ‘Covid-19 and Church-21’, to gauge the opinions of clergy and laity about life under the current lockdown and the future shape of the Church. The questionnaire for this (no cut-off date for self-completion is given) can be found at:

https://yorks.je.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0H78H2aNPJ4ABj7

Coronavirus chronicles: United Christian Broadcasters survey of faith during lockdown

United Christian Broadcasters (UCB) UK have published a report on ‘Faith during Lockdown’, based upon a survey devised and analysed by an independent researcher and conducted online during September 2020. The questionnaire was promoted on UCB Radio, on social media, and in UCB’s emails, and they received 1,488 replies, of which 1,059 were fully completed. Of these self-selecting respondents, who may or may not have been representative of UCB’s audience, 95% lived in the UK and 82% were weekly churchgoers before the pandemic. The majority (55%) claimed their faith had grown stronger during the crisis, with 47% praying more, 36% reading the Bible more, and 39% enabled by online services to ‘attend’ church more frequently. Asked about sources of help throughout lockdown, 62% said they had been comforted by UCB Radio, including 54% of the non-regular churchgoers in the sample. The report can be viewed at:

<https://www.ucb.co.uk/lockdown>

Youthscape’s latest research report on Christian youth ministry

The Youthscape Centre for Research has recently published Phoebe Hill’s *Theological Reflection in Youth Ministry*, featuring a literature review and the results of an online survey of 242 youth workers (153 of whom were employees and 97 volunteers) and focus groups attended by 11 youth workers. Hill paints ‘a cautiously optimistic picture’ of theological reflection in youth ministry. The full report is available as a downloadable PDF for £5 at:

<https://www.youthscape.co.uk/store/product/theological-reflection>

A summary of the findings can be read for free at:

<https://www.youthscape.co.uk/research/theological-reflection>

Coronavirus chronicles: the Jewish experience of Covid-19

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) has published the fourth of its reports on the impact of Covid-19 on the UK’s Jewish community, derived from an online survey of a self-selecting sample of 6,984 Jews conducted on 9–31 July 2020. Written by David Graham, Jonathan Boyd, and Carli Lessof, this is the 22-page *Jewish Community Income: How is it Being Affected by the Pandemic?* The analysis focuses on three types of communal income stream: Jewish charitable giving, synagogue membership fees, and the voluntary contribution parents pay to Jewish schools for their children’s Jewish education. The authors’ summative assessment is that, five months into the pandemic, and based on respondents’ anticipated future payment behaviour, ‘the overall impact on Britain’s Jewish community income was expected to be modest and manageable in the short to medium-term’. The report is available at:

<https://www.jpr.org.uk/publication?id=17783>

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: 616 on 18 December, 630 on 25 December 2020, 648 on 1 January, 691 on 8 January, 740 on 15 January, and 783 on 22 January 2021.

Coronavirus chronicles: survey of impact of Covid-19 restrictions on British mosques

The Muslim Council of Britain, the Muslim Council of Wales, and the Muslim Council of Scotland have jointly launched an online survey to assess the spiritual and financial impact of Covid-19 restrictions on mosques in Britain. The research is being led and hosted by Cardiff University, and the questionnaire (which can be completed anonymously) can be seen at:

<https://cardiff.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/covid-impact-mosque>

OFFICIAL AND QUASI-OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Profiling of voters by religion: a test case for the Information Commissioner's Office

The mainstream press on 27 January 2021 was full of articles with headlines such as ‘Tories Bought Voters’ Race Data “Illegally”’ (*The Times*). The story concerned the purchase, from a third party in advance of the December 2019 general election, of personal information on the ethnicity and religion, as estimated on the basis of their first and last names, of ten million voters. The data acquisition was one aspect of a critical audit report by the Information Commissioner's Office on 11 November 2020 and also the subject of a lively exchange between John Nicolson MP (SNP) and Elizabeth Denham (the Information Commissioner) on 26 January 2021, at a hearing of the Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee's Subcommittee on Online Harms and Disinformation. Under examination, Denham was eventually forced to concede that there was no acceptable legal basis for collecting and processing such personal information (in other words, it was illegal, notwithstanding claims to the contrary made by John Whittingdale MP, the data minister, in the House of Commons). She confirmed that ‘Religion and ethnicity are both, like health information, special category data that requires a higher standard for a legal basis to collect.’ She added that the Conservative Party had since deleted the data, on the recommendation of the Information Commissioner's Office. The exchange can be read at QQ.300–12 in the minutes of the hearing at:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1586/pdf/>

NEW DATASETS

UK Data Service, SN 8728: Scottish Election Study, 2016

The Scottish Election Study, 2016 was undertaken, by a consortium of the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Essex and with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, to investigate Scottish political opinion around the Scottish Parliamentary election held on 5 May 2016. Fieldwork was conducted online by YouGov, with a sample of voting age Scottish residents, in two phases, pre-election (between 15 April and 4 May, N = 4,074) and post-election (13 May to 8 June, N = 3,539), with the same respondents contacted in each case. Background variables included religious affiliation and frequency of religious attendance, which can be used to determine the religious correlates of the political attitudes and behaviour of the Scottish electorate in 2016. A catalogue entry for the dataset is available at:

<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=8728#!/details>

British Election Study, 2019–23: 2019 Post-Election Random Probability Survey

The 2019–23 British Election Study (BES) team at the Universities of Manchester and Oxford have announced the availability of the dataset for the BES 2019 Post-Election Random Probability Survey. This was conducted between December 2019 and July 2020, initially by means of face-to-face interviews but, subsequent to the imposition of Covid-19 restrictions, through online and postal questionnaires. The total number of respondents was 3,946, and fieldwork was managed by Ipsos MORI and NatCen Social Research. Background variables again included religious affiliation and frequency of religious attendance, which can be used to determine the religious correlates of the political attitudes and behaviour of the British electorate in 2019. For further information, see the press release at:

<https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/2019-general-election/the-bes-post-election-random-probability-survey-v-1-0-0-release-note/#.YBLLW-j7Q2w>