

Counting Religion in Britain

A Monthly Round-Up of New Statistical Sources

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OPINION POLLS

Afterlife beliefs: multinational poll from Maru Public Opinion

Afterlife beliefs have been fairly regularly probed in British sample surveys, the first question on the subject being fielded by Gallup in 1939. Since 1970, belief in a life after death held reasonably steady, at between two-fifths and one-half, for a long time, but it seems to have declined to nearer one-third in studies throughout the 2010s. The latest evidence comes from a multinational poll conducted online by Maru Public Opinion among samples of adults in Canada, the USA, and Britain (n = 2,016) on 19–21 March 2021, and in collaboration with Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby. Six questions were asked about afterlife beliefs (the British toplines being shown in Table 1, below), together with contextual questions on prayer frequency and religious affiliation. It will be seen that around half (51%) of the British population believed that they would continue in some form after their death, compared with 55% in Canada and 68% in the USA, although no opportunity was given to them to define what precise forms that might take. Intriguingly, the proportion believing in a continued existence after death decreased with age, from 60% among the under-35s to 53% for persons aged 35–54 and 42% with those aged 55 and over, thereby (apparently) disproving the notion that belief strengthens as the reality of death draws closer. Some observers have attributed this pattern to the prevalence of afterlife elements in popular media and culture targeted at younger people. Minorities only subscribed to the other afterlife beliefs explored in Table 1, the smallest affirmative response (30%) being for the likelihood of seeing people again after they had died. A press release for the survey and full data tables for all three nations can be found at:

<https://www.marugroup.net/public-opinion-polls/canada/life-after-death>

Table 1: Afterlife beliefs, Great Britain, 2021 (% across)

| | Yes | No |
|--|-----|----|
| When people you know die, do you think you will see them again? | 30 | 70 |
| People who have died could be aware of what is taking place in our lives | 46 | 54 |
| Possible to communicate with people who are no longer alive | 40 | 60 |
| Felt you were in touch with someone who has died | 39 | 61 |
| Can converse with a specific person who is no longer alive | 35 | 65 |
| Will continue to exist in some form after you die | 51 | 49 |

Source: Maru Public Opinion.

Religion and funerals: SunLife's *The Cost of Dying 2021 Report*

As ever, SunLife's latest (annual since 2004) *Cost of Dying* report covers more than the purely financial issues but also teases out trends affecting what was once a dominant religious rite of passage. The evidence derives from interviews with 100 funeral directors across the UK between June and August 2020 and with 1,500 individuals who had been involved in organizing a funeral during the past four years, questioned in June-July 2020. Two themes

emerged, both highlighting the marginalization of religion. The first is the continuing growth in direct cremations, the less expensive arrangement whereby the deceased goes straight to the crematorium, and without any service taking place beforehand; these accounted for 14% of all funerals in 2019-20 but for 25% between February and July 2020 (the period largely covered by the first Covid-19 lockdown and associated restrictions), notwithstanding 41% of people still being unaware of the possibility of direct cremations. Secondly, even where a service does take place, there is a lessening demand for a traditional religious funeral, with 63% of funeral directors noting they had declined, against 80% witnessing growth in celebration of life funerals. Among funeral organizers, only 33% described the tone of the funeral they had arranged as traditional, 50% emphasizing that it was a celebration of life and 43% an occasion for remembrance. Although some religious songs did still appear in the top ten funeral playlist in 2020 (*Amazing Grace* taking the number 1 spot, with *Abide with Me* in number 3 and *All Things Bright and Beautiful* in number 4), it was significant that, among funeral organizers, nine of the top ten songs wanted for their own funerals were secular. The report is available at:

<https://www.sunlife.co.uk/siteassets/documents/cost-of-dying/cost-of-dying-report-2021.pdf/>

First religion-related findings released from Fall 2020 Pew Global Attitudes Survey

The Pew Research Center has released some religion-related findings from the Fall 2020 wave of its Global Attitudes Survey, undertaken by telephone in the UK, France, Germany, and the USA. In the UK, interviews were conducted with 1,003 adults aged 18 and over by Gallup between 12 November and 16 December 2020. Asked about the relative importance of four attributes for being truly British, just 20% regarded being a Christian as very or somewhat important (a decline from 37% in Spring 2016), compared with 31% who cited being born in Britain, 70% sharing British customs and traditions, and 87% the ability to speak English. A majority (52%) claimed that being a Christian was not at all important for national identity, with a further 27% saying it was not very important. More than three-quarters (77%) perceived there was a lot or some discrimination against Muslims in Britain, 58% thinking the same was true of Jews and 31% of Christians. A report and toplines for the release are available at:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/05/05/views-about-national-identity-becoming-more-inclusive-in-us-western-europe/>

Religion and conversion therapy: YouGov poll of public attitudes

The Government has announced plans to legislate to ban so-called conversion therapy, the practice whereby people seek to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. In advance of a public consultation preparatory to legislation, YouGov tested the waters of popular opinion by interviewing 1,803 adult Britons online on 27–28 April 2021. A clear majority (64%) of respondents believed that conversion therapy should be banned, with those who were categorized as not religious being more in favour (71%) than the professedly religious (63%). Opinion was less clear-cut about the desirability of the Government establishing an advisory board on issues and policies concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals; this was supported by 44% of the non-religious and 38% of the religious (only two points more than opposed the suggestion). The data table is available at:

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/05/11/britons-want-see-lgbt-conversion-therapy-banned>

Religion and charitable giving: YouGov Profiles data, 2020–21

Practising religious people give more often to charity than the irreligious or non-practising, but they also prioritize different causes, according to YouGov Profiles data collected between April 2020 and April 2021. Asked about their likelihood to donate to a charity during the next three months, 76% of the practising religious indicated they were likely to do so, compared with 56% of the irreligious or non-practising. Four-fifths of this 20% differential was down to those saying they were ‘very likely’ to donate, among whom the proportion for the practising religious was double that of the other group. The top charitable cause for the practising religious to support was children and young people, which was only ranked third by the irreligious and non-practising. Poverty relief was a third priority for the practising religious but did not feature at all among the top five causes with the irreligious and non-practising. Similarly, the latter constituency attached importance to supporting environmental and conservation charities, which were absent from the equivalent list for the practising religious. A blog about the data can be found at:

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2021/05/05/religious-people-give-more-often-different-causes>

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

For the twelfth 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 14–16 May 2021 among 2,131 UK adults, 47% of whom said that anti-Semitism was a problem and 51% Islamophobia, with, respectively, 15% and 19% thinking they were big problems. On the Labour Party’s handling of the anti-Semitism issue since the December 2019 general election, just 23% of the sample judged it had performed well and 36% badly, with 41% neutral or undecided. Data tables are available at:

<https://comresglobal.com/polls/savanta-comres-political-tracker-may-2021-westminster-voting-intention/>

Coronavirus chronicles: Israel as a potential holiday destination

In anticipation of the Government’s announcement (on 7 May) of the names of countries that would be on the ‘green list’ for Britons to travel to after 17 May, without the need to quarantine on their return home, the *Jewish News* and BICOM have released the headline findings from a Savanta ComRes poll they commissioned among UK adults on 23–25 April 2021 (before the recent escalation of violence between Israel and Palestinians). The 2,144 online respondents were asked how well each of thirteen countries had handled the coronavirus pandemic to date. Israel, which even surpassed the UK with its vaccine rollout, was ranked third, after New Zealand and Australia. There was also a marginal increase, from 28% (in pre-pandemic days) to 29% today, in the public’s willingness to consider Israel as a potential holiday destination, a proportion that, but for the new Middle East conflict, might have increased now that Israel has been named as one of the small number of countries and territories on the ‘green list’. The *Jewish News* had a report on the survey in its issue of 6 May 2021 (pp. 10–11), which is available at:

<https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/poll-more-brits-will-now-consider-israel-for-a-holiday-than-before-pandemic/>

FAITH ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Peter Brierley's overview of numbers and trends in the UK church scene in 2021

In 'Numbers and Trends: Twenty-First Century Church Statistics', *Preach Magazine*, No. 27, 2021, pp. 27–31, Peter Brierley summarizes the membership fortunes of the major denominational groupings in the UK to the beginning of 2020 and adds some reflections on the post-Covid Church. The article is part of a special 'Changing Church' theme issue of *Preach Magazine*, copies of which can be purchased for £6.95 (print) or £4.00 (digital) at

<https://www.preachweb.org/issues>

Meanwhile, Brierley continues to write a monthly column on religious statistical subjects for the *Church of England Newspaper*. His most recent contribution is 'Churchgoing: Comparing City and Rural Attendance' (14 May 2021, p. 9).

Coronavirus chronicles: Church of Scotland's congregational statistics report for 2020

The Church of Scotland appears to be one of the first major religious bodies in Britain to publish its membership and other congregational statistics for 2020, in section 5 of the supplementary report of the General Assembly Trustees for May 2021. These data, based upon a 94% response from presbyteries, reveal how the Kirk's fortunes have changed during the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, to 31 December 2020. Table 2, below, summarizes the key performance indicators for 2019 and 2020, a comparison which makes grim reading. Unsurprisingly, there was no in-person attendance figure for 2020, arising from the prolonged closure of places of worship on account of Covid-19 restrictions and reduced capacity (through the need to observe social distancing) even when reopened. In 2019, in-person worshippers numbered 88,415, equivalent to 28% of membership. The (incomplete) estimate of online worshippers in 2020 was 94,674, with a further 17,012 persons engaging with alternative offline worship. The report is available at:

https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/80811/Assembly-Trustees-Supplementary-Report.pdf

Table 2: Church of Scotland congregational statistics, 2019 and 2020

| | 2019 | 2020 | % change |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Members | 312,206 | 297,435 | -4.7 |
| Admissions by profession | 963 | 190 | -80.3 |
| Admissions by certificate | 1,409 | 679 | -51.8 |
| Admissions by restoration | 1,214 | 769 | -36.7 |
| Removals by death | 9,655 | 9,833 | +1.8 |
| Removals by certificate | 1,906 | 1,110 | -41.8 |
| Other removals | 5,194 | 5,466 | +5.2 |
| Children under 17 | 47,393 | 33,868 | -28.5 |
| Children receiving communion | 3,272 | 2,214 | -32.3 |
| Adults not on communion roll | 15,474 | 13,186 | -14.8 |
| Baptisms | 2,356 | 459 | -80.5 |
| Weddings | 1,863 | 503 | -73.0 |
| Funerals | 17,358 | 16,046 | -7.6 |
| Elders | 27,774 | 25,828 | -7.0 |
| Other leaders | 5,217 | 4,771 | -8.5 |

Source: Church of Scotland General Assembly reports.

OFFICIAL AND QUASI-OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Coronavirus chronicles: latest ONS data on vaccine hesitancy and religion

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has published a report (and associated dataset) on first dose Covid-19 vaccination rates in people aged 50 years and over who live in England according to a variety of background characteristics, including religious affiliation (derived from linking to the 2011 census of population). The data cover the period 8 December 2020 to 12 April 2021. The highest rates of vaccination were returned by Christians (93.2%), Hindus (92.0%), Sikhs (91.9%), and Jews (91.8%), and the lowest by Buddhists (83.3%), other religion (81.4%), and Muslims (78.8%). After adjusting for geography, socio-demographic factors, and underlying health conditions, those identifying as Sikhs and Hindus had a higher probability of being vaccinated than professing Christians. The report and dataset are available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/coronavirusandvaccinationratesinpeopleaged50yearsandoverbysociodemographiccharacteristicengland>

Coronavirus chronicles: updated ONS figures on deaths involving Covid-19 by religion

The ONS has also published an article on *Deaths involving Covid-19 by Religious Group, England, 24 January 2020 to 28 February 2021*. It ‘reports age-standardised rates of death involving the coronavirus (Covid-19) by religious group and uses statistical models to adjust for location, measures of disadvantage, occupation, living arrangements, and pre-existing health conditions. It compares the risk of Covid-19 mortality in two discrete periods aligned to each wave of the pandemic.’ The study population comprised 29.3 million people who were enumerated at the 2011 census and were living either in private households or communal establishments in England at the start of the pandemic. The conclusion of the analysis is that ‘the patterns of excess Covid-19 mortality risk have changed over the course of the pandemic; after adjustments, the Hindu population and Muslim men were disproportionately affected throughout the pandemic; for other religious groups, the excess risk relative to the Christian group was only observed in the first wave (Jewish and Buddhist men) or second wave (Sikh men and women and Muslim women).’ The report and dataset of age-standardized mortality rates and hazard ratios are available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/deathsinvolvingcovid19byreligiousgroupengland/24january2020to28february2021>

There is an accompanying methodological article at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/methodologies/deathsinvolvingcovid19byreligiousgroupandethnicgroupenglandmethodology>

Scotland’s census, 2022: religion topic report

The National Records of Scotland have published the 29-page *Scotland’s Census, 2021: Religion Topic Report*, setting out the evidence gathered in developing the religion question for the census, which will now take place in 2022. The main historic sections in the document concern understanding user needs (pp. 8–10) and question testing (cognitive and quantitative) in 2017 (pp. 10–14, 16–29). A next steps section (pp. 14–15) discusses ongoing work

surrounding user requests for inclusion of a Pagan tick box in the census and differentiation of the various branches or schools of Islam. The report is available at:

<https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/religion-topic-report>

Teacher Roman Catholic approval management information for Scotland

The Scottish Government has published *Teacher Roman Catholic Approval Management Information* for 2019 and 2020, disaggregated by age and sector (primary, secondary, or special), but with cautionary notes about its completeness. This information is collected by virtue of Section 21 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, which requires that a teacher appointed to any post on the staff of a denominational school by the education authority must be approved as regards religious belief and character by representatives of the Church or denomination in whose interests the school is conducted. The overwhelming majority of denominational state schools in Scotland are Roman Catholic. The teacher approval management information is available at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/teacher-roman-catholic-approval-management-information>

ACADEMIC STUDIES

Coronavirus chronicles: three articles in the current edition of *Rural Theology*

Although not exactly a theme issue, the current edition of *Rural Theology* (Vol. 19, No. 1, 2021) includes three articles exploring the impact of Covid-19 on the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. The first two are quantitative and report additional findings among practising Anglicans answering the ‘Coronavirus, Church, and You’ self-completion survey, undertaken in May-July 2020: Leslie Francis and Andrew Village, ‘Shielding, but not Shielded: Comparing the Experience of the Covid-19 Lockdown for Anglican Churchgoers Aged Seventy and over with those under the Age of Sixty’ (pp. 31–40, n = 1,791); and Leslie Francis, Andrew Village, and Anne Lawson, ‘Impact of Covid-19 on Fragile Churches: Listening to the Voices of Lay People’ (pp. 41–7, n = 2,496). The third paper is more qualitative, Gavin Elliott’s ‘Listening from the Edge: Paying Attention to Church of Scotland Ministers’ Reflection on the Pandemic’ (pp. 48–51, summarizing four hundred telephone conversations he had with ministerial colleagues at the start of the first lockdown). The issue can be accessed, on a subscription or pay-per-view basis, at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/yrur20/current>

The first two articles are also summarized in Leslie Francis and Andrew Village, ‘The Perceived Impact of Covid-19 on the Church of England’, *FutureFirst*, No. 75, June 2021, pp. 1–2.