

# News Release

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## SOUL OF BRITAIN REVEALED

The British appear to be increasingly uncertain about the direction of the country and about their own moral decision making. They seem to be losing confidence in our major institutions, are unsure whether to trust their neighbours and are abandoning traditional views of God.

These are among the findings of one of the most comprehensive surveys\* into the values and beliefs of the British at the turn of the millennium. It has been commissioned by the BBC to launch *Soul of Britain*, a major new series for BBC ONE.

The survey suggests that nearly half the country (49%) say Britain is 'heading in the wrong direction' while three quarters (75%) now claim 'there can never be absolute clear guidelines about what is right and what is wrong.' Barely half the population (52%) think there is 'something after death', while nearly a third (31%) think 'we are just a biological organism which ceases to exist at death'.

The survey covers fundamental areas including religion, society, politics, health, and relationships. It indicates that, despite growing affluence and technological advances, the British are not as happy as they were.

The findings also suggest that while belief in God and belief in a personal God has declined, church attendance figures are not as gloomy as reported. In response to the survey many people say they believe in life after death and there is evidence of a move away from traditional, established religion to spirituality.

Whilst civic optimism declines, there is a feeling of personal optimism, with a large number of people (82%) professing to feel that they are personally heading in the right direction. Most people still have faith in the values of family and the institution of marriage and are proud to describe themselves as British.

### Religion

The survey shows that, although 62% believe in God today, this belief has declined by 14% over the last 20 years when belief was 76% in 1981. In contrast, belief in a soul has increased; today 69% believe in a soul whereas this was only 59% in 1981.

Whilst the majority believe in God, the survey differentiates between what type of God they believe in. It suggests that belief in a personal God has fallen steadily from 41% in 1957 to 32% in 1990 and is now reduced to 26% in 2000. This decline in belief in a personal God has been matched by an increase in belief in some sort of spirit or life force or an increase in not believing in God.

Belief in the Devil (32%) and Sin (71%) has remained approximately constant over the last two decades.

The majority profess to believe in Heaven (52%) and this is nearly twice as high as those who express belief in Hell (28%).

The survey also shows that the majority of respondents believe in Jesus (62%) but people are less sure of the standing of Jesus Christ. When asked if Jesus was the Son of God, just a man, or just a story, only 38% believed that he was the Son of God at the turn of the second millennium. This represents a significant decline in the belief in the divinity of Christ, which registered 71% in 1957. Most people (61%) believed him to be just a man or a story. In summary, belief that Jesus was the Son of God has almost halved over the last 43 years.

There is also evidence that people find it difficult to clearly define what the Bible means to them. Only 23% believe it to be the unique word of God, 28% think it is a holy book like others and 24% believe it is part of Britain's cultural heritage, like Shakespeare.

Although 71% of the people surveyed claimed to frequently think about the meaning and purpose of life, 69% also admit to frequently thinking about death. Whilst the bare majority (52%) believed that there is another existence after death, a significant minority (31%) consider themselves solely as a biological organism, ceasing to exist at death; the remainder of the sample (17%) are undecided.

More people today describe themselves as spiritual (31%) rather than religious (27%) and there is evidence of strong spiritual experiences in their lives: 55% believe in fate; 25% felt as though they were in touch with someone who had died; 39% have tried alternative medicine; 32% have experienced reflexology and 22% have tried meditation. But the power of prayer is still the most important from a list of spiritual experiences, with 41% having experienced it and 25% of those believing it to be important in their lives.

This snapshot of faith in Britain also suggests that church attendance figures do not give the full picture. The survey shows that 23% have attended a religious service within the last month and this is the same today as it was a decade ago. However, those who regard themselves as belonging to any particular religion has declined from 58% in 1990 to 48% in the year 2000. This might suggest that believers are more committed that they were before with less people claiming religious affiliation but about the same number of people attending a service.

The biggest drop in those identified as members of a particular religious denomination is in the Church of England where figures have fallen by 15% in the last 10 years from 40% in 1990 to 25% in 2000. Catholics remain unchanged at 9% and the survey showed a newcomer in the form of Christian 'House Church', which now accounts for 2% of the population.

A large number of people (79%) admit to visiting religious buildings purely for aesthetic rather than religious reasons.

Although 37% of people expressed confidence in the Church, like many other institutions, it has declined (by 6% since 1990): 45% of respondents believe that the decline in traditional religion makes Britain a worse country in which to live. A large number of people are still keen for religious leaders to speak out on key issues like poverty (82%), racial discrimination (75%), the family (74%), and global inequality (70%).

### Society

Patriotism shines through, with 83% admitting to being proud to be British and 66% willing to fight for their country if there were another major war.

Although people name the main problems facing society today as crime (47%), NHS/health system (24%), and unemployment (20%), a smaller number are concerned about racism (7%), homelessness (7%) and asylum seekers (4%).

A heartening 71% of people know their neighbours well or count them as close friends, but only 47% say that they completely trust their immediate neighbours (a drop of 9% from 1995).

The survey indicates the importance of marriage and the family in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Over half the sample questioned (54%) were married, with half of these (26%) having been married before. Eighty per cent disagree that marriage is an out-dated institution and 76% expect marriage to last a lifetime.

Most people chose their mother (83%) or father (72%), rather than an authority figure, as the main influence in their lives about judging right and wrong. But three quarters (75%) of those questioned thought that there can never be clear guidelines about what is right and wrong. The majority (80%) also plumped for their family as their main source of identity, above work, social or religious background.

It also appears that the nation feels less healthy than it was 10 years ago. Twenty-six per cent describe their health as good or very good, compared to 36% in 1990.

Politics

Most people questioned (49%) believe that Britain is heading in the wrong direction, 36% say the right direction and 15% don't know. This time a year ago an ORB survey revealed that most people thought the country was going in the right direction and the survey suggests that social factors such as crime, violence and drugs are factors which may have influenced this reversal in opinion.

The survey reveals that an increasing number of people today (58%) say they have an interest in politics and this is significantly higher than a decade ago (49%).

\*The survey, by O.R.B. (Opinion Research Business) was conducted with a sample of 1000 randomly selected respondents in Great Britain between 25<sup>th</sup> April and 7<sup>th</sup> May 2000.

*Soul of Britain*, a series presented by Michael Buerk, is shown on BBC ONE on Sundays, from June 4.

Further information:

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