

SPECIAL REPORT

The soul of Britain

GORDON HEALD

The spiritual profile of Britain today has been revealed in a survey commissioned by the BBC and supported by *The Tablet* and the University of Nottingham. The managing director of Opinion Research Business comments on the findings. They will be the subject of nine programmes on BBC1 on Sundays from 4 June.

SLOWLY but surely, we British are a people in decline. We are not so happy as we were; we trust other people less, our satisfaction with home life is less; we do not feel so healthy; and confidence in our institutions has fallen. Furthermore, despite our unprecedented prosperity and the lowest unemployment figure for decades, we believe that the nation is going in the wrong direction.

Our belief in God has also declined. Fewer now have faith in a personal God (26 per cent) as opposed to some kind of spirit or life force – than at any period over the past 50 years, and they have just been exceeded by those who declare that they do not have a clear belief in God at all (27 per cent). As we celebrate the 2,000th birthday of Christ, most people are aware of Jesus, but only a minority believe that he was the Son of God: instead, they think of Jesus as just a man, or a story.

This decline in traditional belief does not mean, however, that atheism has replaced it. Only a very small minority of people declare themselves to be “convinced atheists” (8 per cent). Many have faith that science will help mankind, but they do not think it is capable of explaining the mysteries of life. On the contrary, the movement is in the opposite direction; the survey demonstrates very clearly that there has been a significant rise in the number of people who classify themselves as being “spiritual” (as opposed to being “religious”), which is why belief in a soul has increased significantly over the last two decades – to such an extent that it now exceeds belief in God.

Believers still account for a quarter of the population, but many people have a wide spectrum of beliefs, the majority of which encompass classic Christian positions, but which include such ideas as reincarnation which are taken from Eastern religions.

In addition, people increasingly recognise the influence of evil in society – a quarter claim that they have actually had an awareness of being in the presence of evil, and this figure has grown significantly over the past decade. So has a belief in sin, now shared by more than seven out of every ten people. About a third of the population continue to believe in the devil, much the same figure as over the last 50 years, but fewer now believe in Hell.

Half the population believe in life after death – this figure also has remained fairly constant over the past 50 years. Just over half believe in heaven. But only about a third of

the population hold the essential Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body – only two thirds even of regular church-goers.

In summary, people cling to various general spiritual beliefs, some of which are not necessarily Christian. The survey shows that these spiritual experiences are not on the wane as many would predict, but are, if anything, increasing. Yet whilst people hold these beliefs, they do not necessarily want to be labelled “religious” and even less do they associate themselves with a particular denomination. Only 9 per cent of the population believe that they have the only path to God. Two thirds believe either that all religions offer a path to God, or that there is a way to God outside organised religions. The rest do not believe in God at all.

The survey reveals only 37 per cent of the population have confidence in institutional religion. This decline has been mirrored in attitudes to other institutions such as major companies, and is not as bad as the decline in confidence in the police, Parliament and the European Community in Britain over the Past decade.

It is more worrying for church leaders that they are not seen to be providing the answers to people’s problems, only a minority. Regular churchgoers think that leaders of religion are giving adequate answers to the moral needs of the individual and of families, and to the social issues facing the country today. Only in providing for people’s spiritual needs and helping children understand right from wrong – as in Sunday schools – do a majority of churchgoers think that the Church is taking a lead. If this is the image amongst regular churchgoers, think how much worse it is amongst the general population!

Yet these people believe in, and are discovering, a spiritual side to their lives – so much that they declare prayer to be the most important of all their spiritual experiences. Nearly 40 per cent claim that they have received help in answer to prayer. For churchgoers, spirituality and religiosity are closely related, but outside this group there is little overlap between the two, reinforcing the view that when people declare they are spiritual they are not declaring themselves to be religious.

The nation is seeking spiritual guidance and the Church is not seen to be providing it. Yet, ironically, nearly half the population believes that the decline of the influence of traditional religion makes Britain a worse country in which to live. They mourn the growing inability of traditional religion to

influence what is judged to be right and wrong in society.

This decline in institutional religion is illustrated by the fact that within just one decade those who acknowledge that they belong to a particular religion have become a minority (from 58 per cent in 1990 to 48 per cent now). The decline is even more catastrophic if we recall that a 1937 Gallup poll found that 78 per cent of the population belonged to a religious denomination – amounting to a reduction of 30 per cent in 63 years.

Of the Christian denominations, the Church of England has seen the biggest decline. In 1957, 55 per cent of the population said they belonged to it, but only 25 per cent say so now. Catholics have remained fairly constant since 1957 at 9 per cent of the population, according to this latest ORB survey. Other Protestant groups such as Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals have been reduced from 15 per cent of the population in 1957 to 7 per cent in 1990 and 4 per cent in the year 2000. But there has been a growth in the Christian “House church” movement, which now accounts for 2 per cent of the population.

In spite of this decline in allegiance to any particular denomination, the survey suggests that church-going attendance has remained constant over the 20 years, with 23 per cent of the population attending a service (apart from weddings, funerals and baptisms) within the past month. This is most surprising, flying in the face of the perceived facts. According to the poll 6 per cent of the population attend church more than once a week; a rise from 4 per cent in 1990. Could it be that the new independent churches serving the ethnic minorities are bolstering the results? Certainly in London that is part of the explanation. The survey reveals a strong trend towards moral relativism; as traditional religious beliefs become less central, people are looking inside themselves – not out to God – for direction.

IN 1990, for example, 35 per cent of the population thought there were absolutely clear guidelines about what was right and wrong, which applied always to everyone, whatever their circumstances. Only 20 per cent now think so, whereas 75 per cent of the population believe the opposite: that there can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is right or wrong, because it depends on the circumstances.

This way of moral thinking has implications for the social fabric of society. When respondents were asked what were the most important problems facing society today, 46 per cent cited crime and safety/violence/law and order. This was followed by financial difficulties (27 per cent), the health service (19 per cent), underfunded education (19 per cent) and then, not surprisingly, “lack of morals/discipline/family life”. In the past, economic problems were seen as paramount but now the focus has switched to social concerns such as crime, lack of morality, drugs and the decline of family life.

Finally the survey also reveals that people think increasingly about the meaning and purpose of life. These findings underline the need for vision and leadership to help people rediscover their true spiritual roots.