

A prestigious BBC series of religious programmes, presented by Michael Buerk, was shown on 9 Sundays in June and July 2000, with a budget of the order of £600,000. Behind the series was a survey undertaken by Gordon Heald, Chief Executive, Opinion Research Business, a keen Catholic. It was based on 1,000 randomly selected people telephoned across Great Britain in late April/early May 2000.

**Where are we/you going?**

Half, 49%, the respondents thought the nation was heading in the wrong direction, with the main problems being, in order, crime, lack of finance, the NHS, poor education and lack of morals/discipline/family life. Five out of 6 people, 82%, felt that they themselves were going in the right direction, with the main problems being, in order, finance, employment and health. Nine out of 10, 91%, described themselves as "happy", with five in every 6, 84%, pleased they had accomplished something in the previous few weeks.

**Institutional confidence**

How much confidence did respondents have in various institutions? **Figure 5.15** shows the top seven which had been asked previously in the European Values Study.

Only the education system showed an increasing confidence in the last two decades of the 20th century. The church has dropped, but not as much as the police or legal system. Only 37% of respondents felt "most people can be trusted", though almost half, 47%, felt they could trust their immediate neighbours suggesting that knowing people is critical in the trusting process.

Perhaps that is true of the church also. While a third, 35%, felt there should be Bishops in the House of Lords, over half, 55%, said there shouldn't be. Two-thirds, 64%, also felt that church and state should separate.

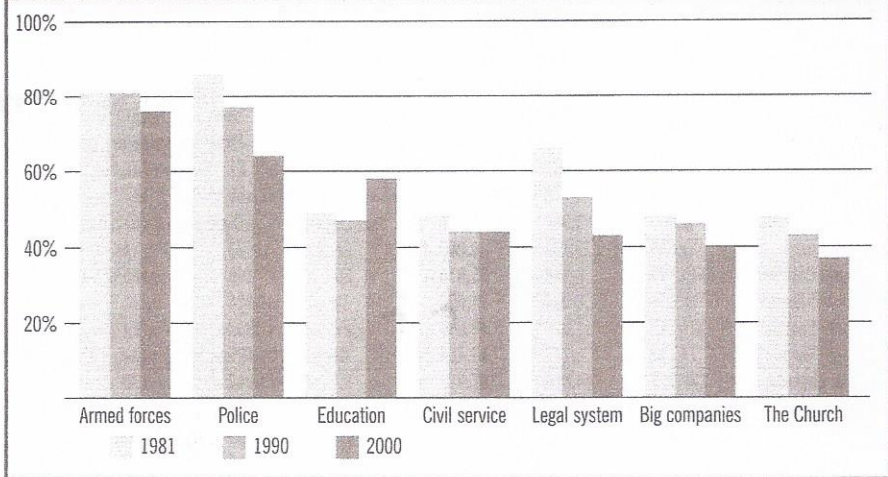
**Morals and Charity**

What is right and wrong however depends on the circumstances at the time. This was the view of three-quarters, 75%, an increase from 64% in 1981.

Three in seven, 43%, felt religious leaders were helping children understand right from wrong; 41% the answers to people's spiritual needs. But 74% wanted religious leaders to speak out on the family, 56% on euthanasia, 51% on extramarital affairs, 49% on abortion and 46% on homosexuality.

Two in five, 38%, gave a regular donation to charity, and another 13% covenanted, usually about £10 a month. Half, 49%, said this was more than they were giving 5 years ago.

**Figure 5.15** Confidence in institutions, Great Britain, 1981–2000



**Church Attendance**

A common phenomenon of sample polls is that people say they go to church more than actual counts suggest. The reporting factor is about double, a ratio that hasn't varied in 20 years, and is as true in America as in Britain. It was so in this study – 23% said they were in church at least once a month, twice the 11.1% measured in the 1998 English Church Attendance Survey.

Over half, 53%, felt that birth should be marked by a religious service (65% in 1990), as did 69% marriage (79%) and 79% death (84%). See also comments on **Page 2.2**.

**The Bible**

What did people feel about the Bible? One person in 11 chose two of these answers:

- 28% It is a holy book like others
- 24% It is part of our cultural heritage like Shakespeare
- 23% It is the unique word of God
- 20% It consists of moral tales/nice stories only
- 9% It is no longer relevant to our culture
- 5% Don't know

**Religious belief**

A majority believed in God (62%), Jesus (62%), heaven (52%) and life after death (51%), but more believed in a soul (69%) and sin (71%). Hell (28%) and re-incarnation (25%) were smaller though both these percentages were slightly up on 10 years ago. See **Page 5.7** for longer trends.

A third, 31%, regarded themselves as "spiritual" and 27% as "religious", but 21% said they were "not a religious person", 10% agnostic and 8% a convinced atheist. The survey didn't ask what being "religious" meant; perhaps part of the answer is seen in the 33% who affirmed "there is a way to God outside organised reli-

gion". On the other hand 45% felt Britain was a worse country in which to live because of the decline in traditional religion — and only 20% better!

More than two-thirds, 71%, often or sometimes thought about the meaning and purpose of life. Over half, 55%, of respondents said there was "a patterning of events in your life that convinces you that in some strange way they were meant to happen", of whom a third, 32%, described this experience as religious. Three in every 7, 38%, had had "an awareness of the presence of God", and an almost equal number, 37%, "that you are receiving help in answer to prayer".

**Summary**

This survey is important because of the wide range of religious questions asked. The study reflects some despair – British people were not as happy as they were, they trusted people and institutions less, they disliked home life more, they didn't feel as healthy, they didn't believe in God as much, and they believed the nation was going in the wrong direction in 2000.

But Britons were not becoming a nation of atheists. Instead they had a more amorphous, vaguer, sense of the religious or "spiritual" as a greater number put it. While there was still a substantial core, about a quarter of the population, of classic believers, a growing proportion, perhaps over a third, had a more numinous view. Maybe a fifth were definitely in the negative camp, with the remainder uncertain and still making up their mind.

This is nowhere near passing below the critical mass of accredited understanding, but provides an opportunity to explain what Christians believe if they can do so with clarity, realising the lack of background so many have.

Sources: Fieldwork results of the BBC *Soul of Britain* questionnaire, Opinion Research Business; article by Gordon Heald "The State of Well-being in Britain" in *The Tablet* 2nd June 2000; personal conversation with the author; BBC Press Release 29th May 2000; article in *Quadrant*, September 2000.