

# Counting Religion in Britain

A Monthly Round-Up of New Statistical Sources

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## OPINION POLLS

### **Same-sex marriage and the Church of England: two YouGov polls**

The Church of England's General Synod recently voted to endorse proposals from the House of Bishops to permit its clergy to offer blessings of the unions of same-sex couples which had already been lawfully recognized by the state as civil marriages or civil partnerships. However, the House of Bishops upheld the Church's traditional teaching on marriage as a union between one man and one woman, and thus has continued to prohibit same-sex marriages being solemnized in the Church of England.

In reaffirming the ban on same-sex marriages, the Church of England is lagging behind the court of public opinion, as two new online polls by YouGov have demonstrated. By far the larger of these, undertaken (through analysis of YouGov Profiles) among 39,328 Britons on 19–26 January 2023, asked whether the Church of England should or should not conduct same-sex marriages. The majority, 55%, replied in the affirmative, the proportion reaching three-fifths among women and the under-50s; 28% of the overall sample were against and 17% undecided. Of the sub-set affiliating as Church of England, Anglican, or Episcopal, a plurality (48%) favoured the Church of England conducting same-sex marriages, with 36% saying it should not and 16% uncertain. The data table is available at:

- <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/b9pfuoijmf/YouGov%20-%20Same-sex%20marriages.pdf>

The other YouGov poll, commissioned by, and reported in, *The Times* (4 February 2023, p. 34), was undertaken with 2,041 adults on 27–30 January 2023. Preferences for the Church of England conducting same-sex marriages in church were similar to the other survey, 54% for and 27% against (46% and 36%, respectively, among professing Anglicans). However, some additional questions were also asked in this smaller study. For example, 62% of respondents thought the Church of England should abandon its teaching that sexual relations between same-sex people are wrong (60% among Anglicans), 55% wanted priests to be able to marry their same-sex partners in civil ceremonies (51% among Anglicans), and 44% were critical of the Archbishop of Canterbury in announcing he would not perform blessings for same-sex couples himself (36% among Anglicans). Notwithstanding growing calls for the disestablishment of the Church of England, such a move would be opposed by 41% of the public and supported by just 29% (72% and 10% among Anglicans). Data tables for the poll are available at:

- [https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/ocie8ox4cd/TheTimes\\_ChurchOfEngland\\_230130\\_W.pdf](https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/ocie8ox4cd/TheTimes_ChurchOfEngland_230130_W.pdf)

### **Should religious people be allowed to hold top government jobs? YouGov/Theos poll**

The race to be the next leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), in succession to Nicola Sturgeon, has reopened the public debate about religious people holding high political office. The fact that one of the candidates for SNP leader, Kate Forbes, belongs to the Free Church of

Scotland and holds conservative Christian views, particularly about same-sex marriage, has reignited divisions among the public in a way not seen since 2017, when Tim Farron stood down as leader of the Liberal Democrat Party in the face of controversy surrounding his evangelical Christian beliefs, specifically regarding homosexuality. To test the current public mood, Theos commissioned YouGov to survey 2,008 adults in Britain online on 22–23 February 2023. When eventually asked the overarching question, ‘To what extent, if at all, would you support or oppose people with a religious faith holding top government jobs?’, 58% indicated their support, while 21% were opposed and 21% undecided. The level of support was greatest among Liberal Democrats (69%), Conservatives (67%), and over-65s (65%); opposition peaked at 29% of under-25s, 26% of men, and 25% of Labour voters, Londoners, and Scots.

However, prior to this general question being put, respondents had been shown a list of twelve groups of people holding particular views and asked whether they should be allowed to occupy a top government job in the UK. The degree of opposition to these groups varied widely, from 11% to 63%, the most unacceptable for holding a top government job being: opposition to same-sex marriage (50%), opposition to abortion (55%), denial of climate change (61%), and a desire to privatize the NHS (63%). Being ‘religious’ was not in itself seen as being a barrier, with only 11% against a Catholic, 13% against an orthodox Jew, 16% against a Muslim, and 19% against an evangelical Christian. As Nick Spencer of Theos observed in the accompanying blog: ‘we have a complicated and perhaps slightly hypocritical attitude to religion in public life’. The blog, with an embedded link to the full data tables, is available at:

- <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2023/02/27/should-religious-people-be-allowed-to-hold-top-political-jobs>

### **Religious affiliation in Great Britain: aggregate data from five Yonder polls in 2022**

Since 2011, BRIN has been tracking self-assigned religious affiliation recorded in published polls undertaken by Yonder (formerly known as Populus) among representative samples of the adult population of Great Britain aged 18 and over. The question asked has been: ‘Which of the following religious groups do you consider yourself to be a member of?’ Annual data for 2011–20 are displayed in Table 64 of Clive Field’s book *Counting Religion in Britain, 1970–2020: Secularization in Statistical Context* (Oxford University Press, 2022). The aggregate of five surveys in 2022, for which 14,267 persons were interviewed online, was: 44.1% Christian (–12.0% since 2011), 3.8% Muslim, 4.6% other non-Christian, 45.4% no religion (+11.3% since 2011), and 2.0% prefer not to say.

### **Lenten traditions and observances**

Lent is a major religious festival in the Christian liturgical calendar, a solemn time of penitence, reflection, and abstinence, commemorating the forty days Jesus Christ spent fasting in the desert, and leading up to Easter. This year, Lent commenced on 22 February (Ash Wednesday). The day before, Shrove Tuesday, is supposedly set aside for finalizing preparations for Lenten observance, but it is also associated with the eating of pancakes and other sweets that may be given up during Lent itself. Hence its alternative name of Pancake Day.

The spiritual aspect of Shrove Tuesday appears to be almost abandoned in Britain, but the consumption of pancakes that day is still widely practised (and heavily promoted by retailers). In a YouGov poll among an online sample of 2,071 adults on 21 February 2023, 39% anticipated eating one or more pancakes, while 52% expected to have none, and 9% were uncertain what the dinner table might contain. Pancakes are eaten far more on Shrove Tuesday

by the under-50s than the over-50s, with two-thirds of the over-65s claiming to have none. Data tables can be found at:

- <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/consumer/survey-results/daily/2023/02/21/15a1a/3>

When it came to Lent proper, just 5% of a second YouGov sample of 2,003 Britons, interviewed on 21–22 February 2023, had plans to give something up for Lent, and the proportion only rose to 11% even for professing Christians and to 17% of self-described very or fairly religious people. Among the 103 individuals intending to make a Lenten sacrifice, chocolate or sweets were the commonest forfeit (50%), followed by alcohol (17%). Data tables can be found at:

- [https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/vk5i55ccd/Internet\\_Lent\\_230222.pdf](https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/vk5i55ccd/Internet_Lent_230222.pdf)

### **British Jewish attitudes to Israel and Israeli politics**

Three-quarters of the 711 adult British Jews interviewed (mainly via telephone) by Survation for the *Jewish News* on 3–25 January 2023 regarded Israel as important for their Jewish identity. Nevertheless, this did not stop 77% of them deeming it acceptable for Jewish people living outside Israel to express concern about the Israeli government or its policies, even though 70% were sanguine enough to recognize that Israel probably does not care about the views of the Jewish diaspora on this topic. Public and Jewish concern about the state of Israeli politics appears to have grown since the current Israeli coalition administration was formed, including as ministers some politicians that many would consider to hold far-right views. Half (52%) of this British Jewish sample acknowledged that the presence of these ostensibly far-right politicians in the Israeli government had impacted (implicitly negatively) their feelings towards Israel itself. Moreover, 26% of respondents agreed that Jewish community leaders should not meet Israeli politicians judged to be from the far-right. Full data tables are available at:

- <https://www.survation.com/archive/2023-2/>

The client's coverage of the story can be read at:

- <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/jewish-news-survation-poll-most-uk-jews-view-israels-new-government-with-dread/>

## FAITH ORGANIZATION STUDIES

### **CAP/Brendan Research mapping of Greater Manchester church closures**

Church Action on Poverty (CAP) has published two reports from its 'Church on the Margins' programme, which was launched in 2020 and is based on research conducted in Greater Manchester. The qualitative report summarizes in-depth conversations with groups of people 'on the margins' involved in different forms of church in Greater Manchester over the past two years. The quantitative report (written by Sarah Purcell and Fiona Tweedie) majors on patterns of church closures affecting five principal Christian denominations in Greater Manchester between 2010 and 2020, analysed by Brendan Research. In its title, the authors pose the question: *Is the Church Losing Faith in Low-Income Communities in Greater Manchester?* The answer is given in the affirmative, in that, the United Reformed Church excepted, 'significantly more churches have closed in low-income areas than in more affluent areas', as defined by the official statistics of deprivation. Both reports can be found at:

- <https://www.church-poverty.org.uk/what-we-do/cotm/reports/>

### **Church of England clergy spouses and partners: Clergy Family Network survey**

During the Spring of 2021, the Clergy Family Network (of Church of England clergy spouses and partners) undertook an online survey among a self-selecting sample of 550 Church of England clergy spouses and partners, to ascertain their experiences and needs. As a household, 44% of respondents claimed they were encountering issues with isolation and making friends, and 43% difficulties in creating time off. When asked, ‘How do you like being a clergy spouse?’, the average score was 6.7 out of 10. The key findings are summarized in a report by Lucie Walsh and Sarah Crouch published in February 2023 and available at:

- <https://clergyfamilynetwork.co.uk/our-research>

### **Community Security Trust’s anti-Semitic incidents report, 2022**

The Community Security Trust (CST) recorded 1,652 anti-Semitic incidents in the UK during 2022. This was the fifth-highest total (after 2018–21) ever logged for any calendar year, albeit it was 27% lower than the number in 2021, when serious violence had erupted between Israel and Hamas in the Middle East, leading to a spike in anti-Semitism in the UK and elsewhere, especially in May-June 2021. As well as the 1,652 verified incidents in 2022 (78% of which were offline and 22% online), the CST investigated a further 615 potential incidents, but it judged they did not evidence anti-Semitic motivation, language, or targeting. This latest 47-page annual report of anti-Semitic incidents is available at:

- <https://cst.org.uk/research/cst-publications>

### **Muslim Census exploration of Muslim women’s faith experiences**

Muslim Census has collaborated with the Ta Collective to investigate the faith experiences of Muslim women living in the UK, based on four online focus groups and 1,200 online interviews (in March-April and June-July 2022, respectively), in the hope of assisting mosques and community leaders to develop initiatives that better address Muslim women’s religious needs. The scale of the challenge was demonstrated by the finding that only 45% of the Muslim women interviewed reported having an overall positive experience within their Muslim community, and just 32% felt connectedness with the wider Muslim community. Despite the role of the mosque as the centre for the communal and spiritual life of Muslims, 25% of these Muslim women rarely visited the mosque and a further 17% never did so. One-fifth even claimed to have been denied entry to a mosque. Just one-quarter of female Muslims in the UK considered they had a mosque local to them that provided facilities for women, while 61% said that their limited access to mosques had a negative impact on their spirituality. One note of caution: the online sample was self-selecting and disproportionately (88%) comprised Muslim women aged under 45 years. More information is available at:

- <https://muslimcensus.co.uk/muslim-womans-faith-experience/>

### **Growth of the Muslim humanitarian charity sector in the UK**

Utilizing Charity Commission data and the reports and accounts of individual charities, the Ayaan Institute has surveyed 1,026 Muslim charities in the UK whose main object is international humanitarian work. Their aggregate income in 2020 was £708 million and had grown by 37% since 2017. On conservative assumptions, it is projected to be £4.39 billion by 2051. Many of these charities are relatively small; of the total of 1,026 charities, the top 10 by income accounted for 62% of all the Muslim sector’s income and the top 20 for 76%. A 14-page executive summary of the final report from this research study, by Jahangir Mohammed

and Beatrice Bianchi and entitled *Aiding the Ummah: Analysing the Muslim Humanitarian Charity Sector in the UK*, is available at:

- <https://ayaaninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Muslim-Humanitarian-Charity-Sector-UK-media.pdf>

### **Faith as a barrier to discussing LGBT+ topics in schools**

Teacher Tapp research in February 2023, conducted for the LGBT+ young people's charity Just Like Us, has found that 30% of the 7,407 primary and secondary school teachers in the UK who responded to an online survey felt that the religion of their school community had been (always or sometimes) a barrier to discussing LGBT+ topics in school. The proportion rose to 46% among teachers in faith schools, compared to 25% of teachers at non-faith schools. The figure was also higher for primary (36%) than secondary (24%) teachers. See, further, the Just Like Us blog post at:

- <https://www.justlikeus.org/blog/2023/02/20/lgbt-faith-resources/>

## OFFICIAL AND QUASI-OFFICIAL STATISTICS

### **Religious census of England and Wales, 2021: additional analyses**

David Voas has provided analysis of, and commentary on, the newly-released age breakdown of the religious census data in his blog post on 'A Less Christian Future for England and Wales' on the British Religion in Numbers website at:

- <http://www.brin.ac.uk/a-less-christian-future-for-england-and-wales/>

The Office for National Statistics has released a report and dataset on *Characteristics of UK Armed Forces Veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021*, which includes breaks by religion (no religion, Christian, all other religions), at:

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/characteristics-of-uk-armed-forces-veterans-england-and-wales-census-2021>

The Office for National Statistics has also released a report and dataset on *Marriage and Civil Partnership Status in England and Wales: Census 2021*, which includes limited breaks by religion (see section 4 of the report, including figures 9 and 12), at:

- <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/legalpartnershipsinenglandandwalescensus2021>

### **Coronavirus chronicles: updating ethnic and religious contrasts in Covid-19 deaths**

The Office for National Statistics has published a new article and underpinning dataset: *Updating Ethnic and Religious Contrasts in Deaths Involving the Coronavirus (Covid-19), England, 24 January 2020 to 23 November 2022*. Among religion-related headlines: 'For both males and females, the Muslim group, which previously experienced among the highest rates of Covid-19 mortality, saw notable decreases in Covid-19 mortality in the most recent period when compared with earlier in the pandemic; in fact, the Omicron period marked the first period since wave 1 of the pandemic where Muslim males and females did not have the highest rate of Covid-19 mortality. In contrast, males and females identifying as Christian or "no religion" saw a small increase in Covid-19 mortality between the Delta and Omicron periods.' The article and data are available at:

- <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/updatingethniccontrastsindeathsinvolvingthecoronaviruscovid19england10january2022to23november2022>



## ACADEMIC STUDY

### **History of the humanist movement in modern Britain**

Callum Brown, David Nash, and Charlie Lynch, *The Humanist Movement in Modern Britain: A History of Ethicists, Rationalists, and Humanists* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, xviii + 323 pp., ISBN: 9781350136601, £19.99, paperback) offers a clear and definitive history of the humanist movement in Britain over a 125-year period, from the formation of the Ethical Union in 1896 to 2021, including its relationship to morality, culture, and internationalism. The work is thoroughly grounded in extensive archival research, oral history interviews, and material in the personal collections of the authors. The eyes of BRIN readers may initially be drawn to chapter 2, on the demography of humanists—covering the number of humanists (pp. 21–5, including figure 4); who were the humanists?; and coming to humanism—but there are rich rewards to be found elsewhere, too.

As the authors freely acknowledge, the various strands that evolved and converged to create the modern humanist movement were relatively small in scale for most of its history, with formal membership fewer than 5,000 at any one time. However, from *c.*2010, the number of members and supporters has grown at what the authors describe as ‘a blistering pace’, reaching around 100,000 by 2021 (comprising 21,000 members, 63,000 supporters, and 16,000 members of Humanist Society Scotland). Although they claim that Humanists UK now constitutes ‘the central organisation of British non-religionism’, having relegated the more longstanding secularist tradition, the overwhelming majority of ‘religious nones’ in Britain are still not affiliated to it, choosing to express their ‘noneness’ in highly individualized and sometimes privatized ways. Further information about the book is available at:

- <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/humanist-movement-in-modern-britain-9781350136618/>

## NEW DATASET

### **Edinburgh Burgh Churches: Seat Rent Revenues, 1860–1925**

This UK Data Service dataset (SN 856293) was created by John Sawkins of Heriot-Watt University and comprises an Excel workbook recording the annual income (extracted from the accounts of the Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Commissioners) from seat (or pew) rents remitted to individual Church of Scotland churches located in the pre-1856 Burgh of Edinburgh, for the years 1860–1925. For the catalogue record, go to:

- <https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=856293>

APPENDIX  
KEYWORDS/TAGS

Abortion, anti-Semitic incidents, anti-Semitism, armed forces veterans, Ayaan Institute, Beatrice Bianchi, blessings, Bloomsbury Academic, Brenda Research, Callum Brown, census of population, Charlie Lynch, Church Action on Poverty, church closures, Church of England, Church of Scotland, Clergy Family Network, clergy spouses and partners, Community Security Trust, coronavirus, Covid-19, David Nash, David Voas, deprivation, disestablishment, Edinburgh, evangelical Christian, Fiona Tweedie, Greater Manchester, humanist movement, Israel, Israeli politics, Jahangir Mohammed, Jews, John Sawkins, Just Like Us, Kate Forbes, Lent, LGBT+ topics, Lucie Walsh, marriage and civil partnership status, mortality, Muslim, Muslim Census, Muslim humanitarian charities, Muslim women, Office for National Statistics, orthodox Jew, pancakes, religion and politics, religious affiliation, religious census, religious festivals, religious prejudice, Roman Catholic, same sex marriage, Sarah Crouch, Sarah Purcell, seat rents, Survation, Ta Collective, Teacher Tapp, The Times, Theos, top government jobs, Yonder, YouGov