

Counting Religion in Britain

A Monthly Round-Up of New Statistical Sources

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OPINION POLLS

Pew Global Attitudes Survey, Spring 2023 round: two early releases of findings

The Pew Research Center has begun to release findings from its Spring 2023 Global Attitudes Survey, which was fielded in the UK (where 1,024 adults aged 18 and over were interviewed by telephone between 20 February and 25 April 2023) and twenty-three other countries. One of the questions asked was: ‘How important is religion in your life?’ In reply, 21% in the UK said that religion was very important, 23% somewhat important, 21% not too important, and 34% not at all important, or, in collapsed form, 44% important and 55% not. This variable was also used as a correlation for answers to another question: ‘Do you strongly favour, somewhat favour, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose gays and lesbians to marry legally?’ Almost three-quarters (73%) in the UK endorsed same-sex marriage, most strongly (as elsewhere) among those for whom religion was not important. For a little more information, see Pew’s blog at:

- <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/13/how-people-in-24-countries-view-same-sex-marriage/>

In a later blog, Pew correlated the importance of religion with replies to the question: ‘Do you think abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases, or illegal in all cases?’ In the aggregate, 84% in the UK agreed that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, but the proportion dipped to 76% among the religiously affiliated and rose to 94% of the religiously unaffiliated. The second blog can be found at:

- <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/20/support-for-legal-abortion-is-widespread-in-many-countries-especially-in-europe/>

Preparing for human extinction: will a religious apocalypse finish us off?

Recent media publicity about AI (artificial intelligence) has helped to raise the profile of potential human extinction events, prompting YouGov to replicate a series of questions it originally asked its panel in February 2022. Its latest online poll was conducted among 2,076 adults in Great Britain on 31 May–1 June 2023. Eleven events were on its questionnaire, one of which was a religious apocalypse. Only 4% of the sample considered that a religious apocalypse would cause human extinction, the highest sub-group figures being 6% of under-25s and residents of Wales and Scotland and 7% of Londoners. Notwithstanding, as many as 19% of the population thought it prudent that the government should develop realistic contingency plans against a religious apocalypse, which was seen as a higher priority than either a zombie apocalypse or an alien invasion. Full data tables are available at:

- <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/96dvxjrr7e/YouGov%20-%20Human%20extinction%20threat%20May%202023.pdf>

FAITH ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Methodist Church triennial membership returns, 2019–22

The Methodist Church in Great Britain appears to have had a ‘bad pandemic’, according to the latest set of triennial data reported to the 2023 annual Methodist Conference meeting in Birmingham. Adjusting for non-response (which was higher than usual), the number of churches declined from 4,285 in 2019 to 3,745 in 2022, or by 12.6%; of members from 174,451 to 148,180, or by 15.1%; and of attendances from 132,980 to 87,588, or by 34.1%. Attendances were not enumerated in 2020 and 2021, on account of lockdowns, and neither the 2019 nor 2022 attendance statistics included virtual worshippers. The report can be found at:

- <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/29514/conf-23-pc-43-there-is-room-triennial-membership-returns-2019-2022.pdf>

Scottish Episcopal Church statistics, 2022

The 40th annual report of the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Anglican presence in Scotland, for the year ended 31 December 2022 has given some encouragement in respect of diocesan statistics. Membership (defined as the number of persons of all ages belonging to the congregation) fell by a mere 0.4% from 2021, to stand at 23,935. Persons on the communicants’ roll were down by 1.8% on the year, to 16,823. Most hopefully, attendance (on the Sunday next before Advent) actually rose by 11.6%, to 8,532, in a post-Covid recovery. Even so, attendance still equated to just half the number of communicants and one-third of the membership. The report is at:

- <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/40th-Annual-Report.pdf>

Teenagers, Christianity, and values in the United Kingdom: Barna Group study

The US-based Barna Group has recently published the 35-page UK summary report from its Open Generation research project, undertaken through online interviews with 25,000 teenagers aged 13–17 in twenty-six countries around the world between 21 July and 24 August 2021, and with funding from a consortium of evangelical organizations. There were sixty-six questions, the core ones exploring teenagers’ perceptions of and engagement with what Barna regards as three crucial elements of the Christian faith: Jesus, the Bible, and justice. Findings are presented in chart form, with UK and global mean figures cited, and also, where appropriate, breaks by committed Christians/nominal Christians/all others; Bible open/Bible unengaged; and justice motivated/justice oriented/justice neutral. Just 42% of UK respondents self-identified as Christians, most of whom were, in Barna’s words, only ‘culturally or nominally engaged in their faith’, even before allowing for some clearly ‘aspirational’ answers. The UK report may be purchased in digital format, priced at US \$9.00, from:

- <https://shop.barna.com>

The UK data can also be explored for free online at:

- <https://www.barna.com/the-open-generation/explore-the-data/>

Co-operative Funeralcare’s funeral music charts, 2023: a comeback for hymns?

Co-operative Funeralcare’s latest set of funeral music charts, compiled from an analysis of 93,000 ceremonies conducted between May 2022 and May 2023, show that hymns entered the overall ‘top 10’ playlist for the first time in seven years. *All Things Bright and Beautiful* was in number 8 position, and *Abide with Me* was number 9. The Co-op attributes this ‘resurgence’ in hymns to ‘recent historical royal events and cultural moments of the past few years influencing a return to tradition, including the funerals of Prince Philip and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II’. The top three spots in the main chart went to *Time to Say Goodbye* (Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman), *My Way* (Frank Sinatra), and *Supermarket Flowers* (Ed

Sheeran). As well as the aggregate playlist, specialist funeral music charts were published for rock, indie/band, pop, classical, hymn/traditional, R&B, country, TV/soap, movie, and sports. The hymn/traditional 'top 10' was headed by *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, *Abide with Me*, *The Lord is My Shepherd*, *Amazing Grace*, and *How Great Thou Art*. The Co-op's press release is available at:

- <https://www.co-operative.coop/media/news-releases/funeral-music-chart-2023-time-to-say-hello-to-hymns>

OFFICIAL AND QUASI-OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Schools, Pupils, and their Characteristics in England, January 2023

Schools, Pupils, and their Characteristics has been published annually by government for more than half a century. It is a major official source of information about the number of faith schools (as we would now designate them) and the pupils attending them. The serial is no longer available in print format but is published online as a database, with an easy-to-use tool to create your own tables by applying a simple/complex selection of indicators and filters. An exhaustive analysis of this year's data is beyond the scope of this newsletter. However, we should note that, of the 24,442 schools in England in January 2023, 17,181 (70.3%) had no religious character, 4,730 (19.4%) were Anglican, 2,033 (8.3%) were Roman Catholic, 325 (1.3%) were other Christian, and 173 (0.7%) were non-Christian or multi-faith. Run your own queries at:

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2023>

ACADEMIC STUDIES

New book: a robust defence of secularization theory and experience

In *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2023, [6] + 227p., ISBN: 9781479814282, paperback), Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan Cragun have attempted 'to provide a simplified, coherent, and testable version of secularization theory'. There are six core chapters dealing with: secularization theory; a global overview of secularization experience (behaviour, belonging, and believing) from the World Values Survey and European Values Study time series (with detailed tables in the appendix); case studies of religious change in Norway, Chile, South Korea, and the USA; a refutation of the 'religion is natural and secularity unnatural' thesis; a portrait of lived secularity; and a review of possible exceptions to secularization. Inevitably, such a broad canvass renders it impossible to examine empirically all countries in detail, historically and contemporaneously, so BRIN readers should not be surprised to find limited information specifically bearing on Britain, although they will gain much from the contextualization and the multitude of references in the endnotes. The book is written in a no nonsense style and is clearly directed, in the main, at a North American audience, and designed as a corrective to the 'school' of academic sociologists of religion around Rodney Stark, who have expressed doubts about the reality, indeed even the possibility, of secularization. The authors' message for them is loud and clear: secularization is happening, in line with theory, and is 'beyond doubt'. The back cover commendation of the book by the UK's Steve Bruce reads: '*Beyond Doubt* will be the defining text on the undeniable proof that secularization theory is correct and here to stay.' Perhaps it will be. On the other hand, the authors are surely right to flag up the limitations of their work and the need for additional research, not least, they argue, the development of better measures of secularization at macro, meso, and micro levels.

Open access journal articles and blogs

Philip Cowley and Alan Wager, ‘Does the British Electorate Mind Politicians Doing God?’, a blog on the Theos website, 6 June 2023, offering further analysis of the data from the YouGov poll conducted on 22–23 February 2023, among an online sample of 2,008 Britons, and initially featured in *Counting Religion in Britain*, No. 89, February 2023:

- <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2023/06/07/does-the-british-electorate-mind-politicians-doing-god>

Pink Dandelion, ‘Believing and Belonging in Britain Yearly Meeting: The Use of Serial Quantitative Studies’, *Quaker Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2023, pp. 61–77; in anticipation of a new survey of British Quakers to be undertaken by the Centre for Research in Quaker Studies in October 2023, the author summarizes the principal findings from the previous studies in the series, in 1990, 2003, and (most especially) 2013, and highlights significant differences between them at:

- <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/quaker.2023.28.1.8>

DATASETS

Whatever happened to the Centre for Comparative European Survey Data?

From time to time, BRIN has acknowledged the valuable work done over the years by the Centre for Comparative European Survey Data (CCESD), which has provided a portal for non-data experts to access and analyse some of the most important social scientific survey series, including much data on religion. CCESD comprised three sub-sites: the British Election Studies Information System (BESIS); the British Social Attitudes Information System (BSAIS); and the CCESD Information System (for Europe-wide surveys). BRIN has noticed that the links for all three services are now broken. Our enquiries to three organizations which might have been expected to have become aware of what happened to CCESD have yielded no answers to the mystery, to date. Any BRIN reader with relevant information is invited to get in touch with us.

APPENDIX KEYWORDS/TAGS

Abortion, Alan Wager, Barna Group, Bible, Britain Yearly Meeting, British Election Studies Information System, British Social Attitudes Information System, Centre for Comparative European Survey Data, church membership, Co-operative Funeralcare, faith schools, funeral music, human extinction events, hymns, importance of religion, Isabella Kasselstrand, Jesus Christ, justice, Methodist Church, New York University Press, Pew Global Attitudes Survey, Pew Research Center, Phil Zuckerman, Philip Cowley, Pink Dandelion, Quaker Studies, religion and politics, religious apocalypse, Religious Society of Friends, rites of passage, Ryan Cragun, same-sex marriage, Scottish Episcopal Church, secularization, teenagers, Theos, World Values Survey, YouGov