

Counting Religion in Britain

A Monthly Round-Up of New Statistical Sources Number 100 – January 2024

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OPINION POLLS

Religion as a source of national identity: new Pew Global Attitudes Survey release

The latest release of data from the Spring 2023 wave of the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, fielded in 23 countries including the UK (where 1,024 adults aged 18 and over were interviewed by telephone between 20 February and 25 April), concerns the perceived importance of four components of national identity: language, customs and traditions, birthplace, and religion. Across all the surveyed nations, a median of 91% said being able to speak their country's most common language was important for being considered a true national, while 81% judged sharing the country's customs and traditions to be an important criterion, 58% having been born in the country, and 42% being a member of the country's predominant religion. In the UK, 88% felt the ability to speak English to be very or somewhat important for being truly British, 76% sharing British customs and traditions, 41% being born in Britain, and just 29% being a Christian (the other 71% indicating this was not very or not at all important).

The UK was by no means alone in assigning limited importance to being a member of the predominant religion (Christianity among all the Western publics), Canadians, French, Germans, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, and Australians all returning even lower figures. Older adults generally placed greater importance on religion as part of their national identity (the UK results being 16% for the under-40s and 36% for those aged 40 years and over). Members of the primary religious group in each country were also found to be more likely to consider their religion to be a critical piece of their national identity (the UK results being 11% for those unaffiliated with Christianity and 51% for Christians). Similarly, religion was more likely to be regarded as an important piece of national identity by those on the political right than on the left (the UK results being 15% on the left and 40% on the right). Pew's report is available at:

- <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/01/18/language-and-traditions-are-considered-central-to-national-identity/>

Michaela Community School, Brent and its alleged ban on prayer rituals

During the middle of the month, on 16–17 January 2024, an unusual test case reached the High Court in London, potentially affecting a pupil's freedom to pray in school. The particular school concerned was the Michaela Community School in Brent, which was founded and is led (as headteacher) by Katharine Birbalsingh, a former government social mobility tsar. In March 2023, the school introduced a policy banning prayer rituals. This has now been challenged by a Muslim student at the school, claiming the policy is discriminatory, breaching her right to freedom of religion. Arguments have been presented by counsel acting, respectively, for the student and for the school, but no date has been set for a ruling in the case. Meanwhile, in one of its regular online polls for *The Observer*, fielded among 2,060 UK adults on 23–26 January 2024, Opinium Research discovered that only 29% of respondents had heard about the case, peaking at 40% in London (where the school is situated). Full breaks are available at:

- <https://www.opinium.com/polling-tables-archive/>

Updates to YouGov trackers on religion-related themes

Two YouGov trackers on religion-related themes have been updated this month. Asked on 24 January 2024 whether religion on the whole is a positive or negative influence on the world, the majority—57%—of the 2,008 Britons polled online judged it to be a negative influence and only 20% a positive influence. The findings were in line with other surveys in the series that began in 2019, with topline and breaks by standard demographics available at:

- <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/the-influence-of-religion-on-the-world-according-to-brits>

The other tracker concerned attitudes to the maximum Sunday trading hours for large shops in England and Wales that had been laid down by the Sunday Trading Act 1994. In the latest study, undertaken online on 20–22 January 2024, the majority—52%—favoured unrestricted Sunday trading, with shop owners opening for as long as they wanted. Just 26% supported the statutory six-hour limit, with a further 15% opposed to shops opening at all on Sundays. The results are again in line with other polls in the series, which similarly began in 2019. The data table, with breaks by demographics, is available at:

- https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/P_Main_Political_Tracker_Survey_Rotation10_sr_21.pdf

Changing shape of funerals: SunLife *Cost of Dying* Report, 2024

SunLife's *Cost of Dying, 2024 Report*, which has been published annually for two decades, aspires to provide 'a comprehensive view of funeral costs and attitudes to funerals over time'. This year's edition was compiled on the basis of two surveys conducted by Critical Research, the first interviewing 100 funeral directors across the UK in May–July 2023, and the second interviewing (in June–July 2023) 1,522 individuals who had been involved in organizing a funeral over the past four years. The majority (80% in 2023) of funerals continue to involve cremations (53%) or burials (27%), typically with some form of 'service', but the combined proportion has declined from 97% in 2019. On the rise have been direct cremations, where the funeral involves no service, which stood at just 3% in 2019 but 20% in 2023. The increase was initially precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic (which was accompanied by severe restrictions on funerals) but latterly by the cost-of-living crisis, since direct cremations are so much less expensive than traditional funerals. However, it would be a mistake to imagine that direct cremations lack all association with some kind of memorial service, which continues to be held (beforehand or afterwards) in 45% of cases. Two-thirds of funerals are arranged without any prior knowledge of whether the deceased wanted a religious or non-religious service, but only 53% of funeral planners reported the service they arranged as 'religious' and 56% of funeral directors noted a drop in the number of traditional religious funerals. Notwithstanding, the playlist of the top ten funeral 'songs' in 2023 was still headed by *Abide with Me* and also included a further four religious hymns/songs. SunLife's report can be found at:

- <https://www.sunlife.co.uk/siteassets/documents/cost-of-dying/sunlife-cost-of-dying-report-2024.pdf/>

Fall-out from Israel-Hamas conflict: where do British public sympathies lie?

British public opinion towards the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas (the latter designated as a terrorist organization by the UK government), initially confined to Israel and Gaza but now spreading more widely in the Middle East, has been tracked by YouGov since it erupted on 7 October 2023. Online samples of adults have been asked on which side their sympathies mostly lie. The principal data points are shown in Table 1, below. It will be seen that, in all instances, the majority of respondents (three-fifths to two-thirds in most polls) has aligned with neither side against the other. However, support for the Palestinians has clearly

grown over time, while that for the Israelis has diminished a little. The full data table for the latest study (13–15 January 2024) can be found at:

- https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/P_Main_Political_Tracker_Survey_Rotation10_sr_20_W.pdf

Table 1: British public’s sympathies in Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 2023–24

| % down | 9/10 | 16/10 | 19/10 | 25/10 | 1/11 | 7/11 | 15/11 | 20/12 | 13/1 |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| N = | 2,046 | 2,574 | 2,052 | 2,064 | 2,045 | 2,080 | 2,007 | 2,085 | 1,751 |
| Israeli side | 21 | 21 | 19 | 19 | 19 | 19 | 19 | 16 | 19 |
| Palestinian side | 15 | 17 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 21 | 20 | 22 | 27 |
| Both sides equally | 20 | 29 | 32 | 32 | 31 | 32 | 30 | 32 | 30 |
| Don’t know | 45 | 33 | 32 | 30 | 31 | 28 | 31 | 29 | 24 |

Source: YouGov.

Notes: Dates represent the first day of fieldwork and month. In the January 2024 survey, the response option ‘both sides equally’ was replaced by ‘neither’.

Fall-out from Israel-Hamas conflict: perceptions of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia

Below, we have extended by another month the two tables about anti-Semitism and Islamophobia being perceived as problems in the UK that were first published in the October–December 2023 editions (Nos. 97–99) of *Counting Religion in Britain*. This latest Savanta political tracker was undertaken online on 19–21 January 2024, the degree to which Islamophobia is perceived as a problem having decreased slightly since November. In the past, Islamophobia has always been regarded as somewhat more of a problem in the UK than anti-Semitism, but, in this latest poll, they are seen as equal problems. Full details are available at:

- <https://savanta.com/knowledge-centre/published-polls/westminster-voting-intention-political-attitudes-poll-savanta-25-january-2024/>

Table 2: Perceptions of anti-Semitism as a problem in the UK, July 2023–January 2024

| % down | July | Aug | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan |
|----------------------|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|--------------------|
| Big problem | 16 | 15 | 14 | 17 | 22 | 21 | 16 |
| Somewhat a problem | 34 | 35 | 37 | 37 | 35 | 36 | 41 |
| Not really a problem | 25 | 25 | 23 | 21 | 18 | 21 | 22 |
| Not a problem at all | 7 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| Don’t know | 18 | 17 | 18 | 18 | 17 | 14 | 15 |
| <i>A problem</i> | 50 | 49 | 51 | 53 | 57 | 57 | 56 |
| <i>Not a problem</i> | 32 | 33 | 31 | 28 | 25 | 29 | 27 |

Source: Savanta political tracker.

Table 3: Perceptions of Islamophobia as a problem in the UK, July 2023–January 2024

| % down | July | Aug | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan |
|----------------------|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|--------------------|
| Big problem | 20 | 21 | 22 | 20 | 23 | 21 | 19 |
| Somewhat a problem | 35 | 35 | 36 | 37 | 36 | 37 | 37 |
| Not really a problem | 21 | 21 | 19 | 19 | 18 | 21 | 20 |
| Not a problem at all | 9 | 9 | 10 | 9 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Don’t know | 15 | 14 | 13 | 14 | 14 | 12 | 13 |
| <i>A problem</i> | 55 | 56 | 58 | 57 | 59 | 58 | 56 |
| <i>Not a problem</i> | 30 | 30 | 29 | 28 | 28 | 30 | 30 |

Source: Savanta political tracker.

FAITH ORGANIZATION STUDIES

National Churches Trust manifesto

The National Churches Trust (NCT) has launched a new 36-page full colour manifesto: *Every Church Counts: A Six Point Plan to Save the UK's Church Buildings*. It underlines the challenges they face, their importance to the community and national heritage, and the steps being taken by the NCT to safeguard them. Although not based on any major new research project, it is a useful collation of current information, including some statistics (among them results of a Savanta poll in December 2023). There are almost 20,000 church buildings which have statutory listed status, about half the total of 38,500 churches in the UK, which gives some measure of their architectural and historic significance. However, 943 are on the Historic England Heritage at Risk Register. In the last ten years, 3,500 churches have closed, and many more are being earmarked for closure (not least in Scotland). The manifesto is available at:

- <https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/EveryChurchCounts.pdf>

Coronavirus chronicles: impact of Covid-19 on Church of England attendance

In the latest issue of *FutureFirst* bulletin (No. 91, February 2024, pp. 2, 6), Peter Brierley has reworked the Church of England's annual *Statistics for Mission* (currently available to 2022) to determine the possible long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on levels of churchgoing in England (as measured by Average Sunday Attendance). His calculations 'show that Covid did indeed make a huge difference in physical church attendance but since then it has gradually recovered and by 2025 church attendance is perhaps likely to be back to what it would have been (as estimated) if there had been no Covid. If live-streaming is included in attendance figures, numbers seem to have even increased!' *FutureFirst* is available as a free digital subscription from peter@brierleyres.com.

United Reformed Church statistics

As in previous years, BRIN is greatly indebted to Martin Camroux for sharing his analysis of the latest statistics of the United Reformed Church (URC), as published in its yearbook for 2024. This is a task he has undertaken every year since his ordination in 1975, just three years after the formation of the URC. This year, his labours have proved more than usually difficult since the URC has changed the basis of its data-gathering in respect of local ecumenical partnerships (LEPs), involving URC places of worship and those of one or more other denominations. Whereas, at least theoretically, the aim had once been to capture only the URC element of each LEP, the new rule is that the *whole* of the membership and attendance of each LEP involving URC members should be reported and credited to the URC, even though URC members are a minority, often a tiny minority, in most LEPs. Although, apparently, not all URC churches have adopted the rule in practice as yet, a sufficient number have done so to give the superficial impression that the URC's fortunes have turned around, especially regarding church membership (which is calculated to be 12.9% up on 2023), but even in terms of average congregations (2.1% up). Whatever the theological rationale for the change in methodology may have been, the URC's leadership has thrown a smokescreen over its own quantitative record, creating a significant discontinuity in its annual reporting, to the eternal regret of church statisticians and historians. Given this confusion, we must be grateful to Martin Camroux who has separately computed data for URC churches *not* in LEPs. This reveals that membership was 4.8% *down* on 2023, which is consistent with other URC performance indicators, for example, a reduction of 44 in the number of URC churches between 2023 and 2024 and of 15 stipendiary ministers. The familiar narrative of URC decline still holds good.

Religious beliefs in Wolverhampton: Through Faith Missions street survey, 2023

BRIN is indebted to Peter Brierley's *FutureFirst* for alerting us to a street survey into personal religious beliefs in Wolverhampton undertaken by Through Faith Missions (TFM) as part of its mission to the city in May 2023. A summary of the findings has been prepared by Peter Sammons and published in the bi-monthly magazine *Sword*, Vol. 18, No. 6, November-December 2023, pp. 30–1. The sample size is not reported, and, in any case, the sample is unlikely to have been a cross-section of the Wolverhampton population, their answers perhaps suggesting an above-average receptivity to Christianity. Five questions were posed, and the typical length of interview was five minutes. Asked about belief in God, 5% replied 'just a force', 12% 'a distant being', 48% 'a personal God', 14% 'non-existent', and 21% 'something else'. On Jesus Christ, 6% said 'he didn't exist at all', 8% 'he was an ordinary man and nothing more', 30% 'he was a prophet and a messenger from God', 41% 'he is the only son of God', and 15% 'something else'. The article is available at:

- <https://tfm.uk.endis.com/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=342784>

British Sikh Report, 2023

The tenth edition of *British Sikh Report*, edited by Jagdev Singh Virdee, is largely based on findings from a self-selecting (and thus potentially unrepresentative) sample of 1,500 UK Sikhs to a primarily online survey in 2023 (pp. 16–45). Results were weighted to align with the age and gender profile of Sikhs in the 2021 census of population for England and Wales. The principal topics covered were: cost of living crisis; sewa (selfless service) and donations to gurdwaras and other organizations; attitudes towards policing; police-Sikh community relations; voting intentions and politics; caring for older persons and children; neurodiversity; Sikh representation; and Punjab and India issues. With a general election in the offing, we may note that 43% of UK Sikhs intended to vote for the Labour Party, 20% for the Conservatives, 14% for other parties, with 23% preferring not to say. On anti-Sikh hate crime, 23% had personally experienced it during the past five years and a further 10% knew somebody who had been a victim. The report also includes two introductory essays: Jagbir Jhutti-Johal (University of Birmingham), 'Ten Years of the British Sikh Report' (pp. 3–8) and Rich Pereira (Office for National Statistics), 'Understanding the Data: Sikh Identity, Census 2021 in England and Wales' (pp. 9–15). The document can be found at:

- <https://britishsikhreport.org/british-sikh-report-2023-full/>

Fall-out from Israel-Hamas conflict: anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents

Since the current conflict began on 7 October 2023, the Community Security Trust (CST) has published several reports on its website of the number of anti-Semitic incidents in the UK which it has investigated and validated. In parallel, Tell MAMA has been monitoring the growth of Islamophobic incidents over the same period. However, surprisingly, neither organization has released any updates on incidents since 13 December 2023, which data have already been noted in the December edition of *Counting Religion in Britain*.

Fall-out from Israel-Hamas conflict: anti-Semitism in the workplace

In November 2023, Work Avenue, the charity which provides employment and business support primarily for the Jewish community, launched an online survey of anti-Semitic experiences in the workplace. The results have yet to appear on Work Avenue's website, but, according to a report in the *Jewish News* filed on 15 January 2024, 39% of the more than 500 respondents claimed to have been recipients of anti-Semitic comments from colleagues or clients since 7 October 2023, when the conflict between Israel and Hamas erupted. On the other hand, 72% had experienced supportive behaviour from colleagues or clients. The sample

appears to have been entirely self-selecting, so its representativeness of the wider Jewish community may be in some doubt. The *Jewish News* article can be found at:

- <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/survey-four-in-ten-british-jews-have-suffered-antisemitism-at-work-since-7-october/>

ACADEMIC STUDIES

Three recent academic papers

- Philippe Brillet, ‘Le christianisme gallois entre splendeur encore récente et effondrement rapide’ [How Welsh Christianity is moving from its long-lasting triumph to a quick demise], *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2023, 20 pp., arguing that Wales long withstood dechristianization but has succumbed to a dramatic decline since the late 1980s, as evidenced in the religious censuses of 2001–21: open access text at: <https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/11201>
- Gareth Longden and Mandy Robbins, ‘The Psychological Type Profile of Humanists UK: Not Just the Mirror Image of Believers’, *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 33, 2023, pp. 65–89, based on a survey of 1,042 members of Humanists UK, who were found neither to be the mirror image of churchgoers nor to be representative of the broader UK population: restricted access text at: <https://brill.com/display/book/9789004544574/BP000012.xml>
- Sriya Iyer, Shaun Larcom, and Po-Wen She, ‘Do Religious People Cope Better in a Crisis? Evidence from the UK Pandemic Lockdowns’, *Cambridge Working Papers in Economics*, No. 2404, 2024, 27 pp., the authors using data from the Understanding Society longitudinal dataset to demonstrate, inter alia, that religious people were one-fifth less likely to suffer increased unhappiness or depression during the first two UK Covid-19 lockdowns (March-July 2020 and November 2020-March 2021): open access text at: <https://www.econ.cam.ac.uk/research-files/repec/cam/pdf/cwpe2403.pdf>

APPENDIX KEYWORDS/TAGS

Anti-Semitism, anti-Sikh hate crime, British Sikh Report, Cambridge Working Papers in Economics, Christianity, church attendance, Church of England, coronavirus, Cost of Dying Report, Covid-19, Critical Research, freedom of religion, funerals, FutureFirst, Gareth Longden, Humanists UK, Islam, Islamophobia, Israel-Hamas conflict, Jagbir Jhutti-Johal, Jagdev Singh Virdee, Jewish News, Katharine Birbalsingh, local ecumenical partnerships, Mandy Robbins, Martin Camroux, Michaela Community School, National Churches Trust, national identity, negative influence of religion, Opinium Research, Palestinians, Peter Brierley, Peter Sammons, Pew Global Attitudes Survey, Pew Research Center, Philippe Brillet, Po-Wen She, prayer rituals, religious beliefs, religious census, religious prejudice, Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion, *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, Rich Pereira, Savanta, Shaun Larcom, shop opening hours, Sriya Iyer, Sunday trading, SunLife, Sword, The Observer, Through Faith Missions, truly British, United Reformed Church, voting intentions, Wales, Wolverhampton, Work Avenue, YouGov