

# Religion in the United Kingdom

## Diversity, Trends and Decline

By [Vexen Crabtree](#) 2007 July 05

With over [170 distinct religions](#) counted in the [2001 Census](#), the religious make-up of the UK is diverse, complex, multicultural and surprising. Less than half of the British people believe in a God, yet about 72% told the 2001 census that they were Christian, and 66% of the population have no *actual* connection to any religion or church, despite what they tend to write down on official forms. Between 1979 and 2005, half of all Christians stopped going to church on a Sunday. Religion in Britain has suffered an immense decline since the 1950s, and all indicators show a continued [secularisation of British society](#) in line with other European countries such as France.

	Adherents	% pop
<a href="#">Christian</a> <sub>1</sub>	42 079 000	71.6
<a href="#">No religion</a> (inc. Jedis) <sub>1</sub>	9 104 000	15.5
<a href="#">Muslim</a> <sub>2</sub>	1 546 626	2.7
<a href="#">Hindu</a> <sub>2</sub>	552 421	1.0
<a href="#">Jedi Knight</a> <sub>1</sub>	390 000	0.7
<a href="#">Sikh</a> <sub>2</sub>	329 358	0.6
<a href="#">Jewish</a> <sub>2</sub>	259 927	0.5
<a href="#">Buddhist</a> <sub>2</sub>	144 453	0.3
<a href="#">Spiritualist</a>	32 404	
Pagan	30 569	
Jainism	15 132	
Wicca	7 227	
Rastafarians	4 692	
Baha'i	4 645	
Zoroastrians	3 738	
Christadelphian	2 368	
Druidism	1 657	
<a href="#">Pantheism</a>	1 603	
<a href="#">Satanism</a>	1 525	
<a href="#">New Age</a>	906	
Eckankar	426	
Raja Yoga	261	
Native American Church	234	
Vodun (Voodoo)	123	
Occult	99	
Ancestor Worship	98	
Free Church of Love	49	
Amish	24	
Other <sub>1</sub>	179 000	0.3
Total religious	45 163 000	76.8
No answer <sub>1</sub>	4 289 000	7.3

# 1. Organized Religion in England

## Summary:

- 66% of the UK population have no connection with any religion or church
- 18% of the British public say they are a practicing member of an organized religion

The comprehensive professional research in 2006 by Tear fund found that two thirds (66% - 32.2 million people) in the UK have no connection with any religion or church. In 2003 August, 18% of the British public said they were a practicing member of an organized religion, 25% they were *members* of a world religion According to these results, one fifth of self-declared members would also not describe themselves as practicing that religion. Presumably the others remain members for traditional reasons or due to social pressure.

“This secular majority presents a major challenge to churches. Most of them - 29.3 million - are unreceptive and closed to attending church; churchgoing is simply not on their agenda.”

Tearfund (2007) on 2006 research

	1964	1970	1983	1992	2005
<b>Belong to a religion and attend services</b>	74%	71%	55%	37%	31%
<b>Does not belong</b>	3%	5%	26%	31%	38%

Source:

British Social Attitudes (2006/7)

Those who 'do not belong' have first shed the *practical* and *theoretical* underpinnings of their religion, before finally overcoming social pressure to state 'your' religion. There are many who are not at the later stages of this secularisation process, so they still say they 'belong', although they are in the process of forgetting & discarding the physical and mental aspects of what they say they belong to. Sociologists know that if they count heads and ask about beliefs, more people *say* they belong to a religion, and *say* they have the beliefs of a particular religion, than actually do. People over-state their own religiosity; that's why statistics from polls will often give higher percentages of 'believers' than will head-counting and deeper investigations.

In a large 2006 August poll of year 9 and 10 teenagers in Cornwall, only 19% said that they 'have a religious faith'. It seems certain that if these teenagers reflect the future (only 22% said they believe in God), religious affiliation is going to continue to drop. A wider Mori poll commissioned by the British Library found that nearly half of teenagers in Britain are atheists (2007)

Organized religion in the UK has severely declined to the point where it is generally overlooked and ignored. The cultural attachment to Christianity in general lives on, but [Monica Furlong](#) in her 2002 comprehensive review of the state of English religion

summarizes the English in the same way as Grace Davies who wrote "[Religion in Britain since 1945](#)" by saying the English "believe without belonging" to our religions. That is, many profess belief but do not take part in organized religion. Subsequent scholars (and we will see supporting evidence on this page) have doubted whether we *believe*; one said we "don't believe, and don't belong". The Catholic Church has shouldered the main part of this decline, as well as the Church of England as can be seen in the rest of the historical stats on this page.

“In the twenty years between 1980 and 2000 the Church of England suffered a 27 per cent decline in church membership. The Roman Catholic Church suffered a similar decline in the same period in mass attendance. Methodists, Baptists and others suffered decline too, though in all the churches, it must be said, there have been significant successes in certain churches and particular enterprises. The only institutional church which has continued to grow has been the Orthodox Church - Greek and Russian - where demand for churches exceeds supply, mainly because of immigration from Orthodox countries.

There is a rather touching footnote to all this, which is that people questioned about how much they go to church, give figures which, if true, would add up to twice those given by the churches.”

"[C of E: The State It's In](#)" by [Monica Furlong](#) (2000)

“Catholics', the largest group, estimated to number about a million by the year 2000 are declining the fastest, but what demands notice is that charismatic Evangelicals, still one of the smaller groups in the Church, are growing rapidly - by around 6,000 every five years. Evangelical Christians, according to the nomenclature of *Religious Trends*, are also growing and moving up towards the half million mark. These last two groups are undeniably success stories numerically.”

"[C of E: The State It's In](#)" by [Monica Furlong](#) (2000)

### **Year 2000 snapshots:**

- In 2000, 60 per cent of the population claimed to belong to a specific religion with 55 per cent being Christian. However, half of all adults aged 18 and over who belonged to a religion have never attended a religious service.
- 48% of people in the UK claim to belong to a religion, compared with 86% of people in the US and 92% of Italians. From BBC's report "[UK is 'losing' its religion](#)" (2000)
- Church attendance in 1999 was 7.5% on an average Sunday, down from 10% in 1989 and 12% in 1979.

A strange cultural phenomenon that occurs when a state religion dies is that many families will state that their religion is the common religion, i.e., Christian, despite not believing in the basics of that religion. "[Institutionalized Religions Have Their Numbers Inflated by National Polls](#)" by [Vexen Crabtree](#) (2009) expands on this phenomenon.

## 2. The Importance of Religion

### 2.1. The Importance of Religion to the British Public

- 17% of the population responded that religion was one of the most significant factors in their lives. A persons' own experience, parents, education and friends come first (2003)
- 33% of the British public consider that 'religion is important'
- 33% describe themselves as religious - 63% say they are not (2006)

Those who *do* profess religion in the UK are largely inactive. A 2007 poll commissioned by the British Library found that 50% of them "do not practice religion very much, if at all" with Christians being the most inactive. A running theme of all the statistics we have seen on this page affirm that although many *say* they are religious they frequently admit they are not practicing.

### 2.2. Compared to Other Countries

Of 41 countries polled, 16 most developed countries have less than 40% of the populace who think religion is important in their lives. The rest (including the US at a very high 60%, and nearly all developing countries) had at least 57% of their populace who said so. Out of all the countries where the majority of the people do not consider religion important, Northern Ireland is the only country which experiences a conflict closely tied with religion. The USA stands as the only developed country that is generally religious.

## 3. Christianity is the Established Religion in the UK

One single general trend can be brought out of all the statistics of religious belief in the UK: Our population is mostly irreligious, innocent and ignorant of religion, and despite some defaulting to calling themselves "Christian" (71%), the country is not Christian despite a vague [50% lingering belief in a God of some sort](#). Just over 6% of the population go to church on a Sunday (for every 6 who do, 94 do not).

“Many people are brought up, as part of their family, to say that they are Christian despite only having a precursory knowledge of Christ and only a vague belief in God. Frequently only a single parent figure has any interest in the Church, but insists that the household each calls themselves a Christian, and sometimes this continues for generations.

An *implicit* Christian is one who calls themselves Christian out of ease or habit, not due to belief. From personal experience, most self declared Christians in the United Kingdom confuse believing in God with being a Christian. Many think that if you believe in God, you are therefore a Christian. In a predominantly Christian (Western) context, that assumption suits only demographics, and is not useful for discerning what *beliefs* people actually have.”

["Institutionalized Religions Have Their Numbers Inflated by National Polls" by Vexen Crabtree](#) (2009)

Despite this, the historical rule of Christian authority in England led to the full institutionalizing of Christianity. Although much of this infrastructure has been removed -

public offices are no longer restricted to members of Catholic *or* Protestant denominations, some oddities still remain. A strange artefact of that history is that Bishops still sit in the House of Lords (the UK's second chamber of government). "Britain is the only country left in the democratic world that allows clerics to sit in its legislature as of right" As the public do not know much about religion nor can they be roused to either oppose or support it, such anachronisms are sometimes left unchallenged: The government tends not to devote much time to actively dismantling such apparatus, because even though it is an democratic embarrassment for a country, the public themselves don't often notice.

## 4. Belief in God

Many large-scale polls indicate that less than half the British public believe in God:

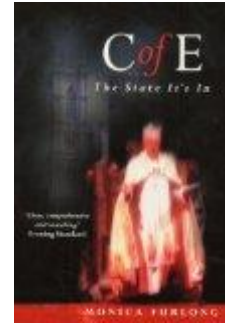
Date	Details	Belief in God
2008	1000 people were polled both in the UK and the USA and asked "Do you believe there is a God?". Less than 40% in the UK said yes, compared with 80% in the USA.	<40%
2006	12507 people were polled, finding that only 35% in Great Britain believe in any kind of God or supreme being, compared to 27% in France, 62% in Italy, 48% in Spain, 41% in Germany and 73% in the USA.	35%
2006	Poll of 4000 older teenagers in Cornwall found that only 22% could affirm that they believed in God, and 49% said they didn't.	22%
2003	1001 British adults surveyed	60%
2003	55% of the British public do not believe in a higher being	45% inc. those unsure

If the poll of 4000 year 9 & 10 teenagers indicates what the future holds, then we can expect belief in God to continue to fall over the next few decades.

## 5. Ignorance of Religion

The British public, both adults and children, are almost wholly ignorant of the basic facts surrounding Christians and other world religions. The Ofsted report on Religious Education (RE) in schools (2007) states that there is a problem even with teachers' insufficient knowledge of RE at primary school level and likewise with recruiting the correct specialists at secondary school level. Not many people seem to mind, as [religious education is seen as easy, and the lessons themselves often used for discussions of current affairs rather than religious studies](#). There is a pandemic innocence of knowledge about religion.

“Children who do not come from churchgoing homes - as I did not - now grow up largely ignorant of Christian ideas in a way unimaginable half a century ago. [...] The comments about religion by journalists in the press and on television [...] suggest that even the basic Christian ideas are no longer understood by university-educated people, still less by others. Indeed even churchgoers can reveal an ignorance of the main elements of Christian belief.”



"[C of E: The State It's In](#)" by [Monica Furlong](#) (2000)

In data revealed in a Mori poll from 2003 Aug, only 55% of the English population could name one of the four Christian gospels ([Matthew](#), [Mark](#), Luke or John). Slightly more, 60%, could name the sacred book used by Muslims: the Koran.

Religious education seems all round to be shunned, and this goes hand in hand with the obvious lack of concern the average British person has for religious matters.

“When I asked the Very Reverend David Edwards, the author of over thirty books on modern Christianity, for his assessment of the state of spirituality in England, he just told me bleakly that "The English have lost any sense of what religion is”

"[The English](#)" by Jeremy Paxman (1998)

## 6. Church Attendance in the UK

In 2007, Tear fund published the following results of their comprehensive review of British Christian religion in 2006:

“One in four of the UK adult population say they go to church at least once a year. [...] 59% never or practically never go to church.”

Tear fund (2007)

- 10% of the UK adult population go to church at least weekly.
- 15% attend church at least monthly.
- 26% attend church at least yearly.
- 59% never or practically never go to church.

Self-disclosure polls of church attendance are generally *twice as high* as reality. Actual measures of church attendance have shown that Church attendance in 1999 was 7.5%, down from 10% in 1989 and 12% in 1979 (declining by about an absolute 2% per decade). This trend predicts that in 2007, the rate will be close to 6% who attend, not the 10% who think they do according to Tear fund. This estimate was backed up by the English Church Census 2004.

The [Christian Research group's fourth English Church Census](#) (2004) is another professional census whose authors have never shied away from reporting honest statistics, no matter how painful they have been for British Christianity. 37500 churches were invited to take part, and about half did. Some stark truths of Church attendance between 1998 and 2005:

- Between 1998 and 2005, half a million people stopped going to church on Sunday. Daily Telegraph's religious affairs correspondent, Jonathan Petre, says "While 1,000 new people are joining a church each week, 2,500 are leaving"
- 6.3% of the population go to church on an average Sunday, compared to 7.5% in 1998
- 29% of churchgoers are 65 or over, compared with 16% of the population
- Sunday churchgoing is declining at 2.3% per year, slightly slower than the 1990s rate of 2.7% per year
- Nearly all Church 'growth' is due to immigrants. A massive influx of Polish workers has filled some churches.
- "The Roman Catholics have recorded the largest drop [...], it has **halved** over the past sixteen years".
- The drop in the 20-29 age group was 29%.

"The fastest rates of decline were among Roman Catholics and Methodists; whereas the Pentecostal Churches showed significant growth over the period. As a result, Methodism has dropped to fourth place behind Pentecostalism. If these rates continue, the C of E will overtake the RC Church within the next four years"

"London has 11 per cent of all churches in England, and 20 per cent of all churchgoers. It has 53 per cent of all English Pentecostals, and 27 per cent of all Charismatic Evangelicals. Also, it caters for 57 per cent of all worshippers in their 20s. "I couldn't believe that figure myself, and had to check it again," said Peter Brierley, the director of Christian Research"

## 7. The 2001 National Census results on Religion

The 2001 National Census optional question on religion was answered by 92% of the population. The Office for National Statistics today (2003 Feb 13) released some brief analysis of statistics pertaining to religion:

- [Religion in Britain](#) - brief look at major religions.
- [Religion: Detailed information including regional comparisons](#)

Statistics quoted and stated below are taken from the above two pages.

### Religion in England and Wales:

"There are 37.3 million people in England and Wales who state their religion as Christian. The percentage of Christians is similar between the two countries but the proportion of people who follow other religions is 6.0 per cent in England compared with 1.5 per cent in Wales. In England, 3.1 per cent of the population state their religion as Muslim (0.7 per cent in Wales), making this the most common religion after Christianity. For other religions, 1.1 per cent in England and 0.2 per cent in Wales are Hindu, 0.7 per cent in England and 0.1 per cent in Wales are Sikh, 0.5 per cent in England and 0.1 per cent in Wales are Jewish and 0.3 per cent in England and 0.2 per cent in Wales are [Buddhist](#).

The English region with the highest proportion of Christians is the North East (80.1 per cent). [...] Outside London, the counties with the highest proportion of Christians are Durham, Merseyside and Cumbria, each with 82 per cent or more. The districts with the highest proportions of Christians are all in the North West: St Helens, Wigan and Copeland

(Cumbria) each have 86 per cent or more. In Wales, the highest proportion of Christians is found on the Isle of Anglesey (79 per cent) and the fewest in Blaenau Gwent (64 per cent)"

### **Religion in London:**

"London has the highest proportion of Muslims (8.5 per cent), Hindus (4.1 per cent) Jews (2.1 per cent) Buddhists (0.8 per cent) and people of other religions (0.5 per cent). [...] Fifty-eight per cent of people in London gave their religion as Christian, with the highest proportion in the borough of Havering (76 per cent). Thirty-six per cent of the population of Tower Hamlets and 24 per cent in Newham are Muslim. Over one per cent of the population of Westminster are Buddhist, while Harrow has the highest proportion of Hindus (19.6 per cent) and Barnet the highest proportion of Jewish people (14.8 per cent). Over eight per cent of the populations of Hounslow and Ealing are Sikh.

Sixteen per cent of the population of London say they have no religion, including 25 per cent in the City of London"

## **8. Belief in Various Religious and Spiritual Things**

In 2003, 18% said they were a practicing member of an organized religion, 25% they were *members* of a world religion. According to these results, one fifth of self-declared members would also not describe themselves as practicing that religion. Presumably the others remain members for traditional reasons or due to social pressure.

24% said they were spiritual but do not belong to an organized religion, 12% said they were sure there was no God and another 14% said they're unconvinced that one exists. Between them, it looks like 26% are agnostic or [atheist](#), and in a similar question (phrased differently) 29% said that they do not believe in God, and 60% said they did (but doesn't inquire as to which God they believe in). Most other large, modern polls [indicate that less than 50% of the British believe in a god](#).

Although in 2003, 60% believed in God, only 52% believed in Heaven<sup>4</sup> so it is clear that many theists are neither mainstream Muslims or Christians. 32% still believe in [hell](#) (2003) although a 2008 poll puts that value at under 20 68% believed in [souls](#) in 2003 meaning that there are many spiritualists who are not theists - something that does not surprise me.

Close friends (46%), a walk in the country (41%), music or poetry all are more inspirational than Jesus (24%) or Nelson Mandela (20%), and all those plus Princess Diana (13%) are more inspirational than "a sacred text" with a mere 6%.