

The Religions and Belief Landscape: facts, figures, ways of thinking

Religion in the United Kingdom is highly diverse and plural. It is a difficult task to provide a concise summary of the multiple traditions and practices that are present on our shores, whilst still remaining attentive to differences within and between religious communities. Religions are dynamic and they respond and adapt to different contexts, settings and times. They are not isolated, in time or by geography, and religious practices are shaped by individual communities and spiritual leaders as well as wider geo-political and cultural events. With this in mind, this resource provides an overview picture of the multi-faceted religious landscape of the United Kingdom, with particular attention to some of the changes that have been noted in religious affiliation over the past decades, principally drawing on publicly available statistical data. It is important to recognise, however, that whilst high-level statistics tell us useful information about religious affiliation and change on a large scale, they do not give us the local and 'lived' details that social care practitioners need to understand the religious landscape of the people and communities they work with on a daily basis.

First, a word on definitions. Despite the Equality Act's best attempts, when we talk about 'religion' it is clear from academic, policy and popular writing that there is no one universally accepted definition of religion. For some, religion is intricately linked to the existence of God or Gods; for others, the concept relates primarily to philosophical meaning-making and the big questions of life (Why are we here? What happens after we die?). Some view religion as a means to connect an individual to 'something bigger than themselves.' Religion can be both institutionally and structurally mandated (through a Church, mosque or temple, religious leaders and sacred texts) as well as incorporate harder to pin down feelings of spirituality, connection and transcendence which may not neatly map out onto the practices and teachings of existing faith institutions. Some people may not associate with a particular church or religious institution, but may feel strongly about the existence of angels or spirits, or might describe themselves as 'spiritual' but perhaps not religious. Others might see religion as something that is very carefully controlled by particular spiritual leaders and teachers. For others, 'religion' could even encompass arguably secular activities, such as football.

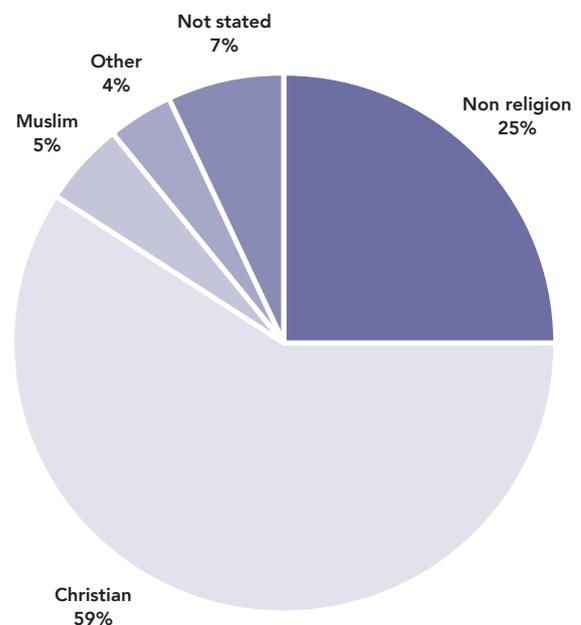
Social Care Practitioners are best served with a definition of religion that is deliberately broad, in order to incorporate the panoply of beliefs, institutions and practices one might come across in practice terms. This may be different to your own personal view of what religion is, but allowing for more fluidity in our understanding of the term will enable better engagement with those who might not share your perspectives. Although there may be some similarities between religious traditions and some shared values, there are also key differences between and within religious groups, sects and denominations.

Not every individual who shares the same religious affiliation will think the same. There are strident debates within religious communities about certain issues (on gender and sexualities equalities issues, for example) as well as between them, and therefore it is very important not to make assumptions about 'religious perspectives' without being attuned to the diversity that is present on the ground.

Religion in the UK: Statistics

The research field is complex and messy but we can draw on three main sources of data – Pew Foundation (annual), UK Census (every 10 years), and British Social Attitudes Survey (annual). They use different timescales and methodologies so the numbers don't line up identically. But the trends are clear – less Anglican and Catholic Christianity, more Pentecostalism, more non-Christian traditional ('world') religions, and MUCH more 'no religion' (somewhere between 25 and 52% now). Within that 'no religion' category there is much debate about what is going on, but the consensus is that 'no religion' nevertheless includes lots of 'new forms' of belief, as follows. If you examine the census statistics more closely, a trend for more women than men to claim religious affiliation is apparent, alongside a general trend for younger people to be non-religious.

Total Religious affiliation, England and Wales, 2011



Source: Census - Office for National Statistics

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The 2015-17 surveys conducted by Pew Forum gave the following results:

- The United Kingdom is the 29th most religious out of 34 European countries.
- 11% in the United Kingdom are highly religious, based on an overall index.
- 10% say religion is very important in their lives.
- 20% say they attend religious services at least monthly.
- 6% say they pray daily.
- 12% say they believe in God with absolute certainty.

British Social Attitudes Survey 2019

Two-thirds (66%) of people in Britain never attend religious services, apart from special occasions such as weddings, funerals and baptisms. • The proportion that report they attend religious services less than monthly has decreased. • The proportion that report they attend at least weekly, or less often but at least monthly, has remained stable – at around 11% and 7% respectively.

In the 2011 census, 'Other' incorporates:

Religion	Count
Pagan	56,620
Spiritualist	39,061
Jain	20,288
Spiritual	13,832
Wicca	11,766
Ravidassia	11,058
Rastafarian	7,906
Baha'i	5,021
Druid	4,189
Taoist	4,144
Zoroastrian	4,105
Believe in God	2,969
Scientology	2,418
Pantheism	2,216
Heathen	1,958
Own Belief System	1,949
Satanism	1,893
Witchcraft	1,276
Deist	1,199
Shintoism	1,075

Note: This list does not include two synthetic categories: 'mixed religion' (23,566), mentioned above, and 'other religions' (13,812), comprising miscellaneous responses not coded in some way.

In the 2011 census, 'No religion' incorporates:

Mysticism	158	204
Native American	234	127
New Age	906	698
Occult	99	502
Own Belief System	3,259	1,949
Pagan	30,569	56,620
Pantheism	1,603	2,216
Rastafarian	4,692	7,906
Satanism	1,525	1,893
Scientology	1,781	2,418
Spiritualist	32,404	39,061
Taoist	3,532	4,144
Theism	505	830
Universalist	971	923
Vodun	123	208
Wicca	7,227	11,766
Zoroastrian	3,738	4,105

An interesting question to ask, therefore, is what 'no religion' really means in contemporary Britain. It is clear from the statistics above that it does not automatically mean atheism, or a total rejection of all religious belief systems and spiritual practices. Recent academic research from the University of Kent (under the auspices of the Understanding Unbelief programme: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/>) has demonstrated that those who identify as 'non-religious' are a diverse group and may well still be involved in what we might see as spiritual activities, practices and views on the ethics of life and death. Notwithstanding this, the increase in those willing to identify as non-religious in Britain is a notable trend, and one to which we should pay close attention, as it is likely to continue.

It is important to be attuned to regional variations in the statistics on religious affiliation. In terms of Scotland and Northern Ireland, some similar patterns to England and Wales can be observed, as shown in the tables below:

Religion in Scotland	Number of People
Church of Scotland	1, 717, 871
Roman Catholic	841, 053
Other Christian	291, 275
Muslim	76, 737
Buddhist	12, 795
Jewish	5887
No Religion	1, 921, 018

Religion in Scotland (2011, National Records of Scotland)

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Religion in Northern Ireland	Number of People
Roman Catholic	738,083
Presbyterian	345,101
Church of Ireland	248,821
Methodist	54,253
No Religion	183,164

Religion in Northern Ireland (2011, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency)

What may also be interesting for social work practice and planning, is the difference in religious affiliation across Local Authority areas, which can be gleaned from the Annual Population Survey 2018 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/adhocs/009830religionbylocalauthoritygreatbritain2011to2018>). The data is outlined in the three tables below. Although comparative data is available from every Local Authority area across England and Wales, in the tables below only the top five areas are listed to give an indicative picture of the most populous religious and non-religious areas. It is perhaps not surprising to see areas such as Leeds or Birmingham in the top five of each table, given their population size, but it is interesting to note the variations across areas by religious tradition/non-religion.

Local Authority Area (England and Wales)	Number of People with No Religion
Leeds	343,871
Birmingham	341,889
Edinburgh	302,559
Glasgow	278,462
Cornwall	257,901

Largest number of people with no religion by LA Area (2018 Annual Population Survey)

Local Authority Area (England and Wales)	Number of Christians (all denominations)
Birmingham	433,269
Leeds	350,831
Liverpool	320,055
Co. Durham	313,080
Glasgow	268,377

Largest number of Christians by LA Area (2018 Annual Population Survey)

Local Authority Area (England and Wales)	Number of Muslims
Birmingham	300,666
Newham (London)	148,363
Bradford	143,394
Tower Hamlets	123,656
Manchester	105,874

Largest number of Muslims by LA Area (2018 Annual Population Survey)

Although across the British Isles there has been a notable overall decline in Christian affiliation and an increase in 'no religion' between the 2001 and 2011 census, it is important to look more carefully at these headlines and question whether this means that religion is declining in importance in our society. As stated earlier, selecting 'no religion' on the census is likely to mean you are not affiliated with a Church (for example, the Church of England) but you may well hold some beliefs and partake in practices that some might see as religious or spiritual. Although there have been declines in Anglican affiliation, there have also been demographic increases in other Christian denominations in England and Wales, for example, Pentecostalism, which has been termed the 'fastest growing' religion in the world (<https://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power/>). Other minority religions are also increasing - a pattern stemming from periods of post-war migration and the growing plurality of religious traditions in contemporary Britain. The growth of certain minority religions has also occurred because of religious conversion, particularly in the case of Buddhism.

Yet, despite these demographic changes, Christianity still remains a potent force in our social and political life. England has a combined Church and State, with the monarch at the head of both, and a number of Bishops taking seats in the House of Lords. There are other religio-state legal connections, too, for example the requirement for all state maintained schools to offer an act of daily collective worship (which must be 'broadly of a Christian character' see, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/281929/Collective_worship_in_schools.pdf). Therefore, despite some notable changes in the religious make-up of our societies in the UK over the past sixty years, religion (however you wish to define it) is still highly present.