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Key findings

Britain's shifting identities and attitudes

In this year's British Social Attitudes report (BSA), we see a continuation of one of the most important trends in post-war history: the steady decline in religion and belief among the British public. This decline is not simply a private matter for individuals and families, but rather a trend with profound implications for our social norms as well as our public institutions.

Today, following decades of secularisation and social change linked to industrialisation and the rise of liberal democracy, we can see clearly not only a shift away from religious worldviews, but also the strengthening of confidence in science and technology, which not only permeate our day-to-day lives in practical ways, but also provide an alternative way of interpreting and understanding the world (Wilson, 2016). While trust in religious institutions is waning, trust in science and scientists is high. If there is indeed a crisis of trust in Britain today, it is far from being in evidence everywhere.

Since the 1960s, this secularisation, along with the women's and LGBT movements has brought about fundamental changes in our moral framework for sex and relationships, as well as a decline in traditional, religiously informed understandings of the proper role of men and women in society (Brown, 2012). Marriage has been transformed on all levels, with the institution now open to same-sex couples and no longer the only socially validated form of sexual relationship. Sexual morality is almost unrecognisable from its post-war starting point, with homosexuality and sex outside of marriage viewed resolutely through a liberal lens and even older generations and the religious shifting their views.

So, are we now a nation of secular, liberal rationalists, with beliefs, attitudes and behaviours driven by empiricism and logic?

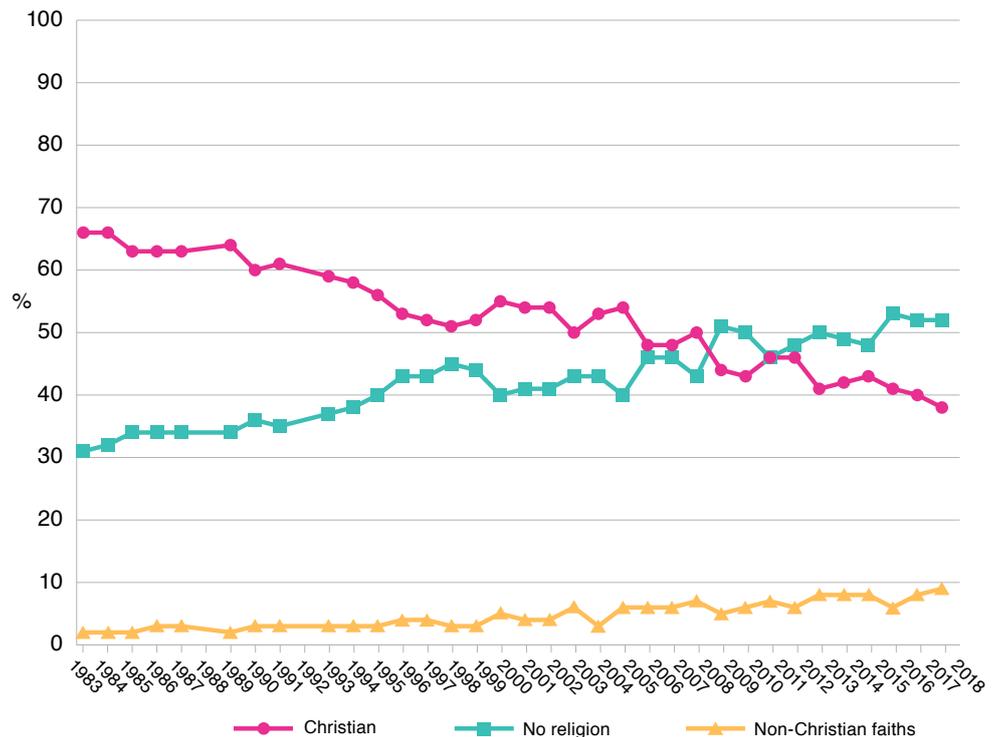
Secularisation: a nation of non-believers?

Our report charts a continuation of a long-term decline in religious identity, religious observance, and religious belief in Britain.

In 1983, when British Social Attitudes began measuring religious identity, two-thirds of the British public identified as Christian. This figure now stands at just over one third (38%) with 52% of the public saying they do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion.

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Figure 1 Religious identity, 1983–2018



This decline is generational – each successive cohort is less likely to identify as religious than the one before. Analysis by Voas and Crockett (2004) illustrates the mechanics of this decline: while two non-religious parents will successfully transmit their lack of religion to their children, two religious parents have just a 50/50 chance of passing on the faith.

Although, as our Religion chapter highlights, some minority faiths are growing, including non-Christian religions and Pentecostal Protestantism, this growth has been driven by migration from traditionally religious cultures in South Asia, West Africa and elsewhere. Even so, the British public as a whole is becoming steadily, perhaps inexorably, more secular.

Increasingly, the non-religious are confidently atheist, with a quarter of the public now stating “I do not believe in God” compared to just 10% in 1998

Today, more than half (52%) do not see themselves as belonging to any religion, and two-thirds never attend ordinary religious services. Increasingly, the non-religious are confidently atheist, with a quarter of the public now stating “I do not believe in God” compared to just 10% in 1998: the generational process of secularisation has continued ‘past the point where people [just] stop identifying with a religion or going to church regularly’ (see the Religion chapter in this report). There is also an element of polarisation; as it becomes more socially acceptable to be non-religious, so the centre ground disappears. Over the past two decades the proportion saying they are “very or extremely non-religious” has more than doubled (from 14% to 33%), while, at the same time, the proportion saying they are “very or extremely religious” has remained stable.

While we remain relatively tolerant of personal faith, in particular Christianity, we are sceptical about the role of religion in public life and wider society. Almost two-thirds (63%) agree with the idea that “looking around the world, religions bring more conflict than peace”, while only 13% disagree.

Under half of us (46%) have some degree of confidence in Churches and religious organisations, while a fifth (21%) say they have “no confidence at all”.

As our society has become more secular, the role of religious institutions and religious identities in determining our moral and social norms has weakened. Other worldviews, such as scientific rationalism, and liberal individualism now play a more significant part in British society, shaping how we understand the world, make decisions and relate to each other.

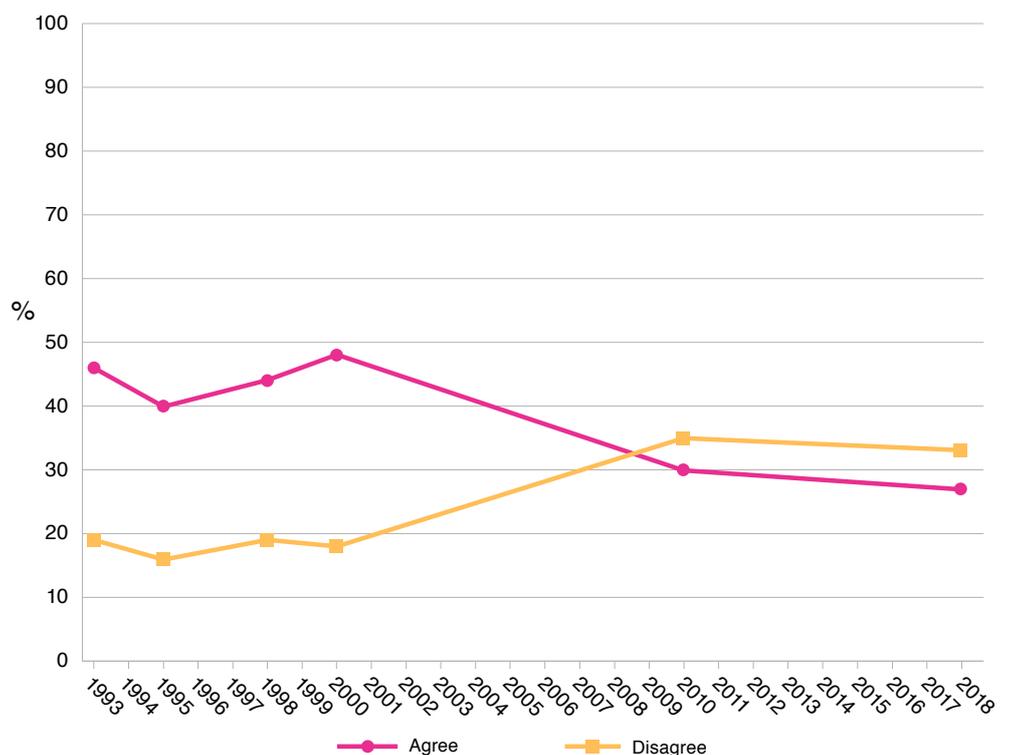
The rise of science and technology

The majority of the public believe that science and technology are a force for good both now and in the future, and, in contrast to faith and religion, feel at ease with science and technology having an influence in both public and private spheres.

As we have become more secular and our lives have become increasingly interwoven with technology, the relative importance we place on science as a way of understanding the world has increased.

The majority of the public believe that science and technology are a force for good both now and in the future

Figure 2 Agreement that “we believe too often in science, and not enough in feelings and faith”, 1993-2018



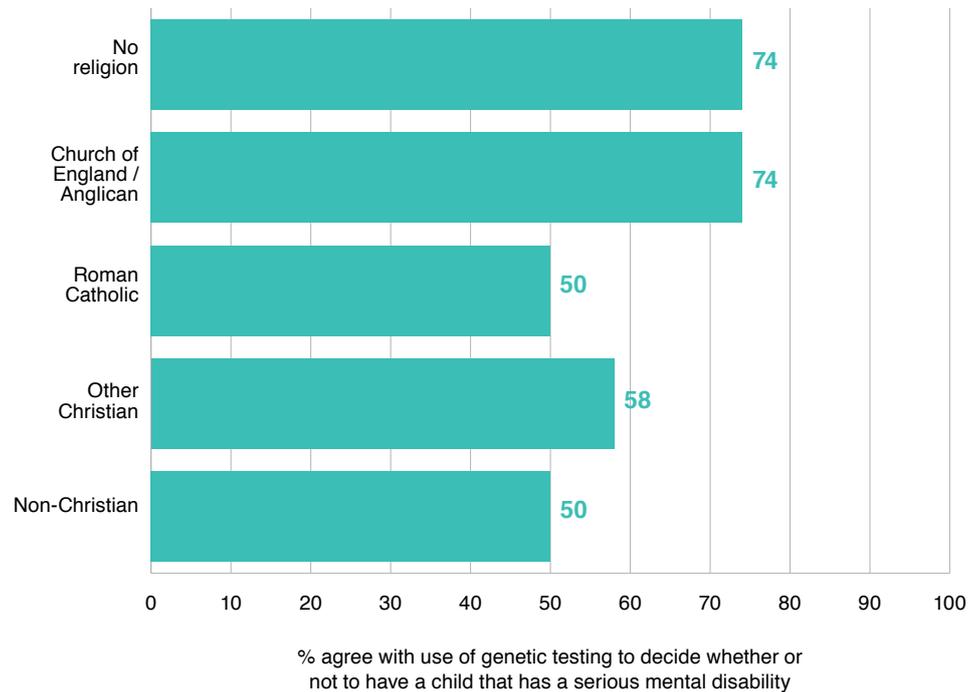
In 1993, just under half (46%) agreed that “we believe too often in science, and not enough in feelings and faith” while now just a quarter (27%) agree. This represents a significant strengthening of public support for science as a way of understanding and interpreting the world.

Trust in secular scientific institutions is very high, in sharp contrast with our low levels of confidence in churches and parliament. Eighty-five per cent trust university scientists “to do their work with the intention of benefitting the public”, and 67% trust company scientists to do the same. Meanwhile, as we have seen, the majority view of the public is that “looking around the world, religion brings more conflict than peace”. Science, in contrast, is seen far more positively. Three-quarters of the public (77%) agree that “science and technology are making our lives healthier, easier and more comfortable”, while just a tenth (9%) disagree. Ninety-four per cent believe that medical research in particular will “lead to an improvement in the quality of life” over the coming decades. And while not everyone is confident that the benefits of science and technology are equally distributed, almost three-quarters (73%) believe medical research benefits everyone equally.

Where science and technology pose complex moral and ethical challenges, we see differences between the views of the religious and the non-religious

While our data clearly chart a trend of increasing secularisation and a high level of public support for scientific worldviews and institutions, religious identity remains relevant to public attitudes, including in the field of science and technology. As we have seen, although a majority either reject the idea that we believe too often in science as compared to feelings and faith (33%), or do not have a clear view either way (31% “neither agree nor disagree”), a substantial minority (27%) agree with this statement. Support is correlated with religious identity, and in particular religious attendance. Among people who attend religious services at least once a month, half (49%) agree that we place too much emphasis on science. And where science and technology pose complex moral and ethical challenges, we see differences between the views of the religious and the non-religious. For example, while the use of prenatal testing to identify serious conditions is widely supported, there are some significant differences associated with religious identity, albeit these are not always as marked as we might expect.

Figure 3 Agreement with parents' use of genetic tests, by religion



As Figure 3 shows, it is clear that faith influences the way in which many people respond to the ethics of pre-birth testing, something that is to be expected given the relationship between this procedure and abortion. With the exception of Anglicans, people who identify with a religion are less likely to say that parents should be allowed to use genetic testing to decide whether or not to have a child with a serious mental or physical disability. Even so, half of Roman Catholics support pre-birth testing, despite the Catholic Church's consistent and high-profile stance on abortion.

A high level of trust in and support for science and technology has characterised public attitudes to science in Britain for many years (Wellcome, 2009), and we can see that our sense of the relative social importance of science, feelings and faith is shifting in favour of a more scientific worldview. However, we should not assume a causal relationship: rather than a scientific worldview driving out religious ones, it seems likely that the rise of science in the post-war decades is a function of the increasing presence of science in our day-to-day lives. Moreover, we should not assume that a scientific worldview has become culturally dominant, given that 27% still feel we place too much emphasis on science over feelings and faith.

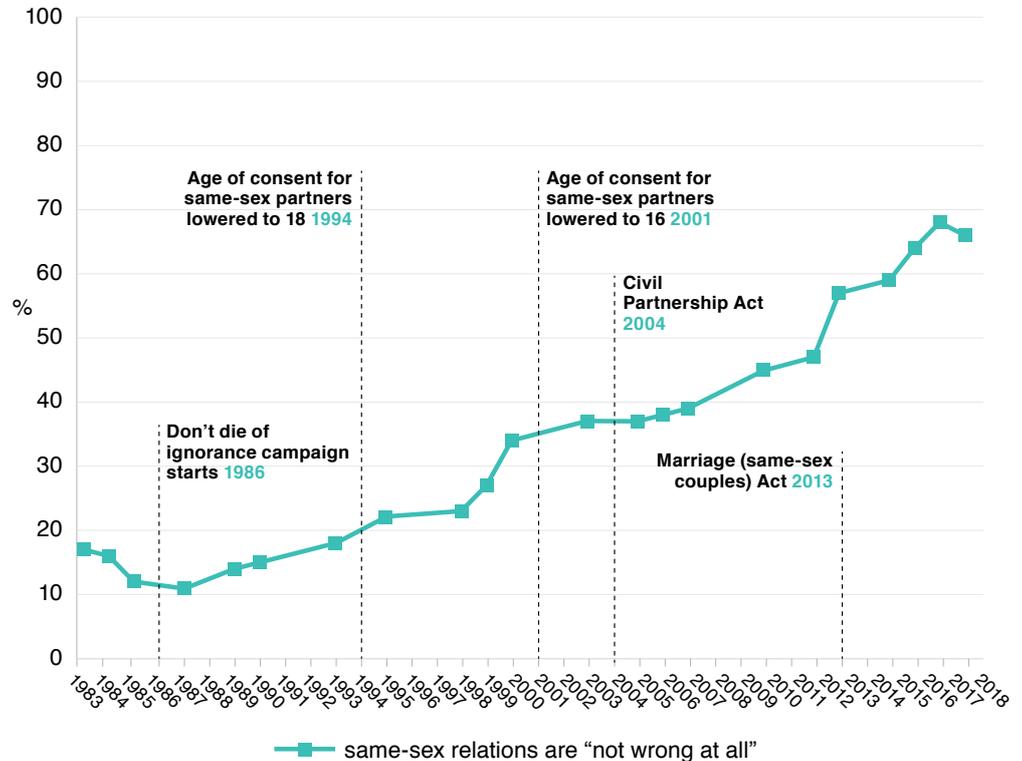
Sex, gender and relationships

Since BSA began in 1983, we have tracked a marked liberalisation of attitudes to sex, sexuality and relationships, and gender identity, all areas of personal and public morality that had long been dictated by religious, and in particular Christian worldviews.

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The most striking example of this change is to be found in attitudes to homosexuality: two-thirds now say that sex between two adults of the same sex is “not wrong at all”, an increase of almost 50 percentage points since the question was first asked in 1983.

Figure 4 Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are “not wrong at all”, 1983-2018



This change in attitudes to homosexuality, and other areas of personal morality are not simply a consequence of younger generations with more liberal views replacing older, more religious generations as they die out: the views of both older generations and religious groups have also become more accepting.

As discussed in the Relationships and gender identity chapter of this report, the legal institution of marriage has been extended to include same-sex couples, while civil partnerships have been created and will soon be extended to opposite-sex couples. We are now actively discussing (or in the case of Scotland, implementing) legal protections for cohabiting couples of any sexual orientation. Religious marriage is now just one form of socially sanctioned and legally protected relationship, a position that would have been difficult to imagine in the 1950s.

These changes mean that both public attitudes to and the law on sex and sexuality are now profoundly out of step with the doctrinal position of many established faiths in Britain, including that of most Christian denominations. For instance, the current position of the Church of England remains that ‘abstinence is right for those that are not called to marriage’, and ‘homosexual practice [is] incompatible

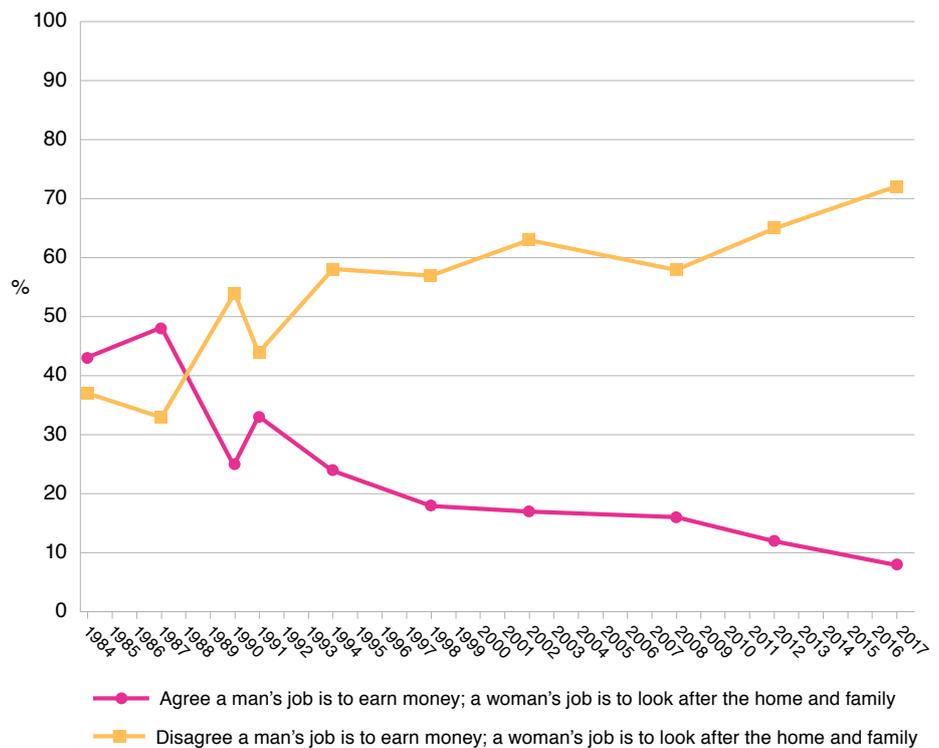
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Attitudes to gender roles have also changed significantly since the 1980s, three-quarters of the public reject the idea that women should be homemakers while men are breadwinners

with scripture’ (Lambeth, 1998). In sharp contrast, we find that only 2% of those who identify as Anglican think premarital sex is “always wrong” and only one in ten believe sexual relations between adults of the same sex are “always wrong”. Indeed, debate over doctrine on homosexuality in particular has threatened schism in the worldwide Anglican Communion for over two decades, an indication of the tension that can arise between social liberalism and traditional religiously-informed perspectives.

As well as attitudes to sexual relationships, attitudes to gender roles have also changed significantly since the 1980s. As highlighted by Attar Taylor and Scott in the 35th Report (2018), three-quarters of the public reject the idea that women should be homemakers while men are breadwinners (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Views on traditional gender roles, 1984-2017



Not only do we clearly see women as having a rightful place outside of the home, we are also unlikely to see particular roles as being men’s or women’s work. The majority of the public think that men and women are “equally suited” to working in a wide range of roles, including doctor, councillor, and MP, although engineering and primary school teaching are still seen as somewhat gendered: around two in ten (19%) consider men better suited to being an engineer while a similar proportion (18%) consider women better suited to primary school teaching.

As we have seen with public attitudes to science, it would be wrong to interpret this as simply a triumph of liberal individualism over religious worldviews. While religious identity and attendance is

indeed declining, the views of the religious population remain distinct in important ways. For example, while almost three-quarters of the non-believing public (73%) support opposite-sex civil partnerships, religious people are less likely to feel supportive: just one third (34%) of those who identify as having a non-Christian faith agree with such partnerships, along with 67% of people who identify with the Church of England, 59% of Roman Catholics and 58% of 'other Christians'.

We may live in a world where public morality in the sphere of sex and relationships is no longer automatically linked to Christian teachings, but it is a mistake to assume this means that such questions are wholly settled. As we see from this year's data, both atheism and (to a lesser degree) some religious identities are becoming more concentrated, giving rise to the potential for significant contention. We can see this being played out in the current debate about the 'No Outsiders' equalities programme for primary age children which includes LGBT characters and has led to sustained and high profile protests by religious groups centred on Anderton Park School in Birmingham. Religious faith may have become less popular among the British public, but it would be a mistake to assume it will therefore be less prominent in our public conversations, particularly when it comes to matters of sex and relationships.

The role of political identity in shaping attitudes

While there has clearly been a decline in religious identity and an associated trend towards a more secular and socially liberal culture, we are not yet a nation of rational actors, weighing our every thought and choice through the lens of scientific and liberal principles. The identities that shape our views may be changing, but this does not imply that the relationship between identity and political and social attitudes is any less significant.

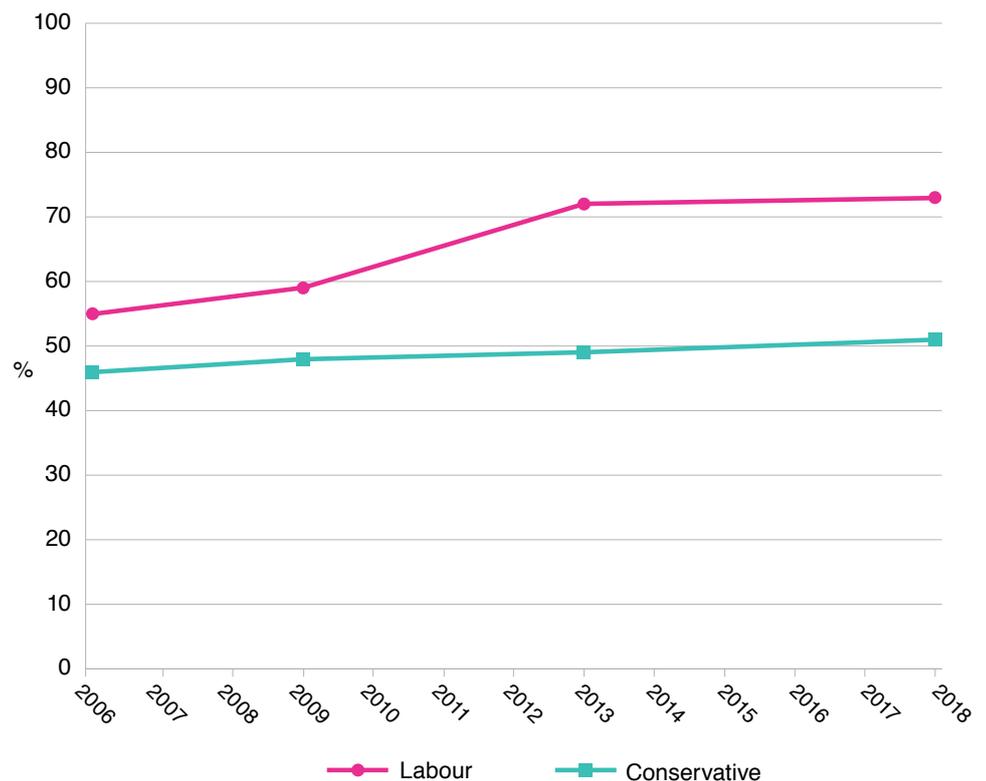
We have already seen that both religious and non-religious identities are related to attitudes. Given the increasing prevalence of confident atheism and the often sharp distinctions we observe between faith groups, it seems likely that a range of religious and non-religious worldviews will continue to have a considerable influence on public attitudes as well as public debate and policy for decades to come.

In this year's report we can also see the continuing relevance of political identity. Like religious belief, identification with traditional political parties has declined over recent decades. In 1987, when we first asked this question on BSA, 44% described themselves as a "fairly strong" or "very strong" identifier with a political party, while today just over a third (35%) identify in this way. The basis of party-political identification has also changed, with the relationship between social class and party weakening, and other factors such as age, education and degree of liberalism becoming more significant (Curtice and Simpson, 2018).

Party identification continues to have a strong relationship with a wide range of political and social attitudes

Nonetheless, party identification continues to have a strong relationship with a wide range of political and social attitudes, illustrated in this year's survey by attitudes to poverty. Since 2006, the view that there is "quite a lot" of poverty in Britain has been rising. Labour Party supporters are significantly more likely than Conservative Party supporters to believe that there is "quite a lot" of poverty in Britain (see Figure 6), as well as that the poverty level has been rising and will continue to rise in the future.

Figure 6 Perception that there is "quite a lot" of poverty in Britain, by political party support, 2006-2018



The relationship between party identity and attitudes to poverty is not fixed. In the past Labour and Conservative supporters largely agreed about what constitutes poverty, but in this year's survey we can see a significant difference between the two groups. Labour supporters now are far more likely than Conservative supporters to take a broad view of poverty. More than one third (36%) of Labour supporters, but only one fifth (20%) of Conservatives, now support the idea that people are in poverty when they have "enough to buy the things they really need, but not enough to buy the things most people take for granted". Most of the increase in support for this view among Labour party supporters occurred after 2013 and, while we cannot pinpoint the precise timing of the change, might be viewed as a consequence of the shift in policy and discourse after the election of Jeremy Corbyn in 2015. This suggests that party identity may indeed be capable of shaping wider social attitudes: as the 'voice' of the party shifts, so does the public debate, and ultimately the views of the party's supporters.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of the power of identity in modern Britain has been the emergence of ‘Leaver’ and ‘Remainer’ as a new political and social fault line

Finally, perhaps the most striking illustration of the power of identity in modern Britain has been the emergence of ‘Leaver’ and ‘Remainer’ as a new political and social fault line. These identities, which did not exist prior to the 2016 referendum, now command significantly stronger allegiance than traditional political parties, with three-quarters of the public (74%) describing themselves as having a “fairly strong” (34%) or “very strong” (40%) identification with either Leave or Remain, and just 12% who do not identify with either.

Public attitudes towards the next steps in the Brexit process will not be determined by a rational weighing of data on the economic and social consequences of the different possible relationships that Britain might have with the EU. Rather, people will look at the options through the partisan prism of these new identities, and will be influenced by the ability of traditional political parties to speak to them, something that has been graphically illustrated by the emergence of the Brexit Party as a new and important force in politics. Led by former UKIP leader Nigel Farage and launched on April 12th 2019, just six weeks later the Brexit Party secured 32% of the vote in the European elections. This success, along with a resurgence of support for the Liberal Democrats and increased support for the Green Party has led to widespread discussion of the idea that we are seeing a more fundamental realignment of British politics (Curtice, 2019), driven by the strength of these new political identities.

Conclusions

Looking at this year’s data on religion and belief, science, sex and gender, it is tempting to argue that we have become a secular nation, dominated by scientific rationalism and the principles of social liberalism. But as ever, BSA does not tell a singular or a simple story. Religion may be declining, but it is also diversifying and deepening, as some believers, like non-believers, become more committed to their worldviews. This means a world in which there may be significant tension between the political and social attitudes of the religious and non-religious, meaning faith is likely to remain an important part of our national conversation.

Meanwhile, it is clear that our identities continue to matter profoundly, and in some arenas, perhaps particularly the political, these identities are changing in rapid and unpredictable ways. Today we may be a more secular, liberal and scientifically-minded society than we were in 1983 when BSA began, but this is by no stretch of the imagination all that we are.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Views on premarital sexual relations and sexual relations between adults of the same sex, among those who belong to Church of England/ Anglican faith

	Sexual relations between adults of the same sex	Premarital sex
	%	%
Always wrong	10	2
Mostly wrong	7	5
Sometimes wrong	8	8
Rarely wrong	10	8
Not wrong at all	58	74
<i>Unweighted base</i>	460	460

Base: All respondents who say they belong to the Church of England/Anglican

Table A.2 Views of traditional gender roles, 1984–2017

	1984	1987	1990	1991	1994
A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	43	48	25	33	24
Disagree	37	33	54	44	58
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1562	1281	2430	1257	984
	1998	2002	2008	2012	2017
A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	18	17	16	12	8
Disagree	57	63	58	65	72
<i>Unweighted base</i>	807	1960	1986	950	2474

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