

# Religion

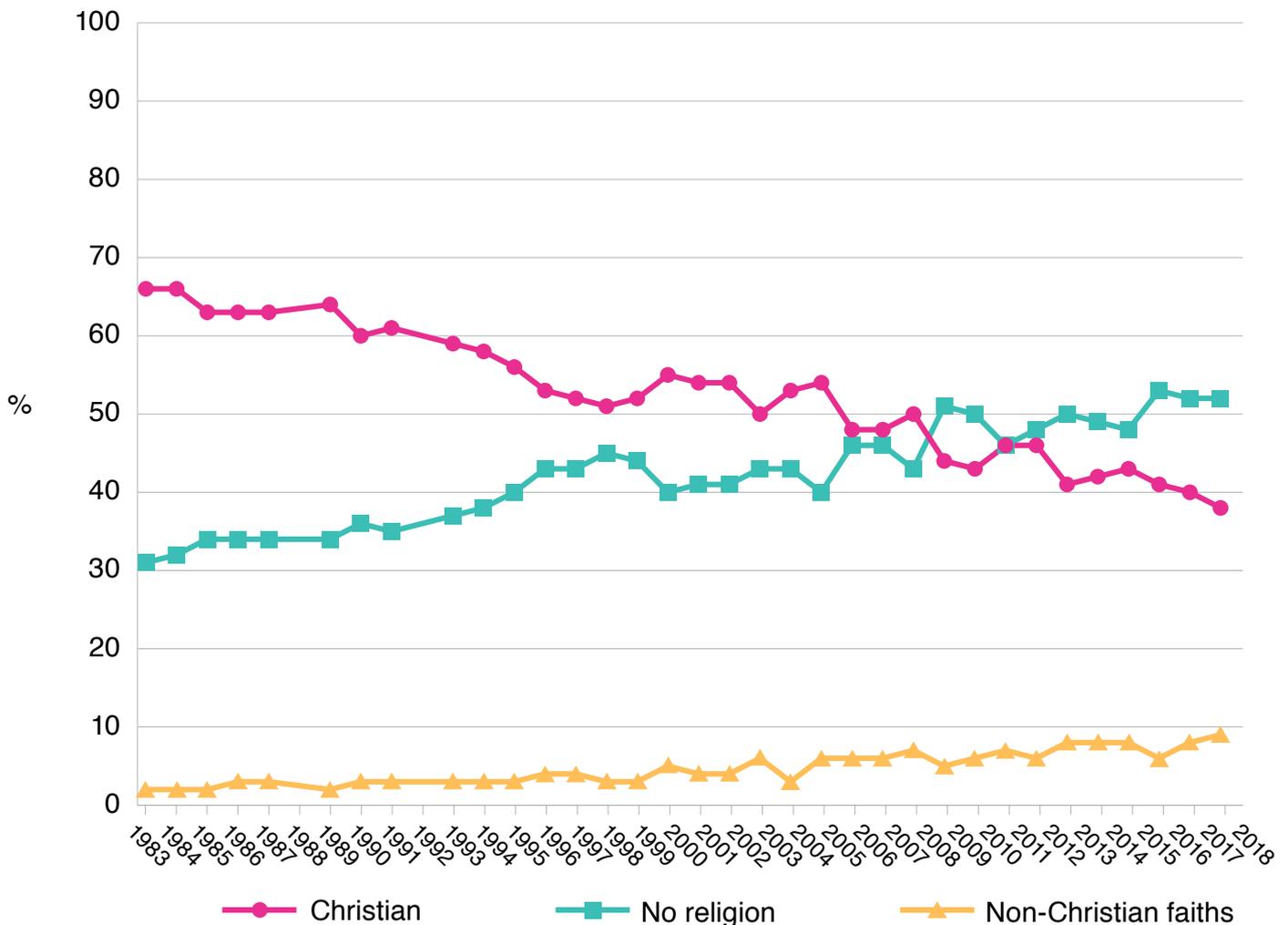
## Identity, behaviour and belief over two decades

The past two decades have seen international conflict involving religion and domestic religious organisations putting themselves at odds with mainstream values. Against this backdrop, we compare religious identification, behaviour and belief among the British public. We find a dramatic decline in identification with Christian denominations, particularly the Church of England; a substantial increase in atheism and in self-description as “very” or “extremely” non-religious; and very low confidence in religious organisations, but tolerance of religious difference.

### Spotlight

Over time, there has been a dramatic decline in the proportion of people who identify with Christianity along with a substantial increase in those with no religious affiliation, and a steady increase in those belonging to non-Christian faiths.

Religious identity, 1983–2018



## Overview

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### Rise of the ‘nones’

**Most of the shift in the religious profile of the nation has been towards non-affiliation, with 52% of the public now saying they do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion.**

- Of these, most were simply not brought up with a religion, with a smaller minority having lost a childhood faith.
  - Those who do not regard themselves as belonging to a religion are increasingly secular, that is, likely to say they are “very” or “extremely” unreligious.
  - The number of people with no religion, who were not brought up in one, has increased from 11% in 1998 to 23% in 2018.
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### Consolidation of attendance

**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.
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### Little time for religion, but prepared to be tolerant

**Most people show little enthusiasm for institutionalised religion, although there is evidence that the public are, in general, prepared to be tolerant of the faith of others.**

- Almost two-thirds (63%) believe religions bring more conflict than peace.
  - Under half (46%) have some or more confidence in churches and religious organisations, with 21% expressing “no confidence at all”.
  - Most people have a positive, or at least tolerant view, of members of other religious groups, but have more reservations about extremism.
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## Introduction

It is widely accepted that various social changes associated with industrialisation, the rise of liberal democracy, and science and technology, have reduced the power, popularity and persuasiveness of Christianity in the West (Bruce, 2011). Precisely when one dates the start of decline depends on which facets of religiosity one chooses and how one measures them. In Britain, church attendance has declined steadily since at least 1851, when a government count showed about half the population in church on a particular Sunday. The figure derived from recent clergy counts is around 6% (Brierley, 2017). In 1900 church membership was around 25%; it is now less than 10%. In 1900 more than half the age-relevant population attended Sunday schools; now it is less than 4%. Similar declines are visible in the use of religious offices to mark rites of passage. In the nineteenth century, around 90% of Scottish weddings were religious; in 2017 the figure was 30% and in 2012 there were more humanist than Catholic weddings. Before the Second World War, the Church of England was baptising three-quarters of the English population; the figure now is 15% (Wilson, 2016; Bruce, 2019).

Critics of the secularisation thesis have tried to counter this evidence in various ways. It is certainly true that migration to Britain of people from traditionally religious cultures in South Asia, West Africa and elsewhere has produced growth in non-Christian faiths, as well as in Pentecostal Protestantism. However, subsequent growth in charismatic and independent evangelical churches has not kept up with general population increase. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2004) argued that contemporary, holistic or 'New Age' spirituality was filling the gap left by the decline of the churches, but their own research showed less than 2% of a typical small English town engaged in activities that could generously be described as spiritual and half of the participants in yoga, meditation, and various forms of healing were primarily concerned with physical and psychological well-being. We find little support for the argument that religious sentiment or need has not declined; it is just expressed in novel ways (Lyon, 2001). Similarly, the suggestion that the British are "believing but not belonging" (Davie, 1994) is at odds with the findings described below (and see Voas and Crockett, 2005).

Some of the disagreement over recent changes in the status of religion comes from confusing popularity and notoriety. Religion is more newsworthy now than it was in the 1990s. The UK has been involved in wars in countries with predominantly Muslim populations and has suffered jihadi terrorist attacks: for example, on the London transport network in 2005 and at a Manchester concert in 2017. In addition, since the fatwa on author Salman Rushdie in 1989, the UK has faced Muslim demands for changes to laws and social mores (for example, over the status of women, school curricula, and gay rights). Conservative Christians have responded with matching demands (Walton, 2013). And some English xenophobes associated with the

English Defence League and other right-wing groups have justified their attacks on Muslims with the claim that Islamic values are displacing Christian culture in the West. If nothing else, that Muslims are often culturally distinctive and sometimes socially segregated allows many non-Muslims to feel that religion taken seriously is at best a nuisance and at worst a danger (Phillips, 2016).

This very brief review suggests that contemporary analysis of religion in Britain should focus on two issues: what are the current trends in religious belonging and observance in Britain? And what do the British public feel about the role of religion in public life? In 2018 we addressed these concerns by repeating questions about religious belief and behaviour. Collected as part of the International Social Survey Programme, these questions were first asked in 1991 and repeated in 1998 and 2008. This chapter uses that data to extend the significant British Social Attitudes (BSA) time-series tracing religion in Britain, and to contribute fresh evidence regarding its role and influence.

## Religion in Britain

This section explores religious identity, practice and belief in Britain in 2018. Taking, in turn, reported affiliation with a religion, attendance at religious services and religious belief, we review changes since the BSA survey series began in 1983 and draw conclusions about the changing religious life of Britain today.

### Religious identity

We start with simple affiliation. Table 1 shows the distribution of answers to the question:

*Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?*

The proportion of the British population identifying as Christian has fallen from two-thirds (66%) to just over one-third (38%) since the BSA survey series began in 1983. Most of the shift in the religious profile of the nation has been to non-affiliation, with 52% now saying they do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion. The proportion of the population identifying as Anglican (belonging to the Church of England or sister churches in Scotland and Wales) has fallen from 40% in 1983 to just 12% in 2018. Muslims and non-denominational Christians have increased. Muslims now make up 5% of the population<sup>1</sup> (and 6% of the BSA survey sample, up from 1% in 1998). It is worth noting that, at 13% of the population (from 3% in 1998), the proportion of non-denominational Christians is now equivalent to 'Church of England' (12%). The exact nature of this group is unclear: some of those people will be active members of

**The proportion of the British population identifying as Christian has fallen from two-thirds (66%) to just over one-third (38%) since 1983**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/muslimpopulationintheuk/>

independent non-denominational churches – indeed a third (34%) of them attend services at least monthly. Some may feel alienated from institutionalised religion. Others may be making a claim not so much about religious faith as ethnic identity (Voas and Bruce, 2004).

**Table 1 Religious identity, 1983-2018**

	1983	2008	2018
	%	%	%
<b>No religion</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Christian (of which...)</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>38</b>
Church of England / Anglican	40	22	12
Roman Catholic	10	9	7
Presbyterian	5	3	2
Methodist	4	2	1
Baptist	1	1	*
Christian – no denomination	3	10	13
Other Christian	3	2	1
<b>Non-Christian (of which..)</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>
Muslim	1	3	6
Jewish	1	1	*
Other non-Christian	1	3	3
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1761</i>	<i>4486</i>	<i>3879</i>

\* = Less than 0.5% of respondents

**Two non-religious parents successfully transmit their lack of religion. Two religious parents have roughly a 50/50 chance of passing on the faith**

Wider research suggests that Britain is becoming more secular not because adults are losing their religion or inclination to practise but because old people with an attachment to the Church of England and other Christian denominations are gradually being replaced in the population by unaffiliated younger people. To put it another way, religious decline in Britain is generational; people tend to be less religious than their parents, and on average their children are even less religious than they are (Voas and Chaves, 2016). Two non-religious parents successfully transmit their lack of religion. Two religious parents have roughly a 50/50 chance of passing on the faith. One religious parent does only half as well as two together (Voas and Crockett, 2004). To borrow the terminology of radioactive decay, institutional religion in Britain now has a half-life of one generation.

To explore the transmission of religion, we also ask:

*In what religion, if any, were you brought up?*

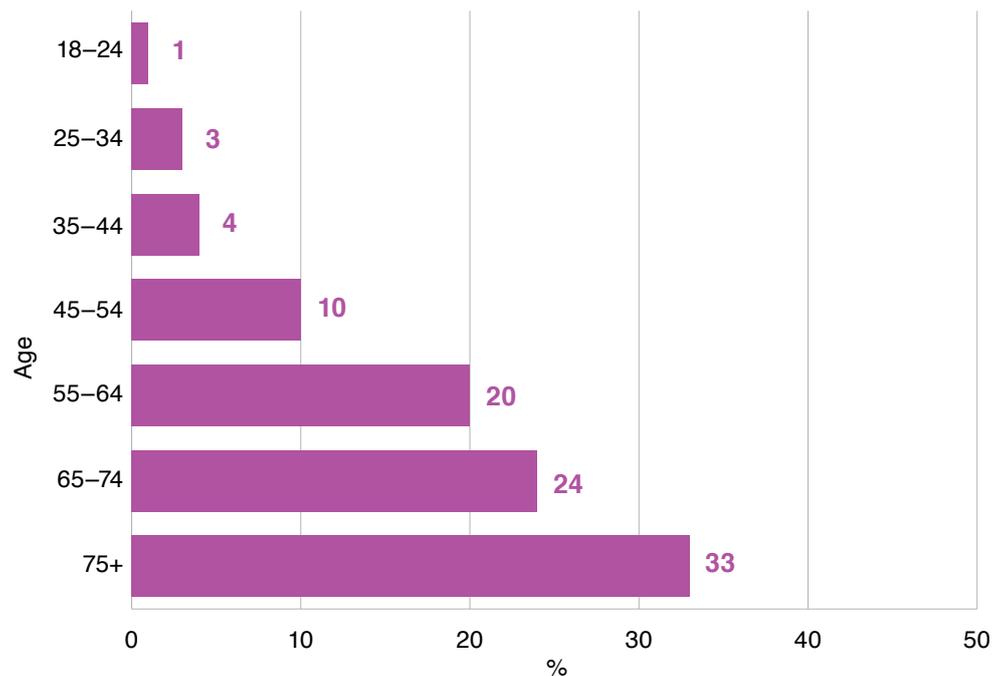
Of those brought up as Anglicans (24% of the total), around half (47%) still regard themselves as such, with an almost equal number saying

that they have no religion. Other specific Protestant denominations fare even worse: only 38% of those brought up as Presbyterians and 27% of those brought up as Methodists have kept these specific religious affiliations. Catholics manage to retain a slim majority, as do generic Christians identifying with no named denomination (for both 55% have kept the religious affiliation they were brought up in). However, for those of non-Christian faiths, particularly Islam, religious identity appears to be stickier; only one in ten who were brought up in one of these religions no longer belongs (93% of those brought up as a Muslim, still identify as Muslim).

Retention is highest among people brought up with no religion. At 24%, they are just as numerous as people raised as Anglicans, but nearly all of them (94%) inherit their parents' lack of affiliation. There is little evidence of adults who were not raised with a religion later acquiring one: the 6% figure here is similar to that reported by other research (Bruce and Glendinning, 2003). It follows that there is a degree of future decline built in, as children are increasingly raised in households that do not have a religious affiliation.

In summary, the proportion of the British population who identify as Christian has fallen dramatically over the last three decades, with most of the decline being in those who identify as Anglican. Some people move away from the faith of their family/childhood, but also an increasing proportion of younger people are not brought up in a religion. This collapse of Anglican affiliation is even more strikingly demonstrated when viewed by age group (Figure 1). A third (33%) of respondents who are aged 75 and above regard themselves as Anglican; in the youngest age group who are 18-24, almost none (1%) do.

**Figure 1 Church of England/Anglican affiliation, by age**



*The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter*

**Retention is highest among people brought up with no religion**

Thinking of oneself as religious is different to claiming a religious identity. To investigate this we ask:

*Would you describe yourself as ...*

*Extremely religious*

*Very religious*

*Somewhat religious*

*Neither religious nor non-religious*

*Somewhat non-religious*

*Very non-religious*

*Extremely non-religious*

*Can't choose*

**The self-described religious outnumbered the non-religious by 38% to 28% in 1998, but now the non-religious are 44% and the religious only 31%**

Table 2 shows a similar pattern of decline to that seen for religious affiliation: the self-described religious outnumbered the non-religious by 38% to 28% in 1998, but now the non-religious are 44% and the religious only 31%. There has also been consolidation – those describing themselves as “very or extremely non-religious” more than doubled (from 14% to 33%) during the past two decades at the expense of the intermediate groups. Three-quarters of the non-religious are now “very or extremely” non-religious, whereas less than a quarter of the religious are “very or extremely” so.

**Table 2 Self-assessed religiosity, 1998-2018**

	1998	2008	2018
<b>Describing oneself as...</b>	%	%	%
Very or extremely religious	6	7	7
Somewhat religious	31	30	24
Neither religious nor non-religious	30	23	19
Somewhat non-religious	13	11	11
Very or extremely non-religious	14	27	33
<i>Unweighted base</i>	807	1986	1552

The secular population is changing in a direction that may be unexpected. As it becomes more acceptable to say that you have no religion, even vaguely religious people who in the past would have identified themselves as belonging to the Church of England or another group no longer do so. Hence the non-religious category is more inclusive now than in the past: it does not consist solely of highly-educated atheists and agnostics. Some commentators (especially in the USA) claim that the rapid increase in having “no religion” is merely a sign of dissatisfaction with the churches (Fuller, 2001; Newport, 2012). In their view, these people are actually or

potentially religious but simply see themselves as “nothing in particular” at the moment. If that were the case, we might expect to find the average level of belief among the religious ‘nones’ to be higher than before. In fact, as Table 3 shows, those who do not have a religious affiliation are far more likely to say they are ‘non-religious’ now than they were in 1998. Now, 73% of those who state that they have “no religion” describe themselves as “non-religious”, while 15% describe themselves as “somewhat” non-religious, and 58% “extremely/very” non-religious.

**Table 3 Self-assessed religiosity, among those who do not identify with a religion, 1998-2018**

	1998	2008	2018
<b>Describing oneself as...</b>	%	%	%
Religious (Very/extremely/somewhat)	12	8	5
Neither religious nor non-religious	34	22	17
Non-religious (Very/extremely/somewhat)	49	64	73
<i>Unweighted base</i>	368	865	784

*Base: those who do not have a religious affiliation*

**The highest levels of religiosity are found among those with non-Christian faiths**

People who do not regard themselves as belonging to a religion are increasingly secular, whether we look over time (as shown in Table 3) or by age. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of respondents with no religion aged less than 45 say that they are very or extremely unreligious, compared to fewer than half (47%) of those who are 65 or older.

What about religiosity among people with a religious affiliation? The highest levels of religiosity are found among those with non-Christian faiths<sup>2</sup> (23% “extremely/very” religious, 50% “somewhat”) and Roman Catholics (18% “extremely/very”, 52% “somewhat”). Anglicans are, typically, much less likely to describe themselves as “extremely/very” religious (6%), with 40% saying “somewhat” and 33% “neither religious nor non-religious”. Around 17% of those identifying with the Church of England (or sister churches in Wales and Scotland) said they are “somewhat” (9%) or “extremely/very” (9%) not religious.

## Religious practice

Religious affiliation; the proportion of the population who identify as belonging to a religion (specifically Christianity), has shown a significant decline over the last 30 years. Can the same be said of participation in religious practices, such as attending services and praying?

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the ‘Non-Christian’ group captures a broad range of religious identities, including Muslim, Hindu and Jewish, and attitudes between these groups may differ, though small base sizes mean we are unable to discern the specific attitudes of these groups.

Almost all religions either require or explicitly encourage active participation in communal activities, and so attendance at services or meetings is a reliable and valid measure of religious interest (Bruce, 2018: 80-1). We ask people who currently belong to a religion, and those who had been brought up in a faith but no longer belonged:

*Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals and baptisms, how often nowadays do you attend services or meetings connected with your religion?*

If we combine the group who say they “never or practically never attend” services with those who have no religion and were not brought up in one (who were not asked this question but are shown in the last row of the table), Table 4 shows that, in 2018, two thirds (66%) of people in Britain never attend ordinary services.

**Table 4 Attendance at religious services, 1998-2018**

	1998	2008	2018
<b>How often attends religious services</b>	%	%	%
Once a week or more	12	10	11
Less often but at least once in two weeks	2	2	2
Less often but at least once a month	5	6	5
Less often than once a month ‡	19	19	13
Never or practically never	48	50	43
No religion and not brought up in a religion	11	12	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3146	4486	3879

‡ Less often than once a month combines the answers: “Less often but at least twice a year”, “Less often but at least once a year”, “Less often than once a year”

The table excludes “varies too much to say”, but these are included in the base

**Over the last two decades reported weekly attendance has remained stable at around 11% of the general population**

Over the last two decades reported weekly attendance has remained stable at around 11% of the general population. Allowing for a degree of exaggeration among nominal Anglicans and with the above-average piety of adherents to other religions, this fits with the less than 8% of the population that church sources and third-party censuses tell us attend Christian churches (Brierley, 2017). Weekly attendance is highest among those of non-Christian faiths (40%), followed by Roman Catholic (23%) and other Christian denominations (23%). Those identifying as Anglicans are much less likely to attend weekly (9%) or indeed to attend at all – 57% say they attend “never or practically never”.

The significant change is shown in the centre of Table 4. Those who say they attend less often than once a month, but more than “never” were 19% in 1998 and 2008 but only 13% in 2018. This suggests the consolidation we will also identify in other data. Increasingly, people

are either conventionally religious or irreligious; the centre ground of claimed occasional participation is vanishing. This is a combination of two related but analytically separable trends. There is behavioural change: the absence of religious socialisation in schools and elsewhere means that people who were not raised by their parents in a faith now have little or no contact with religious activities and ideas. But there may also be more honesty. When a large part of a population is religious, others on the fringe feel some subtle obligation to pretend to belong to a faith they do not really share; as the proportion of true believers declines, pressure to pay lip service to attitudes of others also declines (Bruce 2019).

**Now only half of people claim to ever pray (49%)**

Praying has always been a popular religious practice: individuals can choose to do it in their own time and way and it requires less physical effort and inconvenience than attendance at services. But now only half of people claim to ever pray (49% as compared to 56% in 2008 and 67% in 1998 – the sum of all categories except “Never” in Table 5). Again, that change is made up of two counter trends: “occasionally” praying (made up of those who pray less than once a week) is now claimed by 29% (down from 34% in 2008, 41% in 1998); it appears praying “several times a day” has increased (though the change from 5% in 2008 to 8% in 2018 is not statistically significant), which is likely to be explained by the growth in the number of Muslims. Although Muslims are only a small fraction of the total population, they have a substantial impact on very frequent prayer (and also firm belief in God, as we shall see).

**Table 5 Frequency of prayer, 1998-2018**

	1998	2008	2018
<b>How often pray</b>	%	%	%
Never	30	41	50
‘Occasional’ (less than once a week) ‡	41	34	29
Every week	5	3	3
Several times a week	6	5	4
Once a day	10	8	6
Several times a day	5	5	8
<i>Unweighted base</i>	807	1986	1552

‡ ‘Occasional’ (less than once a week) combines the answers: “Less often than once a year”, “About once or twice a year”, “Several times a year”, “About once a month”, “2-3 times a month”, “Nearly every week”

## Religious belief

We turn now to look at the nature of religious beliefs, starting with a question asking the respondent to choose a statement which “best expresses what you believe about God”. The response options are

**Around half of the population (55%) express some sort of belief in some kind of God**

shown in the top half of Table 6. Given the wide range of things that respondents might have in mind, we expect asserting a belief in God to be more popular than engaging in any conventional religious activity.

The top half of Table 6 shows around half of the population (55%) expressing some sort of belief in some kind of God: around a fifth (19%) are confident believers, 15% believe while expressing doubts, with a further fifth expressing a qualified faith – some of the time but not other times (9%) or ‘Higher Power’ rather than personal God (12%). Around a quarter (26%) are confirmed non-believers, with a further 18% agnostic – not knowing if there is a God and not believing there is any way to find out.

Trends from 1998-2018 indicate both secularisation, in the sense of fewer people believing, and consolidation, as the highly religious are bolstered by growth in the non-Christian population and the non-religious move to harder positions. The biggest change is the increase in the number of people who are confident atheists: from 10% in 1998 to 18% in 2008 and then 26% in 2018. Agnosticism shows little clear change (from 15% in 1998 to 19% in 2008 and 18% in 2018). A statistically significant decrease is found in those who believe “some of the time”. Reductions in the proportion who believe in an impersonal ‘Higher Power’ and ‘doubting believers’ are not statistically significant. There has been very little change in the proportion of people who say they believe in God and “have no doubts about it” (in 1998 it was 21% and in 2018 it is 19%).

While the sample sizes of the individual non-Christian faiths are too small to present detailed findings for these groups, it is worth noting that Muslims are a third of those who say that they believe in God and have no doubts about it. Hindus and Sikhs also predominantly identify themselves as believers. Overall, the decline in belief in God has occurred despite the growth of these relatively theistic non-Christian groups as a proportion of the population.

It is likely that the growth of atheism is largely just a working-through of the cohort difference identified in earlier decades; as elderly believers die off, their place is taken by younger people who were never believers. To explore this, we ask a question about the respondent’s current and previous beliefs:

*Which best describes your beliefs about God?*

*I don’t believe in God now and I never have*

*I don’t believe in God now, but I used to*

*I believe in God now, but I didn’t used to*

*I believe in God now and I always have*

*Can’t choose*

Overall, the proportion that had never believed in God increased from 13% in 1998 to 20% in 2008 and then 26% in 2018 (see the bottom half

of Table 6). Meanwhile, those who used to have a faith but have lost it have also increased, from 12% in 1998 to 16% in 2018.<sup>3</sup> More detailed exploration reveals a downward trend in Christians saying they believe in God and always have (69% in 1998 to 60% in 2018), which is mainly driven by Anglicans (66% in 1998 to 51% in 2018). Finally, compared with 1998, fewer people with no current religious identification now say they have always believed in God (22% to 7%), with a corresponding upward trend in those with no current religion saying they don't believe in God and never did (26% in 1998 to 46% in 2018).

**Table 6 Beliefs about the existence of God, 1998-2018**

	1998	2008	2018
<b>Nature of belief in God</b>	%	%	%
I don't believe in God	10	18	26
I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out	15	19	18
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind	14	14	12
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others	14	13	9
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God	23	18	15
I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it	21	17	19
<b>Belief in God now or in the past</b>	%	%	%
I don't believe in God now and never have	13	20	26
I don't believe in God now, but I used to	12	15	16
I believe in God now, but I didn't used to	4	5	4
I believe in God now and I always have	48	37	35
<i>Unweighted base</i>	807	1986	1552

**Less than a quarter (23%) of people agree that “there is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally”**

A further question suggests that even believers in Britain tend to have in mind a rather distant God. Less than a quarter (23%) of people agree that “there is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally”; two in five Christians (40%) hold this belief (who overall make up just 15% of the total population).

<sup>3</sup> Our question which asks respondents to choose a statement which “best expresses what you believe about God” allows the respondent to express more nuance about their beliefs in God, giving them the chance to express uncertainty, while our question which asks “which best describes your beliefs about God?” does not. We therefore view the former question as producing a more reliable estimate of the level of atheism.

To explore faith in more detail we ask respondents whether they believe in a range of doctrines: life after death, heaven, hell, religious miracles, reincarnation (being reborn in this world again and again), nirvana and the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors. Respondents can answer yes or no, each definitely or probably, as well as indicating that they can't choose. Table 7 shows the proportion that indicate some level of belief (definitely or probably).

When few claim to believe in the sort of God who regulates human fate and even fewer attend events where they would be taught such concepts, it is not obvious what respondents have in mind when considering these statements. But three things can be noted in Table 7: first, there are varying levels of belief in various doctrines, whether traditional Western Christian (life after death, heaven, hell, and miracles) or non-Western (reincarnation, nirvana, or ancestors). Second, it appears that many beliefs have declined in popularity, although the only statistically significant decreases are in belief in heaven and in reincarnation. Third, that belief in heaven is much more popular than belief in hell suggests that traditional Christian doctrine is being displaced by positive thinking.

	1998	2008	2018
<b>% definitely/probably believe in...</b>			
Life after death	50	46	42
Heaven	45	41	37
Hell	27	28	26
Religious miracles	32	29	26
Reincarnation	n/a	24	20
Nirvana	n/a	10	8
Supernatural power of ancestors	n/a	18	16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>807</i>	<i>1986</i>	<i>1552</i>

*n/a = not asked*

**There has been an increase in the certainty and assertiveness of responses, with the confidently negative growing faster than the confidently positive**

By and large the religious belief questions show the same sort of change we find in questions about behaviour: there has been an increase in the certainty and assertiveness of responses, with the confidently negative growing faster than the confidently positive. For instance, 44% of the public say they either “definitely” did or “definitely” did not believe in heaven compared with 37% in 1998.

There may be an age effect at work in the belief in life after death: not (as many suppose) that we become more drawn to an afterlife as we get older, but rather the reverse. Perhaps because the time ahead of the young is much greater than the time behind them, life seems indefinite, so young adults tend to believe, in some unstudied way,

that they will carry on forever. As they age, people come to accept that there is an end. As Table 8 shows, only 13% of respondents aged 18-24 definitely rule out life after death, which is just half the level found among people aged 55 and above (26%) (though note that the 18-24 age group has a relatively small base size here).

**Table 8 Belief in life after death, by age**

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, definitely	21	20	23	19	17	19
Yes, probably	27	22	29	23	20	23
No, probably not	32	28	22	25	24	25
No, definitely not	13	22	20	23	26	22
<i>Unweighted base</i>	84	196	236	254	780	1552

## Patterns of identity, practice and belief

In summary, there is continued decline in affiliation to Christianity and religiosity more generally among the British population. Over half of the British population states that they have no religion. Overall attendance at religious services has also continued to decline – two thirds (66%) never attend religious services apart from special occasions – although the proportion of the population attending weekly or at least monthly is more stable. These patterns are echoed by religious belief. While the proportion of the public expressing confident faith is stable at around 19%, confident atheism has increased to 26%. Taken as a whole, these patterns suggest secularisation is increasing on two fronts: the decline in overall levels of involvement with religion, and consolidation of those who were wavering towards more confirmed secular positions.

There are large differences between the young and the old in various key indicators of religious involvement, such as identifying with a religion, attending services, or believing in God (Table 9).

**Table 9 Religious identification, attendance and belief in God, by age, by gender**

	Male	Female	All
<b>% Have a religion</b>			
18-34	32	41	36
35-54	37	50	43
55+	51	65	58
All ages	41	54	47
<b>% Ever attends religious services or meetings*</b>			
18-34	26	32	29
35-54	28	35	32
55+	29	37	33
All ages	28	35	31
<b>% Believe in God‡</b>			
18-34	29	38	33
35-54	36	44	40
55+	33	50	42
All ages	33	45	39

*The bases for this table can be found in the appendix to this chapter*

*\*This includes all frequencies reported, including "less often than once a year", but excludes those who say "varies too much to say"*

*‡ For belief in God we have combined answers for those who say "I believe in God now, but I didn't used to" and "I believe in God now and always have" (presented in the bottom half of Table 6)*

It is tempting but wrong to think that people become more religious with age. As already noted, the evidence strongly suggests that the association between age and religious commitment comes about because people are increasingly raised without religion or lose it in their youth, and they are replacing older generations who were brought up in more religious times (Voas and Chaves, 2016; see also Lee, 2012).

As with much else in life, religious participation is gendered. Quite why is contentious and complex (Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012; Voas et al., 2013) but the differences are striking. At every age, men are less likely than women to say that they have a religion, or go to church, or believe in God (shown in Table 9).

## The public reputation of religion

Given the scale and potential significance of the shifts in religious faith in Britain, our attention now turns to wider analysis of public attitudes and religion: what does the British population think of religion and religious institutions?

**At every age, men are less likely than women to say that they have a religion, or go to church, or believe in God**

## Religion and public life

As we mentioned in our introduction, media news bulletins regarding religion often focus attention on the threat from Islamist terrorism and the many conflicts around the globe in which at least one agent claims to be motivated by religion. In order to gauge general reactions to whether religion is a force for good or ill, we ask people whether they agree or disagree that:

*Looking around the world, religions bring more conflict than peace*

Almost two-thirds (63%) of the British public agree that religions bring more conflict than peace (28% “strongly agree”, 35% “agree”) – while only 13% disagree (10% “disagree”, 3% “strongly disagree”).

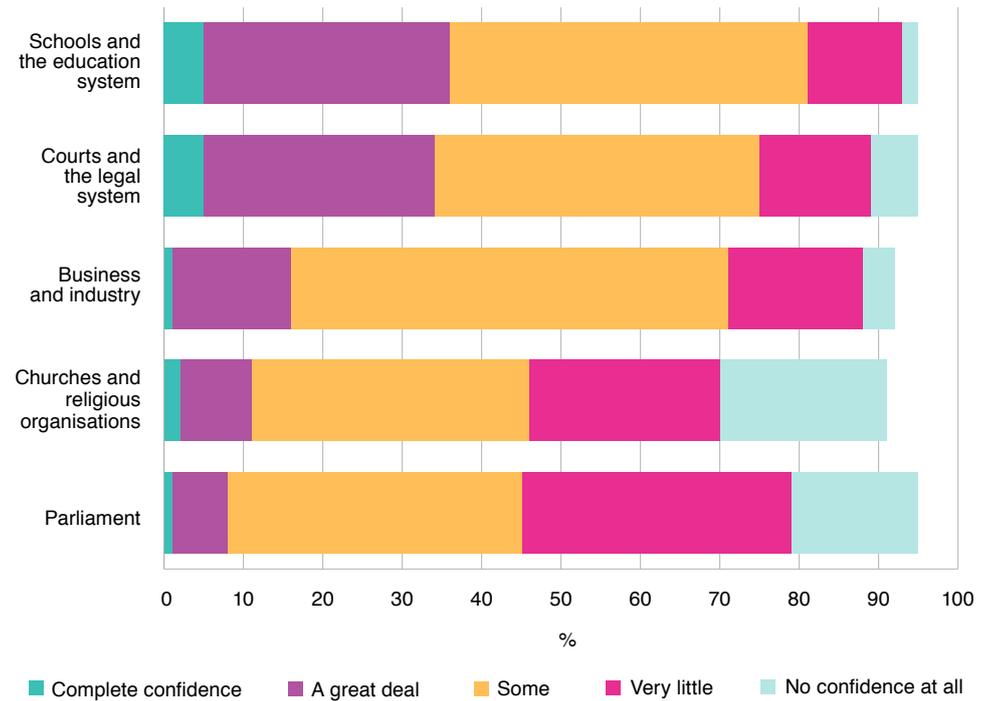
This suggests the generalized view of religion, among a majority of the population, is pretty poor. However, despite increasing secularisation, the proportion that hold negative views has reduced since 1998, when 75% agreed (see the top section of Table 10). As shown, those with “no religion” are an increasingly large group within the population. By 2018, 74% of them agree religions bring more conflict than peace, although around half (52%) of people with a religious affiliation also agree. However, compared to 1998, this proportion is lower among both those with a religion and those without one. This could be attributable to a range of factors, including increasing multiculturalism (diversity, tolerance and knowledge/understanding of other faiths). Despite an apparent increase in faith-inspired terrorism, it also, perhaps, reflects a more nuanced public discourse about the causes of war and conflict.

To assess views of religion at home, we ask how much confidence respondents have in five institutions, offering “complete”, “a great deal”, “some”, “very little” and “no confidence at all” as response options: “schools and the education system” are the most popular, with 80% supporting the three positive positions (Figure 2). The “courts and legal system” follow at 75% and then “business and industry” at 71%. Just 46% have confidence in “Churches and religious organisations”, closely matching “Parliament”, at 45%. Despite the Brexit fiasco, “Churches” exceed even “Parliament” in the proportion expressing “no confidence at all” (21% versus 16%).

Confidence in religious institutions has fallen over the last two decades – 54% had some degree of confidence in 1998, falling to 50% in 2008, then 46% in 2018. This is likely to reflect public exposure of abuse scandals and their handling by churches, coupled with a tendency to associate religious organisations with controversial positions on gender, marriage, sexuality, abortion, and so on. Unsurprisingly, those with no religion are much less likely than Christians to have confidence in religious institutions (28% compared with 66% for Christians, 68% for non-Christian faiths), but levels of confidence have fallen among Christians (down from 72% in 1998) and much more dramatically among those with no faith (54% in 1998).

**Confidence in religious institutions has fallen over the last two decades**

**Figure 2 Confidence in institutions**



The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

'Can't choose and not answered' are not featured in this table, but can be found in the appendix to this chapter

**Around a third (35%) feel religious organisations have “too much power” (26%) or “far too much power” (9%)**

Along with widespread distrust of religious institutions, other research suggests British people now increasingly expect religion to be confined to the domestic hearth (Bruce and Voas, 2007). To explore views on the role of religion in public life, we ask:

*Do you think that churches and religious organisations in this country have too much power or too little power?*

Around a third (35%) feel religious organisations have “too much power” (26%) or “far too much power” (9%), with only 5% saying “too little/far too little”. This has shown an increase over the last few decades, up 5 percentage points since 2008, and 10 since 1998 (see middle section of Table 10). Again, these views are more likely to be expressed by the non-religious. Around half (48%) of those with no religion think religious organisations have too much power, compared with 20% of those who have a religious affiliation. Overall, the attitudes of Christians differ from non-Christian faiths – 23% who identify as ‘Christian’ feel that religious organisations have too much power compared with 11% for those of non-Christian faiths.

A large majority are also against religious leaders trying to influence voting behaviour. When asked to agree/disagree with the statement: “religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections”, only 9% thought religious officials should try to influence

**Seventy-two per cent of professing Christians agree that religious leaders should not try to influence voting behaviour**

elections, while 76% opposed such intervention. However, this shows less change over time (up from 71% in 1998) and there is also less difference according to religious affiliation: 81% of those with no religion agree, compared with 71% of those who have a faith. Seventy-two per cent of professing Christians agree that religious leaders should not try to influence voting behaviour. Those of non-Christian faiths are slightly less likely to agree (68%) but more likely to say “neither agree nor disagree”, rather than express disagreement with the statement.

**Table 10 Attitudes toward religious role in public life, by whether have a religion, 1998-2018**

	1998	2008	2018
<b>Religions bring more conflict than peace (% strongly agree/ agree)</b>			
Has religion	69	69	52
No religion	82	81	74
All	75	74	63
<b>Religious organisations have too much power or too little power (% too much power/far too much power)</b>			
Has religion	16	21	20
No religion	35	41	48
All	25	30	35
<b>Religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections (% strongly agree/agree)</b>			
Has religion	66	73	71
No religion	76	77	81
All	71	75	76

*The bases for this table can be found in the appendix to this chapter*

## Religious tolerance

Although the British public are increasingly disinclined to participate in religion or hold it in particularly high regard, they are relatively tolerant of people who are religiously different. A classic question on social distance asks how they would feel about a relative marrying someone from another group. The question reads as follows:

*People have different religions and different religious views. Would you accept a person from a different religion or with a very different religious view from yours marrying a relative of yours?*

Table 11 shows a 15-point rise over the past decade in “definitely accept”, from 24% to 39%, which is a remarkable increase (even

**Only 17% agree that “all things considered, people belonging to different religions cannot get along with each other when living close together”**

if half of it comes from the “probably accept” category). Only 10% could not accept a mixed marriage (7% probably, 3% definitely). Meanwhile, only 17% agree that “all things considered, people belonging to different religions cannot get along with each other when living close together.”

**Table 11 Tolerance of religious difference, 2008 and 2018**

	2008	2018
<b>Person from a different religion marrying a relative</b>	%	%
Definitely accept	24	39
Probably accept	50	43
Probably not accept	10	7
Definitely not accept	8	3
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1986	1552

Respondents are asked about their attitude towards members of different religious groups:

*What is your personal attitude towards members of the following religious groups?*

*....Christians?*

*....Muslims?*

*...Hindus?*

*...Buddhists?*

*...Jews?*

*...Atheists or non-believers?*

**Those aged 55 or over are more inclined to view Muslims negatively (22%) when compared with those who are 18–34 (13%)**

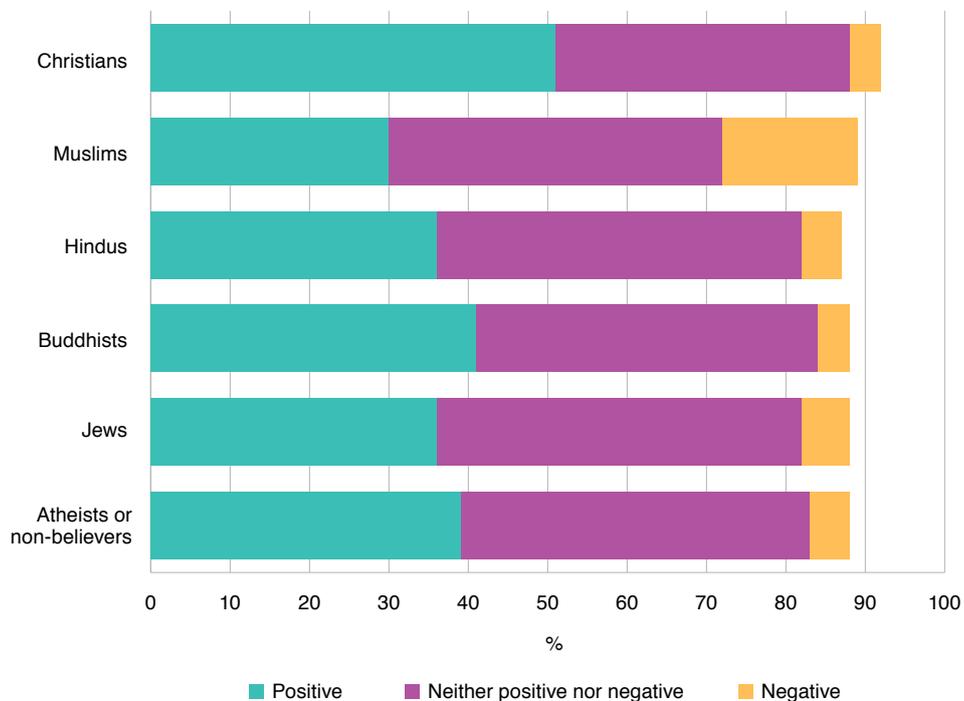
Respondents can give the following answers: “very positive”; “somewhat positive”; “neither positive nor negative”; “somewhat negative”; “very negative”; “can’t choose”.

As Figure 3 shows, Christians do best, scoring 51% positive (“very” or “somewhat”) and only 4% negative (“very” or “somewhat”), with 37% saying “neither positive nor negative”. For the non-Christian faiths, roughly the same proportion of respondents (42%-46%) choose the neutral category. That could suggest indecision or indifference, but neither precludes the observation that the British are relatively tolerant. Even the least popular group (Muslims at 17% negative, 42% neutral and 30% positive) is not that unpopular.

Views of other faith groups do differ by age, with older people being generally less positive than younger people about religions other than Christianity. For example, those aged 55 or over are more inclined to view Muslims negatively (22%) when compared with those who are

18-34 (13%). There seems to be a greater degree of tolerance among younger people.

**Figure 3 Positive or negative views towards religious groups**



The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

'Can't choose and not answered' are not featured in this table, but can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Although British people generally have a favourable view of most religious groups, there is evidence that they look less kindly on those who take their religion very seriously. When asked to agree or disagree whether:

***People with very strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others***

two-thirds (65%) agree; 24% "strongly". This has fallen from 74% in 1998 and 73% in 2008 (although most of the fall is in the more moderate "agree" group, with a corresponding increase in those who neither agree nor disagree).

Suspicion of extremism is evident in unwillingness to take a completely laissez faire approach to religion. On the statement that "governments should not interfere with the attempts of any religion to spread its faith", 39% agree but 28% disagree, with a substantial number of neutral or unsure responses. When the hazards are more explicit, the reaction is stronger, as seen with the question:

***There are some people whose views are considered extreme by the majority. Consider religious extremists, who believe***

*that their religion is the only true faith and all other religions should be considered as enemies. Do you think such people should be allowed to ... publish their views on the Internet or social media?*

Two-thirds (68%) of people give a negative answer; only 22% are ready to allow free expression in these circumstances.

## Conclusions

The rich data on religion collected as part of the most recent survey will doubtless be analysed in greater detail, but the brief tour above offers compelling evidence that the process of secularisation continues unabated. Britain is becoming more secular not because adults are losing their religion but because older people with an attachment to the Church of England and other Christian denominations are gradually being replaced in the population by unaffiliated younger people. To put it another way, religious decline in Britain is generational; people tend to be less religious than their parents, and on average their children are even less religious than they are (Voas and Chaves, 2016). Further, as having no religion becomes more common and, one would assume, more socially acceptable, it appears that vaguely religious people who in the past would have identified as belonging to the Church of England or another group no longer do so.

As we have mentioned, it is claimed by some sociologists of religion that the rapid increase in having “no religion” is merely a sign of dissatisfaction with the churches. If that were the case in Britain, we might expect to find expressions of belief among the religious ‘nones’ to be higher than before. However, in Britain, people who do not regard themselves as belonging to a religion are increasingly secular. Our data show that secularisation continues past the point where people stop identifying with a religion or going to church regularly. The non-religious carry on becoming less and less religious. As a corollary, the idea that what we observe is transformation of religion, not decline, seems inconsistent with the evidence. Instead, we identify a pattern of divergence and consolidation – with the non-religious, in particular, appearing to become more strident (or at least open) in their non-belief.

Secularisation should not be interpreted as a growth in intolerance, indeed the reverse appears to be true. The British public do increasingly appear to have little confidence in religious institutions or faith that they are a force for good. However, a large majority maintain positive or neutral views of individuals belonging to a religion – a pattern which is even more prevalent among younger people – although also a suspicion regarding, and reluctance to indulge, extremism.

In conclusion, our analysis shows that those claiming religious identity, practising a religion or believing are clearly diminishing, as a proportion of the British population and so, arguably, in influence. In further work to

**Our data show that secularisation continues past the point where people stop identifying with a religion or going to church regularly. The non-religious carry on becoming less and less religious**

be published elsewhere, we find that social attitudes are associated in different ways with identity on the one hand and practice on the other. Those making blanket or unnuanced claims about the influence of faith or religion or making claims about 'the religious' or 'Christians' might want to take care.

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## Appendix

The data on which the Spotlight chart is based are shown below.

**Table A.1 Religious identity 1983–2018**

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Christian	66	66	63	63	63	64	60	61	59	58	56
Non-Christian	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3
No religion	31	32	34	34	34	34	36	35	37	38	40
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918	2945	3469	3633

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Christian	53	52	51	52	55	54	54	50	53	54	48
Non-Christian	4	4	3	3	5	4	4	6	3	6	6
No religion	43	43	45	44	40	41	41	43	43	40	46
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3620	1355	3146	3143	3426	3287	3435	4432	3199	4268	4290

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Christian	48	50	44	43	46	46	41	42	43	41	40	38
Non-Christian	6	7	5	6	7	6	8	8	8	6	8	9
No religion	46	43	51	50	46	48	50	49	48	53	52	52
<i>Unweighted base</i>	4124	4486	3421	3297	3311	3248	3244	2877	4328	2939	3988	3879

The data on which Figure 1 is based are shown below.

**Table A.2 Affiliation with Church of England, by age**

% belong to Church of England	<i>Unweighted base</i>	
<b>Age group</b>		
18-24	1	218
25-34	3	512
35-44	4	629
45-54	10	631
55-64	20	665
65-74	24	681
75+	33	536

Bases for Table 9 are shown below.

**Table A.3 Religious identification, attendance and belief in God, by age, by gender**

	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>Religion</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
18-34	314	416	730
35-54	530	730	1260
55+	845	1037	1882
All ages	1691	2188	3879
<b>Attends religious service or meeting</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
18-34	314	416	730
35-54	530	730	1260
55+	845	1037	1882
All ages	1691	2188	3879
<b>Believe in God</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
18-34	133	147	280
35-54	198	292	490
55+	358	422	780
All ages	690	862	1552

The data on which Figure 2 is based are shown below.

**Table A.4 Confidence in institutions**

	<b>Schools and the education system</b>	<b>Courts and the legal system</b>	<b>Business and industry</b>	<b>Churches and religious organisations</b>	<b>Parliament</b>
<b>Level of confidence</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Complete	5	5	1	2	1
A great deal	31	29	15	9	7
Some	45	41	55	35	37
Very little	12	14	17	24	34
No confidence at all	2	6	4	21	16
Can't choose/No answer	6	5	8	9	6
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1552</i>	<i>1552</i>	<i>1552</i>	<i>1552</i>	<i>1552</i>

The data on which Table 10 is based are shown below.

**Table A.5 Attitudes toward religious role in public life, by whether have a religion, 1998-2018**

	<b>1998</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2018</b>
<b>Religions bring more conflict than peace (Agree)</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Has religion	436	1116	765
No religion	368	865	784
All	807	1986	1552
<b>Religious organisations have too much power or too little power</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Has religion	436	1116	765
No religion	368	865	784
All	807	1986	1552
<b>Religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Has religion	436	1116	765
No religion	368	865	784
All	807	1986	1552

The data on which Figure 3 is based are shown below.

**Table A.6 Positive or negative feeling toward different faiths**

	Christians	Muslims	Hindus	Buddhists	Jews	Atheists or non-believers
<b>Feel toward faith</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Positive	51	30	36	41	36	39
Neither positive nor negative	37	42	46	43	46	44
Negative	4	17	5	4	6	5
Can't choose or not answered	8	11	13	13	12	13
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1552	1552	1552	1552	1552	1552

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