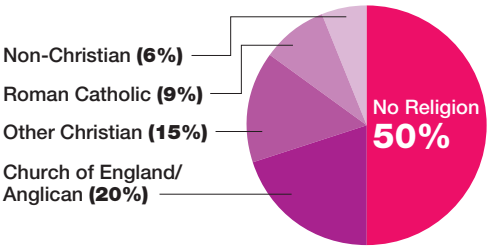
12. Religion
Losing faith?

How religious is the British public and how has this changed over time? Getting an accurate picture of the importance of religion in people's lives matters; not least because it influences the role of religion in policy making and public life, and helps guide the allocation of funding and resources.

There was much debate in the run-up to the census about how to measure 'religiosity'. The chapter examines levels of religious affiliation, whether someone was brought up in a religion, and whether they regularly attend religious services.



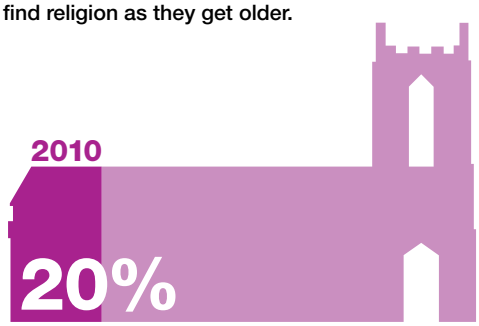
Half (50%) do not regard themselves as **belonging to a particular religion**, while the largest proportion (20%) of religious affiliates belong to the Church of England. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of those aged 18–24 do not belong to a religion, compared with 28% of those aged 65 and above.

More than half (56%) of those who belong to or were brought up in a religion never **attend religious services or meetings**. Just 14% attend weekly.

Levels of religiosity have declined over the past three decades and are likely to decline further, mainly as a result of generational replacement.

One in three (31%) in 1983 did not belong to a religion, compared with one in two (50%) now. **The largest decline** has been in affiliation with the Church of England, which has halved since 1983 (from 40% to 20%).

This change – which is likely to continue – can be explained by **generational replacement**, with older, more religious, generations dying out and being replaced by less religious generations. There is little evidence that substantial numbers find religion as they get older.



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We last closely examined religion in *The 26th Report*, contributing to the ongoing debates around how and why religious faith in Britain is changing, and what this means for public attitudes and social policy (Voas and Ling, 2010; McAndrew, 2010). This chapter updates some key elements of this earlier work, focusing particularly on the extent to which the British public is religious, how levels of religiosity vary, and how and why they have changed over the past three decades.

An accurate measure of religiosity in Britain is important for several reasons. We need to feel confident that we can accurately describe what Britain looks like, rather than accept the picture painted by religious or secular leaders. As recent debates around the census highlighted, measures of religiosity guide the allocation of time and money to religious groups and organisations (and consequently to their secular counterparts), and influence policies such as the support of faith schools and retention of bishops in the House of Lords. Understanding religiosity is also important because we know it underpins and influences a number of value and belief systems, whether by directly shaping political views (Andersen *et al.*, 2005), or informing attitudes through the influence of the social contexts people experience (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001). Using *British Social Attitudes* data, McAndrew (2010) showed religiosity to be strongly linked with attitudes to a range of social issues; the most religious were more likely than others to be anti-abortion, support traditional gender roles and to believe premarital sex is wrong. So, changes in religiosity are likely to accompany and contribute to changes in attitudes to a range of issues.

However, measuring religiosity is not a straightforward exercise. In the run up to the 2011 census, a number of journalists, bloggers and campaigners publicised the disparity between the findings of the 2001 census and the corresponding *British Social Attitudes* survey. While the census reported that 72 per cent of the British population were Christian and 15 per cent of no religion, in that same year we found 43 per cent to be Christian and 41 per cent to be of no religion. The difference between the two results can be partly explained by question wording, the response options offered and the context in which the questions were asked.[1] In this chapter, we use a range of complementary measures of religious upbringing, affiliation and practice included in the *British Social Attitudes* survey to present an up-to-date and nuanced picture of religiosity in Britain, how this has changed and why.

How religious is the British public?

Religiosity can be measured in a number of ways – as testified by the aforementioned debate around the question wording used in the census and its implications for the data obtained. We cannot simply divide the public into the religious and non-religious; there will be varying levels and combinations of commitment and practice. Here, we utilise three long-standing *British Social Attitudes* questions, which measure distinct aspects of religious affiliation and practice.

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We measure religious affiliation using the following question:

Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?
IF YES: Which?

Table 12.1 shows how respondents answered this question in 2010. Half do not belong to a religion, around one in five identify themselves as Church of England or Anglican and around one in ten are Roman Catholic. Slightly less than one in five belong to another type of Christian faith and around one in twenty belong to a non-Christian religion.

Table 12.1 Religious affiliation

Religion which respondent belongs to	%
No religion	50
Church of England/Anglican	20
Other Christian	(15)
Christian – no denomination	9
Christian – specific denomination[2]	6
Roman Catholic	9
Non-Christian[3]	6
Base	*3297*

More often than not, religious belief is initiated in childhood. To ascertain the extent to which the British public in 2010 has been brought up in a religion, we asked:

In what religion, if any, were you brought up?
PROBE IF NECESSARY: What was your family's religion?

Overall, 79 per cent of the British public describe themselves as having been brought up in a particular religion. In Table 12.2 we cross-analyse responses to this question with people's current religious affiliation, reported above. Clearly, being brought up in a religion has a major impact on religious affiliation later in life. Around half of those brought up as Anglican/Church of England still affiliate with this religion, though two-fifths now follow no religion. Those who were brought up in a non-Christian faith or in Roman Catholicism are far more likely to affiliate with their original religion; this was the case for almost nine in ten of those brought up in a non-Christian religion and

50% **do not affiliate to a religion**

six in ten of those brought up Roman Catholic. Despite this, those who were brought up without a religion are far less likely to shift from this position later in life – almost 19 out of 20 of those who were not brought up in a religion do not have a religious affiliation today. It is clear that the religion one was brought up in has a strong impact on religious affiliation later in life.

Table 12.2 Current religious affiliation, by religious upbringing

	Which religion brought up in				
	Church of England/ Anglican	Roman Catholic	Other Christian	Non-Christian	No religion
Current religious affiliation	%	%	%	%	%
Church of England/ Anglican	49	3	4	*	2
Roman Catholic	1	62	1	–	*
Other Christian	6	3	49	2	3
Non-Christian	1	*	1	87	*
No religion	43	32	44	10	94
Base	*1279*	*447*	*765*	*147*	*628*

** Less than 0.5 per cent; – indicates zero*

While around half of the public describe themselves as belonging to a religion, does this mean that a similar proportion actively practise their faith by attending religious services? If, and how far, is religious affiliation linked to religious practice? To assess this, we asked those who indicated they belong to and/or were brought up in a religion the following question:

Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals and baptisms, how often nowadays do you attend services or meetings connected with your religion?[4]

Their responses are presented in Table 12.3. Clearly, religious affiliation does not automatically translate into religious practice. Slightly more than half of those who belong to or were brought up in a religion never attend services or meetings connected with their religion. For the remainder of this group, practice varies widely – one in twenty attend religious meetings less than once a year while, at the opposite end of the spectrum, slightly more than one in ten attend at least weekly.

The religion one was brought up in has a strong impact on religious affiliation later in life

Table 12.3 Attendance at religious services or meetings

Level of attendance	%
Never	56
Less than annually	5
At least annually	15
At least monthly	9
At least weekly	14
Base	*2680*

Base: respondents who affiliate to a religion and/or were brought up in a religion

Is the propensity for those who belong to a religion to attend services and meetings the same for all religions, or are those who belong to particular religions more likely to attend than others? In Table 12.4 we cross-analyse attendance at religious services or meetings by religious affiliation. Those who affiliate to the Church of England/ Anglicanism are least likely to attend religious services; only around half ever attend and less than one in ten do so at least once a week. Attendance is considerably higher for followers of other religions; only slightly more than two in ten non-Christians never attend religious services, compared with around three in ten Roman Catholics or followers of other Christian faiths.

Table 12.4 Attendance at religious services/meetings, by religious affiliation

	Religious affiliation				
	Church of England/ Anglican	Roman Catholic	Other Christian	Non-Christian	No religion
Level of attendance		%	%	%	%
Never	48	29	34	23	88
Less than annually	7	5	5	4	3
At least annually	25	20	16	12	6
At least monthly	10	17	14	21	1
At least weekly	8	28	29	39	1
Base	*719*	*287*	*495*	*152*	*1027*

Base: respondents who affiliate to a religion and/or were brought up in a religion

We have seen that the British public cannot be easily divided into the 'religious' and 'non-religious' – the degree and nature of religiosity varies considerably. Across the public as a whole, 50 per cent do not affiliate with a religion, 18 per cent do affiliate but do not actively practise it (by attending services or meetings) and 30 per cent affiliate and actively practise. We next turn to consider how membership of these three broad groups differs across the population as a whole.

How does religiosity vary among the British public?

A number of groups are traditionally regarded as more religious than others – women compared with men, the old compared with the young, and the less well educated compared with the better educated. In addition, religiosity has been shown to link with support for particular political parties (Clements, 2010). In Table 12.5 we test these assumptions by comparing, across these characteristics, the proportions who are not religious, who belong to a religion but do not attend meetings, and who both belong to and practise a religion.

As expected, we see that men are slightly less likely than women to belong to a religion, while, among those who do belong, women are more likely than men to attend religious meetings. However, we also see that those with qualifications in the middle of the spectrum (CSE to A-level) are less religious than those at either end. While those at each end of the spectrum (no qualification/degree) are the most likely to affiliate with a religion, those with no qualifications are more likely than others to say they are religious but do not practise (27 per cent), and those with degree level qualifications are more likely than others to practise their religion (39 per cent). These findings do not completely support the assumption that the less well educated are traditionally more religious than the better educated, especially when it comes to religious practise. The larger differences, however, appear between older and younger age groups. Around two in three of the youngest age group (aged 18–24) do not belong to a religion, compared with less than one in three of the oldest age group (aged 65 years and over). A similar pattern is seen with religious attendance, with around four in ten respondents aged 65 years and over attending religious meetings, compared with slightly more than two in ten of the youngest age group.

56%

of those affiliating to a religion, or brought up in a religion, never attend religious services or meetings

Table 12.5 Religious affiliation and attendance, by demographic characteristics and party identification

		No religion	Religious but don't attend meetings	Religious and do attend meetings[5]	*Base*
All	%	50	18	30	*3297*
Sex					
Male	%	56	17	25	*1442*
Female	%	45	19	35	*1855*
Age					
18–24	%	64	10	24	*230*
25–34	%	57	14	28	*446*
35–44	%	60	11	28	*637*
45–54	%	51	18	30	*557*
55–64	%	47	21	30	*563*
65–97	%	28	31	39	*857*
Highest educational qualification					
Degree	%	48	12	39	*643*
A-level	%	55	14	30	*780*
O-level	%	58	17	25	*537*
CSE	%	56	21	20	*183*
No qualification	%	42	27	28	*1129*
Party identification					
Conservative	%	44	22	32	*943*
Labour	%	46	20	32	*1011*
Liberal Democrat	%	55	11	33	*411*
Other party	%	63	16	17	*194*
None	%	59	16	23	*532*

Religiosity also varies by party identification – the non-religious are the most likely to support a party other than the main three (63 per cent) or not to identify with a political party (59 per cent); they are least likely to support the Conservative party (44 per cent). Interestingly, despite a higher proportion of Conservative supporters belonging to a religion (54 per cent), levels of attendance at religious services are very similar for supporters of the three main political parties (around 32 per cent).

So, levels of religiosity vary markedly across the public and are strongly linked with age and, to a lesser degree, educational qualifications, sex and party identification. These links may provide clues as to how levels of religiosity have changed over time – and it is to this question that we turn to next.

How has religiosity changed over time?

Table 12.6 presents *British Social Attitudes* data on religious affiliation, which the survey has asked about since its inception in 1983. Looking back over the last three decades, we see major changes in the religiosity of the British public. One in three respondents in 1983 did not belong to a religion, compared with one in two now. This decline is largely accounted for by falling affiliation with the Church of England/Anglicanism; the proportion who follow this religion has halved across the lifetime of the study. Adherence to other Christian religions has remained relatively stable, while the share of the population who belong to non-Christian religions has risen – largely as a result of immigration to Britain after the Second World War (Voas and Ling, 2010). We can also see in Table 12.6 that the proportion of the population brought up in a religion has declined by nine percentage points in the last 15 years. Finally, we can look at patterns of attendance among people who affiliate or were brought up in a religion. There is a core of people who attend religious meetings at least weekly or monthly, the levels of which have remained relatively unchanged over the last 20 years. Similarly, the proportion of those who attend less than once a year remains stable. There has been some slight change, however, with those attending "at least annually", six percentage points down on levels for 1990, which is likely to have contributed to the slight rise in the proportion reporting they "never" attend.

Table 12.6 Religious affiliation and attendance, 1983–2010

							Change
	83	**90**	**95**	**00**	**05**	**10**	**83–10**
Affiliation	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	
Church of England/Anglican	40	37	32	30	26	20	-20
Roman Catholic	10	9	9	9	9	9	-1
Other Christian	17	14	15	16	18	15	-2
Non-Christian	2	3	3	5	6	6	+4
No religion	31	36	40	40	40	50	+19
Base	*1761*	*2797*	*3633*	*3426*	*4268*	*3297*	
							95–10
Brought up in a religion	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	
	n/a	n/a	88	88	86	79	-9
Base	*n/a*	*n/a*	*3633*	*3418*	*4268*	*3287*	
							90–10
Attendance	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	
Never	n/a	49	55	55	58	56	+7
Less than annually	n/a	6	4	4	5	5	-2
At least annually	n/a	21	19	17	15	15	-6
At least monthly	n/a	10	9	9	8	9	-1
At least weekly	n/a	12	13	13	11	14	+2
Base	*n/a*	*2682*	*3333*	*3048*	*3800*	*2680*	

n/a = not asked
Base for 'Attendance': respondents who affiliate to a religion and/or were brought up in a religion

Why are we less religious than we used to be?

How can we explain this decline in religiosity? Here, we focus on the decline in religious affiliation, which we have seen is strongly influenced by being brought up in a religion, and links to levels of religious attendance. Does the decline in religious affiliation result from a lifecycle effect (with each individual generation's attitudes following a particular pattern throughout their lifecycle), a period effect (with a particular event or way of thinking affecting all or some of society at a particular point in time) or a generation or cohort effect (with more religious generations dying and being replaced by less religious ones)?

To explore these possibilities, we grouped respondents into nine 'generations' and considered their levels of religious affiliation at four points in time. This analysis is presented in Table 12.7. The first point to note is that there is no evidence of a lifecycle effect – that is, as people grow older they become more or less religious. Non-affiliation remains relatively stable as each generation ages; for example, 30 per cent of those born between 1936–1945 did not follow a religion in 1983 (when they were aged 38–47 years), compared with 31 per cent in 2010 (when they were 65–74 years).

Could the decline in religious affiliation be attributed to a period effect? At a time of plummeting trust in politicians and banks (Curtice and Park, 2010), might public cynicism have extended to religious bodies, perhaps spurred on by scandals within the church, such as the sex abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland? There is some evidence of a decline in religious affiliation between 2000 and 2010, particularly for those generations currently aged in their mid-30s to mid-60s. This trend is likely to be very recent, as it has not been identified in previous work on this topic, and therefore merits further investigation.

However, by far the most marked differences occur between cohorts – indicating that the decline in religious affiliation in Britain has primarily been brought about by generational replacement. In 1983, for example, 55 per cent of those born between 1956 and 1965 (then aged 18–27) did not belong to a religion, compared with 12 per cent of those born before 1915 (then aged 68+). By 2010, 65 per cent of the youngest generation (born between 1986 and 1992 and then aged 18–24) did not belong to a religion, compared with 24 per cent of the oldest generation (born between 1926 and 1935 and then aged 75+[6]). The result of continual generational replacement is that, overall, the proportion of the population who does not belong to a religion continues to rise. These findings broadly reflect the conclusions of other studies which investigate the causes of the decline in religious affiliation in other European countries (see for example Voas, 2009).

Non-affiliation remains relatively stable as each generation ages

Table 12.7 No religious affiliation, cohort analysis, 1983–2010[7]

	1983	1990	2000	2010
% not belonging to a religion				
All	31	36	40	50
Cohort		**(age in brackets)**		
1986–1992	n/a	n/a	n/a	65 (18–24)
1976–1985	n/a	n/a	59 (18–24)	57 (25–34)
1966–1975	n/a	54 (17–24)	53 (25–34)	60 (35–44)
1956–1965	55 (18–27)	47 (25–34)	46 (35–44)	51 (45–54)
1946–1955	39 (28–37)	40 (35–44)	39 (45–54)	47 (55–64)
1936–1945	30 (38–47)	32 (45–54)	27 (55–64)	31 (65–74)
1926–1935	24 (48–57)	25 (55–64)	21 (65–74)	24 (75–94)
1916–1925	20 (58–67)	23 (65–74)	17 (75–94)	n/a
1915 or earlier	12 (68+)	19 (75–94)	n/a	n/a

n/a = not asked

What do our findings mean for the future? We cannot, of course, rule out the possibility that a major event might affect people's relationship with religion. But on the basis of our findings it seems likely that the ongoing decline in religious affiliation (and consequently religious attendance) will continue. This reflects the fact that each generation is less likely than its predecessor to be born into religious families, and that this lack of religiosity tends to remain with an individual as they get older.

Conclusions

Britain is becoming less religious, with the numbers who affiliate with a religion or attend religious services experiencing a long-term decline. And this trend seems set to continue; not only as older, more religious generations are replaced by younger, less religious ones, but also as the younger generations increasingly opt not to bring up their children in a religion – a factor shown to strongly link with religious affiliation and attendance later in life.

What does this decline mean for society and social policy more generally? On the one hand, we can expect to see a continued increase in liberal attitudes towards a range of issues such as abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia, as the influence of considerations grounded in religion declines. Moreover, we may see an

65%

of 18–24 year olds do not affiliate to a religion, compared with 55% of the same age group (18–27) in 1983

increased reluctance, particularly among the younger age groups, for matters of faith to enter the social and public spheres at all. The recently expressed sentiment of the current coalition government to "do" and "get" God (Warsi, 2011) therefore may not sit well with, and could alienate, certain sections of the population.

Notes

1. The difference between the proportions of the population identified as belonging to a religion by the 2001 census and *British Social Attitudes* can be partly explained by question wording: the census asks respondents "What is your religion?" – implying that the respondent has one – while the *British Social Attitudes* survey asks "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?" The difference may also be due to the response options offered; with the census listing the major world religions, and *British Social Attitudes* listing specific denominations; respondents answering the former would be most likely to see this as a question concerned with 'cultural classification' rather than religion (Voas and Bruce, 2004). Finally, the context of the questions is significant, with the census question following one on ethnicity, arguably causing 'contamination' of responses (*ibid*.).

2. "Other Christian – specific denomination" includes Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian/Church of Scotland, Free Presbyterian, Brethren, and United Reform Church (URC)/Congregational.

3. "Non-Christian" includes Hindu, Jewish, Islam/Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, and Other non-Christian. Due to small base size we cannot break this group down further for subgroup analysis.

4. Answer options are: *Once a week or more, less often but at least once in two weeks, less often but at least once a month, less often but at least twice a year, less often but at least once a year, less often than once a year, never or practically never, varies too much to say.*

5. 'Religious and do attend meetings' includes anyone who attends, however infrequent – that is, any of: *Once a week or more, less often but at least once in two weeks, less often but at least once a month, less often but at least twice a year, less often but at least once a year, less often than once a year.*

6. In fact this age category only includes those aged 75–94, so as to fit with the years specified in the left-hand column; there were three people aged 95 in the sample. When the 95 year olds are included in the 75–94 age group, this brings the percentage of those saying "No religion" down to 23 per cent, but this is largely due to rounding (the difference is 0.2 per cent).

7. The bases for Table 12.7 are as follows:

	1983	1990	2000	2010
All	*1761*	*2797*	*3426*	*3297*
1986–1992	*n/a*	*n/a*	*n/a*	*229*
1976–1985	*n/a*	*n/a*	*277*	*446*
1966–1975	*n/a*	*336*	*614*	*637*
1956–1965	*298*	*512*	*715*	*557*
1946–1955	*357*	*560*	*521*	*563*
1936–1945	*286*	*456*	*501*	*497*
1926–1935	*289*	*382*	*432*	*357*
1916–1925	*261*	*330*	*359*	*n/a*
1915 (or earlier)	*264*	*207*	*n/a*	*n/a*

n/a = not asked

Various corrections have been made to Table 12.7, for example, while those in the 1966–1975 cohort would be aged 15–24 years old in 1990, there were no 15 or 16 year olds in the sample.

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