



Embargoed for 06:00 December 23rd 2013

Press contact: Professor Linda Woodhead (07764 566090)

l.woodhead@lancaster.ac.uk

“No Religion” is the New Religion

YouGov poll probes the growing category of people who report “no religion”

A number of recent surveys have revealed that the number saying they have “no religion” continues to grow. Two large surveys by the Westminster Faith Debates carried out by YouGov now reveal what it really means to be “religion none.” The surveys were completed by 8,455 GB adults – of these 3199 identify as “no religion.”¹

The younger you are, the more likely to say “no religion”

In total, 38% of the population now report having “no religion.”² The proportion grows to nearly half (48%) of young adults (under 30), of whom only 26% identify with a Christian denomination (CofE, Catholic, Baptist, etc).

Amongst those over 60 the situation is more than reversed, with 27% stating “no religion” and 58% a Christian denomination. (The balance of people either do not wish to state, or state their religion as “other” or a non-Christian faith.)

“No religion” has nearly overtaken “Christian”

If religions other than Christianity are taken out of the picture, “none” has become the majority identity for British people under 50 (Table 1).

Whereas Christian remains the identity of a majority of the entire population of those aged 60+, “no religion” has – for the first time – become the identity of the absolute majority of those aged 18 and 19.³



Table 1

Age cohort	No religion	Christian	Other religion (including those who prefer not to state their religion)	No religion as % of the population (excluding Other)
18-19	55%	20%	25%	73%
20s	47%	26%	27%	65%
30s	44%	28%	28%	61%
40s	41%	40%	19%	51%
50s	36%	47%	17%	43%
60s	29%	56%	15%	34%
70s	21%	62%	17%	26%
80s	14%	64%	22%	17%
Total	38%	41%	21%	48%

Most nones are not atheists, they just don't identify with religion

Most “nones” are not atheists. Atheism has been growing far less than “no religion.” Our survey finds that one in five people are atheist. Amongst the “nones,” 43% are atheist, 40% are agnostic, and 16% believe in God.

Most nones don't decisively reject God, what they reject is an identification with “religion,” with a particular religion, and with the label “religious” (Table 2).

Table 2

<i>Which, if any, of the following best describes you?</i>	Nones	All
	12%	15%
A spiritual person		
A religious person	1%	8%
Both spiritual and religious	1%	10%
I would not describe myself, or my values and beliefs, as spiritual or religious	67%	48%
None of these	17%	13%
Don't know	3%	6%



Not all “Christians,” “Buddhists” etc. are religious either

Indifference to religion is not unique to “nones.” It is shared by some people who identify as Jewish, Christian, Buddhist and so on. In total, only 47% of those who report a religious affiliation describe themselves as religious and/or spiritual, and over a quarter say they are not influenced by religion.

There are also significant numbers of “affiliated” atheists and agnostics – 63% of those who identify as Buddhist, 42% of those who state their religion as Jewish, 33% of Christians, 11% of Muslims.

Only 13% of “nones” are hostile to religion

We identified “hostile nones” as those who say they have no religion, are atheist, and say that of both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church that it is “a negative force in society.” They amount to 13% of nones, and 5% of the population. (Similarly, 7% of the population in our survey say they are influenced by humanism or secularism.)

Hostile nones are disproportionately male: 62% male, 38% female.

In contrast to “nones” in general, hostile nones are as likely to be found amongst older as younger people, and there is no evidence of a dramatic rate of growth.

16% of nones believe in God; most are indifferent

Some nones (16%) say they believe in God, and some (23%) say they are influenced by religion.

But by far the largest category of nones (71%) are indifferent to religion, and 84% of nones are either agnostics or atheists.

Hardly any nones go to church or read holy scriptures (2%). They take no notice of religious authorities. Only 3% pray. Their most common spiritual practice is meditation or taking time to still the mind (18%).

Nones are younger and more ethically liberal than the general population

There is nothing particularly distinctive about those who say “no religion” in terms of class, gender, or political affiliation (with the exception of the gender imbalance amongst hostile nones). As shown in Table 1, the category of nones is relatively youthful, though there are nones in every age cohort.



“Nones” are more liberal than the rest of the population in their attitudes to personal morality, and this is enhanced by the age effect (young people in general are more liberal). For example, among those under 50, nones believe that gay marriage is right by a margin of 59%; the rest of the population is also in favour, but by the much narrower margin of 10%. There is a similar disparity among older people, but also less support in general for gay marriage, with older religious affiliates being the only group more inclined to think that gay marriage is wrong.

Why so many “nones”?

A large amount of the increase in “no religion” over time is due to religiously-affiliated older people (especially Anglicans) being replaced by cohorts of unaffiliated younger people.

However, this effect alone is probably not sufficient to explain all the increase in non-affiliation in the last decade or so. As being “no religion” becomes more widespread and accepted, it’s also likely that some adults who affiliated as Christian at the start of the 21st century had become “no religion” by 2013.

The growth of “no religion” comes at the expense of “Church of England” above all. The decline in “Roman Catholic” is much less (partly because of immigration), and the overall percentages for other religions and denominations are roughly the same across age groups.

Could the trend towards “no religion” change? Of course – but if the reason for the change is that Anglicans, in particular, are not transmitting their faith to their children, then it gets harder as each generation becomes more distant from contact with, or memory of, religion.

Linda Woodhead comments:

“The steady and relentless growth of “no religion” within our lifetime is a remarkable social shift. Support for the Christian churches, particularly the established churches of England and Scotland, is draining away. No religion is the new establishment. Whilst it’s always possible that this trend could be reversed, it gets less and less likely as the chain of memory connecting young people to religion stretches and snaps.”

Ends



Notes to editors

¹ The surveys were designed by Linda Woodhead for the Westminster Faith Debates and carried out online by YouGov. Fieldwork was undertaken between 25th-30th January 2013 and 5th-13th June 2013. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). Northern Ireland is not included. The surveys are available at <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/>

² The 2011 [Census](#) reports a quarter of the population of England and Wales saying “no religion.”

The 2012 [British Social Attitudes Survey](#) ($n=3,248$) reports 48% saying “no religion.”

The variation may be partly explained by the form of the question. Fewer people seem to opt for “no religion” when given the option of “Christian”, as on the Census. More report “no religion” when the option is “CofE,” “Catholic,” “Baptist” etc., as on the BSA survey and our survey.

³ The sample size of 18-19 year olds in our survey is small (144) but the proportion reporting no religion is in line with what would be expected of this cohort given the growth rate of the no religion category.