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‘What British People Really Believe’

Guest edited by Linda Woodhead, based on her surveys with YouGov for Westminster Faith Debates.

Chapter 6. What British people really believe about society, politics and religious institutions

Linda Woodhead

Socio-political attitudes

There are plenty of surveys which look at religion and voting patterns or party-political affiliations. What we wanted to in the surveys for the Westminster Faith Debates was drill down deeper to people’s underlying social, political and economic values and motivations, and see how these correlated with other factors, including religious affiliation, belonging, and strength of belief.

Religion and political leaning

It may be a cliché to say that the Church of England is the Tory party at prayer, but our surveys show there’s still truth in it. When people are asked their voting intentions, Anglicans are more conservative than the general population, and churchgoing ones even more so (fig. 1).

	<u>Conservative</u>	<u>Labour</u>	<u>Liberal Democrats</u>
General population	24%	33%	7%
Church of England	31%	28%	5%
Church of England churchgoing	35%	24%	7%

Fig 1

To see the political patterns more clearly, we created a ‘political leaning’ scale, drawing on a number of questions about social, economic and political attitudes. We

split this into three categories: left, centre and right. The proportions for the general population are 30% left, 43% centre, 27% right. We can also express this as a right-left ratio. For the general population the right-left ratio is 1.11, i.e. the population leans towards the right.

Fig. 2 shows how political leaning varies by religious affiliation. It finds that Catholics are about the same as the general population, other Protestants lean a bit more to the right, and Anglicans lean even more so. But those who say they have no religion ('nones'), lean slightly to the left, and people who belong to other, non-Christian, religions are more left-leaning.

<u>Religious Affiliation</u>	<u>Percentages</u>			<u>Ratio – Right/Left</u>
	<u>Left</u>	<u>Centre</u>	<u>Right</u>	
Catholic	27%	44%	30%	1.12
Protestant	23%	40%	37%	1.63
Church of England	16%	41%	43%	2.65
None	31%	42%	27%	0.87
Other	37%	48%	16%	0.43

Fig 2 Religious affiliation and political leaning

Interestingly, religious affiliation is a much better predictor of political leaning than social class, which doesn't make as much difference. Ethnicity, however – being white or non-white – makes a big difference, with non-whites being more left-leaning, which helps account for why affiliates of non-Christian religions are further to the left.

The other big factor is age, so we looked to see whether the rightwards leaning of Christians is partly to do with the fact that their average age is higher than that of the general population. Figs 3 and 4 show that age does indeed make a difference. But the right/left ratio for over-60s in the general population is 2.11, so older Christians, especially Anglicans, are still more right-leaning than the general population. For under-35s in the general population, the ratio is 0.54, so they are gently left-leaning – but under-35 Anglicans are the exception. They are the only under-35 religious affiliates who lean (slightly) to the right. So self-identified Anglicans look set to remain perhaps not the Tory party at prayer, but the Coalition government at prayer!

<u>Over 60</u>	<u>Percentages</u>			<u>Ratio – Right/Left</u>
	<u>Left</u>	<u>Centre</u>	<u>Right</u>	
All	21%	36%	44%	2.11
Catholic	21%	34%	45%	2.20
Protestant	15%	35%	50%	3.41
Church of England	11%	35%	53%	4.52
None	30%	34%	36%	1.19
Other	33%	38%	29%	0.88

Fig 3 Over-60s religious affiliation and political leaning

<u>Under 35</u>	<u>Percentages</u>			<u>Ratio – Right/Left</u>
	<u>Left</u>	<u>Centre</u>	<u>Right</u>	
All	30%	53%	16%	0.54
Catholic	29%	55%	16%	0.53
Protestant	40%	43%	17%	0.43
Church of England	19%	53%	28%	1.44
None	31%	52%	17%	0.56
Other	37%	54%	8%	0.22

Fig 4 Under-35s religious affiliation and political leaning

Religion and ‘Little Englandism’

By amalgamating the results of a number of questions on our survey, including ones about immigration, attitudes to the EU, and attitudes to increasing cultural diversity in Britain, we were able to construct a ‘little England’ score. Fig 5 shows the results for the general population. We drew the dividing line between ‘cosmopolitans’ and ‘little englanders’ at 5.5 on the scale, which means that 46% of the population are cosmopolitan, and 55% are little England in their attitudes.

1 (most cosmopolitan)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9 (most insular)
6%	11%	10%	12%	14%	12%	12%	11%	13%

Scale: 1-5.5 = cosmopolitan 5.5-9 = insular/‘little England’

Fig 5 Little England scale, general population

Looking at the results by religious affiliation, Anglicans are the most ‘little England’ of all the religious affiliations – 37% cosmopolitan, 63% little England. Catholics are

more evenly balanced and similar to the population as a whole – 45% cosmopolitan, 55% little England. Most non-Christians groups are tilted the other way – Jews are 75% little England and 25% cosmopolitan, for example. In fact, non-Christian religions as a whole are 73% cosmopolitan, 27% little England. Those who say they have ‘no religion’ are 55% cosmopolitan, 45% little England.

Religion and Optimism

We also clustered a number of questions designed to gauge how optimistic or pessimistic people feel about life in Britain today. We used questions which asked to what degree people thought that post-war British society had become better or worse, whether they felt more concerned about Islamist terrorism, whether they thought people had become more selfish than 20 years ago, and whether they felt that crime had been rising (nationally, it has been falling).

If we use a scale which runs from 0-100, with 0 being most optimistic, and 100 most pessimistic, then the mean for the general population is 60 – in other words, the British are mildly pessimistic (which may be why Americans reply ‘just great’, when asked how they are, whilst British people say ‘not bad’ or ‘could be worse’).

We found that strength of belief in God is strongly correlated with optimism and pessimism, with the strongest believers being generally pessimistic, and atheists being generally optimistic. If you think there is probably a God, you add 5 points of pessimism to your score, and if you think there is definitely a God, you add 7 points. This raises the question, are people pessimistic because they are believers or the other way round? Perhaps it suggests that strong believers are out of sympathy with contemporary society and critical of it, that they see themselves as at odds with the direction of social travel.

There are also differences by religious affiliation. Anglicans are pretty pessimistic, and Anglican pessimists outweigh Anglican optimists by about 60% to 40%. Catholics and nonconformists are about 50:50. But other faiths and ‘nones’ are much more optimistic. Actively practising your faith by belonging to a group makes you more optimistic if you are an Anglican, but doesn’t make much difference for most other religions and denominations.

Age also has a big effect, adding on average 2.5 points per decade – the older we get, the less optimistic. For over 60s the median pessimism score is 70. As for social class, the least pessimistic are the highest classes ‘AB’. Add 2 points for C1, 6 for C2, and 4 for DE. If you are white, add 5 – non-whites, including migrants, are more optimistic than white ethnic British. There is quite a close correlation between the ‘little England’ scale and the pessimism scale, the more insular you the more likely you are to be pessimistic in outlook – presumably because you feel that Britain is drifting from its traditional values and social cohesion (which you like), and becoming more culturally diverse and cosmopolitan (which you don’t like).

Attitudes towards churches and faith schools

Attitudes to the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches in Britain

The most surprising result when we ask people their attitude towards the two largest historic denominations in Britain is that the majority don’t have a strong opinion. Either they ‘don’t know’ or they are indifferent – they don’t feel that the churches are either a positive or a negative force. Amongst those that do have a view, a slim margin think the Church of England is a positive force, whilst a large margin think the Catholic Church in Britain is a negative force.

In your opinion, would you say that the

Church of England today is...?

A positive force in society	18
A negative force in society	14
Neither a positive or negative force in society	58
Don't know	10

Fig 6 Attitudes towards the CofE

In your opinion, would you say that the

Catholic Church in Britain is...?

A positive force in society	13
A negative force in society	28
Neither a positive or negative force in society	47
Don't know	11

Fig 7 Attitudes towards the RC Church in Britain

The indifference may well be explained by people's lack of contact with the churches. Almost half the population said that they have had no direct contact with the Church of England in the last year. Of the other half who have, 20% have done so by way of a funeral, 15% visiting a cathedral or historic church, 12% a wedding, 11% a Christmas service, 10% a christening. The percentage who said they have had contact by way of the media – whether newspapers or TV or other – was the same as that which said they'd had contact with clergy person in their own community (8%). Only 1% said they had been the recipient of help from the church in their community.

But when people *did* have a clear opinion about the churches, we asked why they felt this way. The reasons are interestingly different for the two denominations. In relation to the Anglican Church, the main reasons have to do with the past, Englishness, and values. So the three most popular answers, each attracting around 20% of respondents are that it's 'integral to English culture', 'an ethical voice in our society', and 'part of our heritage'. Next, with 10% each are that it's 'at the heart of local communities', and 'is a support for those in need'. Nine percent prefer the more religious reason 'it brings people closer to God'. As for the negatives, almost a third say that the CofE 'is too prejudiced – it discriminates against women and gay people'. A quarter say it is 'stuffy and out of touch', and 17% that it is hypocritical.

With respect to the Catholic Church, the most common reason for negativity is that 'it is too prejudiced – it discriminates against women and gay people' (28%). Another 23% say 'because of the child abuse claims', and 22% that it is 'too hypocritical'. As for the minority who see the Church as a positive force, the most popular reason is that it is 'an ethical voice in society' (19%), and then three other reasons tie in popularity (13% each): it's part of our heritage, it's an important part of a global church, and it is a support for people in need. Only 10% cite the more 'religious' reason that the Church 'brings people closer to God'.

Attitudes to Faith Schools

State-supported ‘faith schools’ (schools with a particular religious character) make up around a third of schools in England and Wales (Scotland has a different system, with state-funded schools being either non-denominational or Roman Catholic). Most faith schools in Britain are church schools (e.g. Church of England, Roman Catholic) and the rest (around 1%) are non-Christian (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Hindu). Many ‘faith schools’ (notably Church of England voluntary controlled schools) are not in practice significantly different from non-faith schools. Under the Coalition government the number of Academies and Free Schools in England has expanded rapidly, and around a quarter of these are faith schools. So faith schools are a very important part of our educational landscape.

Overall, our survey found that only a third of people support state funding for faith schools in general. Nearly half actively disapprove, and the rest say they ‘don’t know’. Political affiliation makes little difference to the level of approval. Only a quarter of people who might have a school-age child say they would send him or her to a faith school. There is little variation by class or region (except Scotland, with its different school system).

Interestingly, however, young people are more positive about faith schools than older people – when asked if the government should provide funding for faith schools, 18-24 year olds are in favour by 43% to 36%, compared with those aged 40-59 who are opposed by 47% to 28%. Also intriguing is the fact that, despite relatively low support for faith schools, people don’t object to faith schools discriminating on religious grounds in their admissions by 49% to 38% (13% don’t know). There isn’t much support for reforming proposals to make faith schools more mixed by admitting a quota from a different faith or none.

We asked people about what influences them when they chose a school, in order to gauge how much the ‘faith’ part of faith schools counts. Overwhelmingly, people say that academic standards matter most in choosing a school, as Fig. 8 shows. Values and religion count for far less.

If you were thinking about sending your child to a school in your local area, which two or three, if any, would influence your choice? (Please tick up to three)

Academic standards	77
Location of the school	58
Discipline records in the school	41
Ethical values	23
Prestige of the school	19
Grounding of pupils in a faith tradition	5
Transmission of belief about God	3
Something else	5
Don't know	9

When faith schools are broken down by religion and denomination, the only kind which has a margin of support is Church of England (4% margin). There is a margin of opposition of 7% against funding Catholic schools, 33% against Jewish and 40% against Islamic and Hindu schools. But young people are more positive than older people about funding non-Christian faith schools – e.g. 32% of 18-24 year olds support funding for Islamic schools compared with 16% of 40-59 year olds.

Looking at the main factors which have an effect on attitudes, age has an effect, but overall strength of belief in God is the stronger factor. People who are certain there is a God are more than three times more likely to support funding for faith schools than are atheists. If we isolate attitudes towards non-Christian faith schools, being insular or 'little England' rather than cosmopolitan is the strongest factor after belief in God. Under-30s with a cosmopolitan outlook are more than twice as likely to be supportive of faith schools as over-30s with an insular outlook.

Thus our research shows that when choosing a school most parents aren't concerned with religion. They are concerned with academic standards. The people who fuel the debate tend to be strong believers and strong non-believers, but they both exaggerate the faith element in the debate. So long as parents want their children to get the best qualifications, so long as politicians of left and right support parental choice and high academic standards, and so long as faith schools maintain these standards, the debate can continue, but faith schools are not going away.