

III Religion in Great Britain

In a recent speech to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, Prime Minister David Cameron described Britain as a Christian country.ⁱ His speech provoked a debate in the media, prompting some commentators to ask whether Britain really was a Christian country and, if so, for how long. This article explores these questions by examining demographic data on religious affiliation in Great Britain.

Recording religion

The 2001 census was the first census to include a question on religion.ⁱⁱ The question simply asked “What is your religion?” and – unusually for a census question – respondents weren’t obliged to answer it.

Before the 2001 census, the only systematic survey that routinely asked people about their religious affiliation was the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA), which surveys over 3,000 people each year.ⁱⁱⁱ The BSA asks a range of questions on religion, including questions on religious affiliation, upbringing, and attendance at religious services. The question on religious affiliation asks “Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?” and if respondents answer “yes” they are then asked to which religion they belong. In the 2011 BSA survey, 50% of respondents said they belonged to no religion, 44% belonged to some form of Christianity, and 6% said they belonged to other religions. So Britain is no longer a majority Christian country on this measure of religious affiliation.

However, in 2001 the BSA question on religious affiliation produced a higher proportion of responses in the “no religion” category and a lower proportion in the Christian category than was recorded in the census that year. While the BSA estimated that 43% the British population was Christian and 41% had no religion, the census recorded that 72% of the British population was Christian while 15% had no religion. This difference suggests that people’s sense of religious affiliation is sensitive to the question that is used and the response categories that are offered when they are asked to define it.^{iv}

Since 2002, a question on religious affiliation has also been included in the Labour Force Survey (LFS), a quarterly survey of around 50,000 households, covering more than 100,000 respondents, that is designed to represent the population of the UK. Because of its large sample size and comparative frequency, the LFS not only provides good estimates of the size of religious populations but also of how they are changing over relatively short periods of time.

The Labour Force Survey question on religion

From 2002 to 2010 the LFS asked respondents in Great Britain the question: “What is your religion even if you are not currently practising?”

Initially the question was asked only of the person directly answering the survey, but its scope was expanded in 2003 to include responses on behalf of people aged 16 or older. In 2004 it was expanded again to allow responses on behalf of people of all ages.

There are two things to note about this question. First, the LFS asks a different question about religion in Northern Ireland, with different response categories, so LFS data on religion can only be aggregated for the population of Great Britain and not for the UK as a whole.

Second, the question measures self-defined religious affiliation rather than religious practice, and it does so in very broad terms. The qualifying phrase “even if you are not currently practising” could be interpreted as an invitation to express a sense of cultural affinity with a particular religious tradition rather than an expression of faith in that tradition’s beliefs.

The presence of the qualifying phrase is therefore likely to increase the number of responses in religious categories and reduce the number in the category for “no religion”. And indeed, when the qualifying phrase was removed in 2011, to bring the LFS question into line with the census question, it had the effect of reducing responses in the Christian category and increasing responses in the “no religion” group.^v Nevertheless, from 2004 to 2010, the LFS question provides data gathered on a consistent basis that can show trends in religious affiliation in Great Britain.

Trends in religious affiliation in Great Britain

Table 1 compares the size of Britain’s religious populations in the fourth quarters of 2004 and 2010. Between these periods, the estimated number of Christians fell by 3.4 million, from 44.8 million to 41.4 million, which is equivalent to around 570,000 fewer people each year.

At the same time, the number of people with no religion increased by 4.4 million, from 9.0 million to 13.4 million. This represents growth of 49% over the six-year period, equivalent to around 730,000 more people each year.

Table 1: Religious affiliation in Great Britain, Q4 2004 & Q4 2010

	Population		Population change		Annual population growth rate
	Q4 2004	Q4 2010	Number	%	
Christian	44,820,000	41,410,000	-3,410,000	-7.6%	-1.3%
No religion	9,010,000	13,390,000	+4,380,000	+48.7%	6.6%
Muslim	1,890,000	2,580,000	+690,000	+36.7%	5.2%
Hindu	550,000	790,000	+240,000	+43.0%	6.0%
Sikh	340,000	340,000	0	-1.2%	-0.2%
Jew ish	280,000	270,000	0	-1.0%	-0.2%
Buddhist	160,000	270,000	+120,000	+74.0%	9.2%
Any other religion	390,000	610,000	+220,000	+57.4%	7.6%

Source: ONS Labour Force Survey

Between Q4 2004 and Q4 2010, the Muslim population grew by an estimated 690,000, from around 1.9 million to around 2.6 million, which represents growth over the period of 43%. Other categories of religious affiliation that saw high growth rates were Hindus (43%), Buddhists (74%) and the category for any other religion (57%), although each of these was starting from a lower base than Muslims and people with no religion.

Table 2 and Chart 1 show the change in the size of each religious group measured as a proportion of the population in the fourth quarter of each

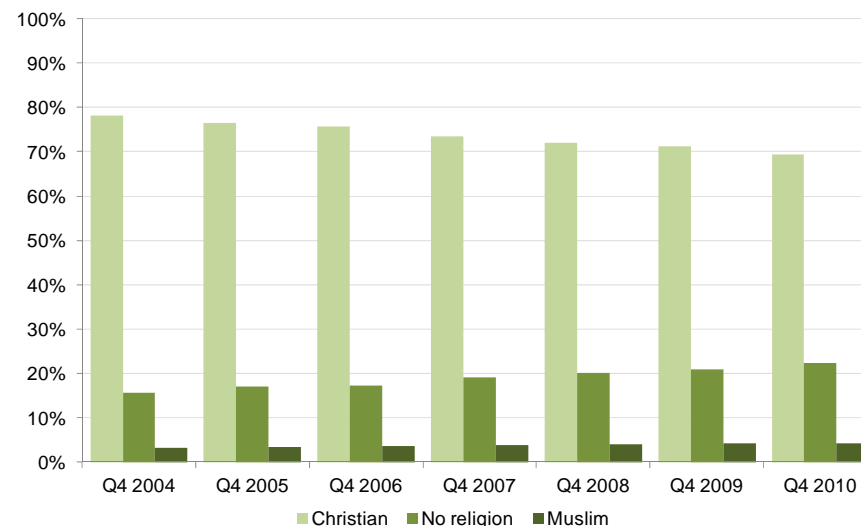
year from 2004 to 2010. Chart 1 illustrates the change in the three largest groups, which are Christians, people with no religion, and Muslims.

Table 2: Religious affiliation in Great Britain (%), Q4 2004 - Q4 2010

	Q4 2004	Q4 2005	Q4 2006	Q4 2007	Q4 2008	Q4 2009	Q4 2010
Christian	78.0%	76.4%	75.7%	73.5%	72.1%	71.1%	69.4%
No religion	15.7%	17.0%	17.2%	19.1%	20.1%	21.0%	22.4%
Muslim	3.3%	3.5%	3.7%	3.9%	4.1%	4.1%	4.3%
Hindu	1.0%	1.1%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.4%	1.3%
Sikh	0.6%	0.6%	0.6%	0.6%	0.7%	0.6%	0.6%
Jew ish	0.5%	0.5%	0.4%	0.5%	0.5%	0.4%	0.5%
Buddhist	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%	0.5%
Any other religion	0.7%	0.7%	0.8%	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%	1.0%

Source: ONS Labour Force Survey

Chart 1: Christians, people with no religion, and Muslims as a proportion of the population, Great Britain, Q4 2004 - Q4 2010



Source: ONS Labour Force Survey

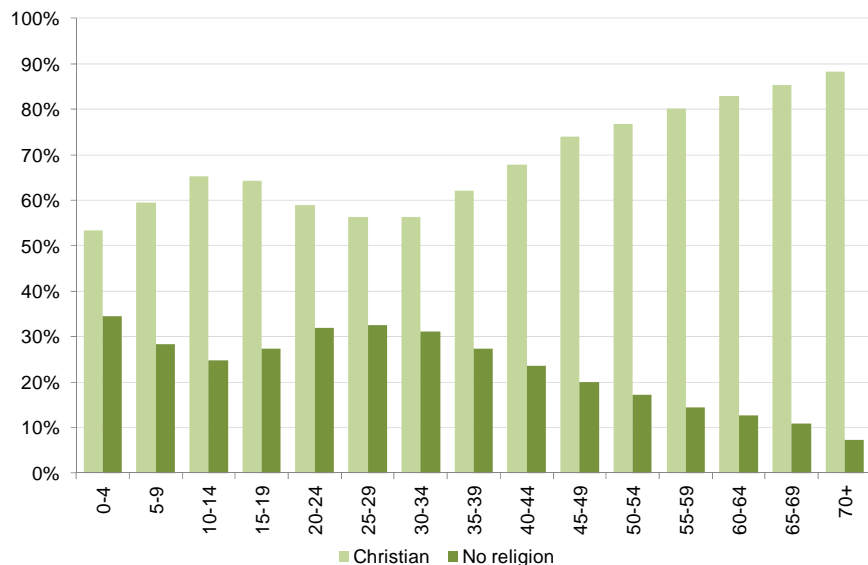
Between Q4 2004 and Q4 2010, the Christian population fell from 78.0% of the population to 69.4%, while the group of people with no religion grew from 15.7% to 22.4%.

If these populations continue to shrink and grow by the same number of people each year, the number of people with no religion will overtake the number of Christians in Great Britain in twenty years, on this measure of religious affiliation.

The age profile of Christians and people with no religion

What factors are driving the change in religious populations? Snapshots of population data can only provide limited answers to such questions, but differences in the demographic characteristics of some religious groups suggest some interesting possibilities.

Chart 2: Christians and people with no religion as a proportion of the population in each five-year age band, Great Britain, Q4 2010



Source: ONS Labour Force Survey

Chart 2 shows the proportion of the British population in each five-year age band that is Christian and the proportion that has no religion. For people aged twenty-five and older there is a clear pattern: the older you are, the more likely you are to identify yourself as a Christian and the less likely you are to define yourself as a person with no religion.

The picture is more mixed for people under the age of twenty, although this should not be surprising, as most of the respondents in this age group will be proxy respondents, whose religious affiliation will be decided by an adult member of the household answering the survey on their behalf. Indeed, it is interesting how the responses for the age-bands covering ages 0 to 14 broadly mirror the responses for the age bands covering ages 30 to 44, given that the mean age at birth for women in England and Wales was between 28.2 and 29.5 during the period 1996-2010, when the children in this cohort were born.^{vi}

For the adult population there are several possible interpretations of this data. One possible interpretation is that as people get older they are more likely to become religious, and Christianity is the dominant religion in Great Britain. A problem with this interpretation, in which people are increasingly likely to become religious as they age, is that if it were true, one would expect the Christian population to increase in an ageing society. But the Christian population is shrinking despite an increase in the number and proportion of older people.^{vii}

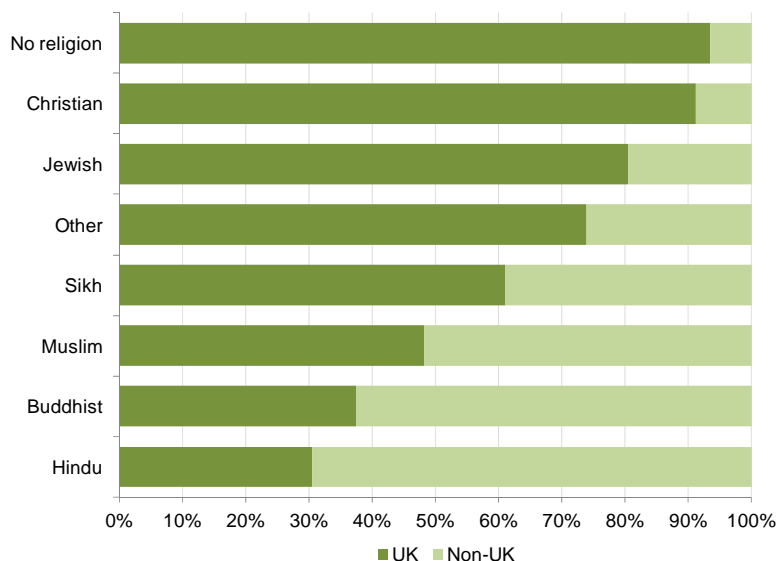
An alternative hypothesis is that as children grow into young adults and form a religious identity independent of their parents, an increasing proportion are coming to regard themselves as having no religion.

The role of migration

The period from 2004 to 2010 was a period during which there were high levels of net migration to the UK. Total net migration for the years 2005 to 2010 was 1.25 million, so migration is likely to have played a role in the changing size of Britain’s religious groups.^{viii}

Chart 3 shows the proportion of each religious group in Great Britain that was born inside and outside the UK.

Chart 3: Religious affiliation by country of birth, Q4 2010



Source: ONS Labour Force Survey

People with no religion are the group with the largest proportion born in the UK (93.5%), followed by Christians (91.1%) and Jews (80.5%). Hindus are the group with the smallest proportion born in the UK (30.6%), followed by Buddhists (37.6%) and Muslims (48.2%).

While this data suggests that migration has played a large role in the growth of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam in Great Britain over the long term, it does not provide an accurate reflection of the role of migration in shaping religious affiliation in recent years.

Table 3 shows the change in the size of religious groups in Great Britain between Q4 2004 and Q4 2010, broken down by country of birth.

Table 3: Religious affiliation by country of birth, Q4 2004 & Q4 2010

	Q4 2004		Q4 2010		Change	
	UK	Non-UK	UK	Non-UK	UK	Non-UK
Christian	41,880,000	2,940,000	37,740,000	3,670,000	-4,140,000	+730,000
No religion	8,450,000	560,000	12,510,000	870,000	+4,070,000	+320,000
Muslim	850,000	1,030,000	1,240,000	1,340,000	+390,000	+300,000
Hindu	200,000	350,000	240,000	550,000	+40,000	+190,000
Sikh	190,000	150,000	210,000	130,000	+10,000	-20,000
Jewish	220,000	50,000	220,000	50,000	+0	+0
Buddhist	70,000	90,000	100,000	170,000	+30,000	+90,000
Any other religion	310,000	80,000	450,000	160,000	+150,000	+80,000

Source: ONS Labour Force Survey

Between Q4 2004 and Q4 2010 the number of Christians born in the UK fell by 4.1 million, while the number born abroad increased by around 730,000. So migration had the effect of reducing the rate at which the Christian population declined – without migration the total number of Christians in Great Britain would have fallen further.

The number of people with no religion who were born abroad also increased by around 320,000, although this growth accounted for less than 10% of the total growth in the “no religion” category. Around 43% of the growth in the Muslim population was due to migration. The total number of Muslims in Great Britain increased by around 690,000, while the number of Muslims born abroad grew by 300,000.

Changes to the LFS question on religious affiliation since Q1 2011

In Q1 2011, the LFS made two changes to its question on religious affiliation.

First, the wording of the question changed. Where it had asked, “What is your religion even if you are not currently practising?” it now asks “What is your religion?”

Second, the order of the response categories has changed. Before Q1 2011, the first response category offered was Christian, followed by a list of other religions, with “no religion” offered last of all. Since Q1 2011, the first response category offered is “no religion”, with Christian listed second, followed by the same list of other religions as before.^{ix}

These changes to the question on religious affiliation have had a measurable effect on the distribution of responses.

Table 4 shows the estimated number and proportion of people in each religious category based on responses given in three different quarters: Q4 2010 (before the question changed), Q1 2011 (after the question changed), and Q3 2011 (the most recent quarter for which data is available).

Table 4: Religious affiliation in Great Britain, selected quarters

	Old question		New question			
	Q4 2010		Q1 2011		Q3 2011	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Christian	41,410,000	69.4%	38,610,000	64.9%	37,770,000	63.0%
No religion	13,390,000	22.4%	16,140,000	27.1%	17,320,000	28.9%
Muslim	2,580,000	4.3%	2,440,000	4.1%	2,560,000	4.3%
Hindu	790,000	1.3%	770,000	1.3%	800,000	1.3%
Sikh	340,000	0.6%	370,000	0.6%	370,000	0.6%
Jewish	270,000	0.5%	280,000	0.5%	280,000	0.5%
Budhist	270,000	0.5%	240,000	0.4%	250,000	0.4%
Any other religion	610,000	1.0%	660,000	1.1%	570,000	1.0%

Source: ONS Labour Force Survey

Between Q4 2010 and Q1 2011, following the change in the question, the estimated number of Christians fell by around 2.8 million, while the estimated number of people in the “no religion” category grew by roughly the same number. Between 2004 and 2010 the average quarterly change in the Christian and “no religion” categories was much smaller than this, at

around -140,000 and +180,000 respectively. The new question therefore appears to have produced a transfer of affiliation from the Christian category to the “no religion category” that is equivalent to almost 5% of the population. The responses in other categories appear unaffected.

Conclusion

People’s sense of religious affiliation is subtle and sensitive to the question that is used when they are asked to define it. Nevertheless, under every measure of religious affiliation the proportion of the British population that regards itself as Christian is shrinking, while the group of people with no religion is growing at an almost equivalent rate. LFS measures of religious affiliation suggest that around two thirds of the British population is Christian, but that proportion is decreasing by around one and a half percentage points each year.

Oliver Hawkins

ⁱ Prime Minister’s [King James Bible Speech](#), 16 December 2011.

ⁱⁱ The 1851 census included a voluntary question on religion on a separate form. The 2001 census was the first to include a question about religion on the main census form.

ⁱⁱⁱ Details of the methodology used in the British Social Attitudes survey can be found at NatCen Social Research: [link](#)

^{iv} A report on religion in the 2011 BSA survey can be downloaded here: [link](#)

^v The effect of the change in the LFS question is discussed in the final section of this article.

^{vi} See [Characteristics of mother 1, England and Wales, 2010](#), ONS. The figures quoted here are the standardised mean age of mother for all births.

^{vii} See [Ageing across the UK: Regional Trends 42](#), James Bayliss and Frances Sly, ONS.

^{viii} See House of Commons Library Standard Note [‘Migration Statistics’ \(SN06077\)](#).

^{ix} In Scotland, three Christian categories are offered after “no religion”: Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic and “other Christian”. These are followed by the list of other religions.