

Counting Religion in Britain

A Monthly Round-Up of New Statistical Sources

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OPINION POLLS

Pew Research Center polling updates on religion

In a Pew Research Center blog of 9 August 2024, Jonathan Evans drew together data from 102 countries and territories surveyed by Pew between 2008 and 2023 touching on two key metrics of religiosity: the number of people saying religion is very important in their lives, and the number claiming to pray daily. On the first metric, the UK came sixth from bottom of the league table, and on the second, bottom. More generally, Europe and East Asia were found to be the least religious places, with sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East-North Africa region the most religious. Commentary and charts can be found at:

- <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/08/09/where-is-the-most-religious-place-in-the-world/>

In another Pew blog of 28 August 2024, Jonathan Evans, Maria Smerkovich, Manolo Corichi, and William Miner presented initial findings on religion from the Spring 2024 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, fielded in 36 countries including the UK (where 1,017 adults were interviewed by landline and mobile telephone by Langer Research Associates between 11 January and 9 March 2024). Respondents were asked whether it was important for the UK national leader (i.e. prime minister) to have various religious qualities. In the UK, 22% considered it important (7% very and 14% somewhat) and 77% not important for the leader to have religious beliefs that were the same as the respondent's; 27% considered it important (11% very and 16% somewhat) and 73% not important for the leader to have strong religious beliefs even if different from the respondent's; and 50% considered it important (24% very and 26% somewhat) and 48% not important for the leader to stand up for people with the respondent's religious beliefs. The blog (with link to topline results) is available at:

- <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/08/28/many-around-the-globe-say-its-important-their-leader-stands-up-for-peoples-religious-beliefs/>

Church closure poll: Whitestone Insight for National Churches Trust

Over 3,500 churches have closed in the UK during the last ten years, begging the question what Christians do when their local church building shuts its doors. To find out the answer, at least hypothetically, the National Churches Trust (NCT) commissioned Whitestone Insight to undertake an online survey among 2,667 self-identifying UK Christians aged 18 and over on 12–20 June 2024. Asked 'What would you do if your local church building closed?', 30% of all Christians and 22% of churchgoers replied that they would no longer attend church services in person at all. A further 30% of Christians indicated they would attend another church, 5% would worship online, and 35% were undecided or unwilling to say. Alternative forms of worship, whether online or in a 'new' form of physical church, did not greatly appeal. Not unexpectedly, the findings have led to media headlines such as 'Church Closures Drive Away Worshippers, Research Shows' (*Methodist Recorder*, 30 August 2024, pp. 1, 3). A NCT press release for the poll (which could have been clearer in distinguishing between data for all Christians and Christian churchgoers) and Whitestone Insight's tables (which needed better labelling and explanations of the different weighted samples) can be found at:

- <https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/news/our-research>

UK general election, 2024: how faith communities actually voted

Lord Ashcroft Polls surveyed (on 2–4 July 2024) an online sample of 16,677 Britons after they had voted (including by post) in the UK general election on 4 July 2024, revealing the attributes of those who cast their ballot in favour of the various political parties. In Table 1, below, we summarize the break by religious affiliation for the major faith groupings: Christians, non-Christians, and nones. It will be seen that Labour voters and, more especially, Green Party and Scottish National Party voters were less likely than average to be Christians and more likely to be nones, while the reverse was true for Conservative voters and, to a lesser extent, Reform UK voters. Age was probably a major explanation for this pattern. The standout result for other parties was the 25% of their voters who were non-Christians, over three times the national average; in particular, 22% of Muslim voters opted for other parties, typically in support of independent candidates (often standing in opposition to the Labour Party’s position on the Gaza conflict). Full data tables are available at:

- <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2024/07/how-britain-voted-and-why-my-post-vote-poll/>

Table 1: Religious affiliation of voters in the 2024 UK general election

Percentages across	Christian	Non-Christian	No religion	Prefer not to say
All voters	47	7	46	1
Labour	38	7	55	1
Conservative	66	6	28	1
Reform UK	56	2	41	1
Liberal Democrats	46	5	48	1
Greens	25	9	63	2
Scottish National Party	31	4	65	1
Plaid Cymru	38	8	53	0
Other parties	30	25	41	2
Refused to say	44	8	39	8

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls.

Religion as a source of the current conflict in the Middle East: new YouGov poll

On behalf of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, YouGov polled an online sample of 2,533 adults in Britain on 17–18 July 2024, asking them ‘To what extent, if at all, do you think religion and religious beliefs have contributed to the current conflicts in the Middle East?’ Unsurprisingly, perhaps, 82% said they had contributed a great deal (55%) or a fair amount (27%), the number peaking at 90% of Conservative and Reform UK voters. Just 9% replied that religion had not contributed very much (7%) or not at all (2%), the highest combined proportions being 16% among the under-25s and 19% for Londoners, with the remaining 9% undecided. Full data tables are available at:

- https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/AhmadiyyaMuslimCommunity_Results_240718_W.pdf

Public concerns about religious extremism in the UK: Ipsos and YouGov polling

An online poll by Ipsos, conducted in Great Britain on 9–12 August 2024 among a sample of 1,100 adults aged 16–75, asked respondents whether they were concerned about six aspects of life in Britain, one of which was the rise of religious extremism. Overall, 74% said that they were concerned (39% very, 35% fairly) about religious extremism, the proportion peaking at 84% with Leave voters in the 2016 referendum on EU membership, 84% of Conservatives, and 92% of Reform UK voters. One fifth were either not that concerned (16%) or not at all concerned (4%), while 5% were undecided. Chart and data table are available at:

- <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/85-percent-say-britain-is-divided-as-concern-about-extremism-rises>

The YouGov poll, undertaken online among 2,114 adults on 5–6 August 2024, focused on one specific manifestation of religious extremism. It revealed that three quarters of the British public continue to perceive Islamic extremists as a big (52%) or moderate (23%) threat. Concerns were greatest among Conservative (89%) and Reform UK (94%) voters in the 2024 general election and lowest among the under-25s (55%). The full data table is at:

- https://ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/Internal_Extremists_240806.pdf

Is the National Health Service treated like a ‘national religion’ in Britain?

It is often claimed that the National Health Service (NHS) is akin to a ‘national religion’, so revered has it become, despite all the criticisms of its operational performance. This belief was especially evidenced during the earliest days of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, when Linda Woodhead wrote an influential blog for the Religion Media Centre entitled ‘The NHS, Our National Religion’. In fact, only 30% of 4,096 Britons interviewed online in a YouGov poll on 20 August 2024 agreed that the NHS is currently treated like a ‘national religion’ in Britain, the highest numbers being 36% of men, 38% of over-65s, 43% of Reform UK voters, and 46% of Conservatives. A plurality (43%) disagreed that it is treated like a ‘national religion’, while 26% were undecided. Full demographics are available at:

- <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/survey-results/daily/2024/08/20/724e3/3>

FAITH ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Public examinations in Religious Studies

Data released by the Joint Council for Qualifications on the number of entries for public examinations sat in June 2024 in England and Wales have revealed a continuing relative fall in the popularity of Religious Studies (RS) as an examination subject. At A Level, there were 15,201 entries in RS in 2024, 2.8% fewer than in 2023, compared with an increase of 2.3% in entries for all subjects; the fall in RS was greater in Wales (–6.1%) than in England (–2.6%). At GCSE Level (Full Course), there were 233,459 entries in RS; while the number was 0.5% more than in 2023 (0.3% in England and 0.6% in Wales), the increase for all subjects was 4.7%, entailing a drop in market share for RS. More details are available at:

- <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/>

UK general election, 2024: final briefing from Theos, on religion and climate change

The Theos think tank has released the seventh (and final) *Religion Counts* briefing in connection with the UK general election that took place on 4 July 2024. Like the preceding six titles in the series, it has been written by Paul Bickley, George Lapshynov, and Yinxuan Huang and draws upon findings from recent waves of the British Election Study (BES) Internet Panel. Of all the principal religious groups, Christians were revealed as being the least environmentally friendly (although practising Christians were significantly more environmentally conscious than non-practising ones), reflecting the fact that Christians were most protective of the economy and least likely to be willing to sacrifice economic growth for environmental protection. By contrast, the non-religious were more environmentally friendly than the population average, albeit even they were overtaken by some non-Christian religions which celebrated reverence for the environment as an element of faith. The briefing is at:

- <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2024/07/03/religion-counts-where-do-the-religious-stand-on-climate-change?>

JPR report on UK Jewish observance of Shabbat

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) has published an 11-page factsheet by David Graham entitled *On the Seventh Day: Shabbat Observance and Practices among British Jews*. It draws on data from JPR's online UK Jewish research panel, mostly from the November-December 2022 UK National Jewish Identity Survey, completed by a self-selecting sample of 4,891 self-identifying Jews aged 16 and over. The vast majority of respondents was found to observe Shabbat rituals at least occasionally, even though only 34% indicated that observing at least some aspects of Shabbat was very important to them. The report is available at:

- <https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/seventh-day-shabbat-observance-and-practices-among-british-jews>

Community Security Trust report on anti-Semitic incidents, January–June 2024

The Community Security Trust (CST) logged 1,978 anti-Semitic incidents in the UK between January and June 2024, double the figure for the equivalent period in 2023, and the highest total ever for the first half of any year (the previous record being 1,371 in January–June 2021). The increase mainly reflects the continuing domestic impact of the current conflict in the Middle East, triggered by the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. Of the 1,978 incidents, 68.1% were offline and 31.9% online. The 41-page report is available at:

- <https://cst.org.uk/public/data/file/e/d/Antisemitic%20Incidents%20Report%20Jan-June%202024.pdf>

Foreign-born Jews resident in the UK: Pew Research Center stands corrected

In a recent report on *The Religious Composition of the World's Migrants*, by Stephanie Kramer and Yunping Tong, the US-based Pew Research Center has endeavoured to collate what is known about the 'stocks' of international migrants, defined as adults and children who now live outside their birth country, regardless of when they left it. The methodology of the study involved marrying up UN data on migrants with country-specific censuses and sample surveys on religious affiliation. In the case of the UK, the number of residents matching the Pew definition of international migrants in 2020 was estimated to comprise 5,340,000 Christians, 1,610,000 Muslims, 620,000 Hindus, 200,000 Buddhists, 120,000 Jews (including 21,000 from Romania, 21,000 from Poland, and 14,000 from Israel), 400,000 other religions, and 1,060,000 religiously unaffiliated. The accuracy of Pew's 2020 data on Jewish migrants living in the UK (a threefold increase on 1990) has been questioned by the *Jewish News* and Daniel Staetsky of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, since 120,000 (compared with 2021–22 UK census data) would imply that foreign-born Jews account for two fifths of the UK's Jewish population when the reality is probably half as many. Staetsky's own estimate is 63,000. According to the *Jewish News*, Kramer has now committed to revising the number of Jewish migrants in the UK and to consider what other adjustments to Pew's data may be necessary. Pew's report, interactive table, and dataset from the research can be found at:

- <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/08/19/the-religious-composition-of-the-worlds-migrants/>

while the *Jewish News* coverage is at:

- <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/us-research-centre-backs-down-on-uk-figures/>

ACADEMIC STUDIES

Some picks from recent Taylor and Francis academic journals

Kindly note that not all the referenced content is open access:

- Stephen Parker and Leslie Francis (eds), ‘Cathedral Studies (Part 2)’, *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2024, pp. 235–437: a further selection of twelve articles on cathedrals in England and Wales, several drawing on quantitative data, mostly focusing on Anglican cathedrals (with three essays on Liverpool Cathedral) but including a final paper (by Francis Davis) urging Catholic cathedrals to be drawn into this field of study: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjbv20/current>
- Lydia Reid, ‘Beyond Conflict: An Exploration of the Way UK Church Leaders View the Relationship Between Science and Religion’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2024, pp. 327–45: against the background of Ian Barbour’s four-fold typology of the engagement between science and religion, the paper reports the findings of a largely paper-based survey of the attitudes of 1,100 clergy (83.7% Anglican) to science in a convenience sample gathered in 2015–18, and of face-to-face interviews with 20 senior church leaders: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13537903.2024.2342636>
- James Butler, ‘Declining to be Church? Rediscovering God’s Time and Action Through Paying Careful Attention to a Numerically Declining Church’, *Practical Theology*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2024, pp. 206–17: the paper offers a positive theological reading of the process of church decline, in contrast to the traditional life cycle model where decline is seen as a problem of ageing and something to be solved; it uses a case study of one numerically declining Methodist church in Greater London (pseudonymously named Oakfields Chapel) to emphasize its gifts and spirituality even amidst decline, suggesting that ‘a church in numerical decline is not just a problem to be solved, but an invitation to pay attention to God in the present’: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1756073X.2024.2331850>

APPENDIX: KEYWORDS/TAGS

Ahmadiyya Muslim community, anti-Semitic incidents, British Election Study Internet Panel, cathedral studies, church attendance, church closures, church decline, climate change, Community Security Trust, daily prayer, Daniel Staetsky, David Graham, environment, examinations, general election, George Lapshynov, importance of religion in personal life, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, international migrants, Ipsos, Islamic extremists, James Butler, Jewish News, Jews, Joint Council for Qualifications, Jonathan Evans, Journal of Beliefs and Values, Journal of Contemporary Religion, Langer Research Associates, Leslie Francis, Liverpool Cathedral, Lord Ashcroft Polls, Lydia Reid, Manolo Corichi, Maria Smerkovich, Methodist Church, Middle East, National Churches Trust, National Health Service, National Jewish Identity Survey, national religion, NHS, Paul Bickley, Pew Global Attitudes Survey, Pew Research Center, Practical Theology, religion as source of conflict, religious extremism, religious qualities of national leaders, Religious Studies, science and religion, Shabbat, Stephanie Kramer, Stephen Parker, Taylor and Francis, Theos, Whitestone Insight, William Miner, Yinxuan Huang, YouGov, Yunping Tong