

Census 2021: And the winner is...



Nick Spencer explores the 2021 Census results for religion in England and Wales, and how we can interpret them. 29/11/2022

Remember those maths puzzles you used to do as a kid? What's the next number in this sequence: 2, 5, 11, 23, ? Or maybe try this one: 2, 4, 10, 28, ?

Well, I've got another one for you: 71, 59, ?

I'll admit this one is trickier as you've only got two numbers to get going but if you said '47' you'd be on the right tracks.

The true answer is, in fact, 46 – that being the percentage of people in England and Wales who, in the [2021 Census](#), ticked the Christian box. Having been 71% in 2001, and 59% in 2011, it's now 46%. Anyone want to take any bets for 2031?

The decline in the proportion of adults in England and Wales (and in Scotland and Northern Ireland too) calling themselves Christian should shock no-one who hasn't been on Mars these last two decades. Nor should the rise of the non-religious category, reaching 37% this time and set (next time) to become the biggest single group in the country. The demographic and cultural trends have been pointing in this direction for over half a century. What the Census has done is clear up some of the uncertainty that always swirls around polling data, while also giving us a level of granularity that reveals how minority religious groups – Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, and others – have all increased in numbers over the last decade.

At this point, the usual lines of argument from the usual suspects will go forth and multiply. Some religious groups will try to claim that the non-religious are actually in fact religious, they just don't know it. That won't wash. People tick the no-religion box for a reason. Non-religiosity may be complex (see below) but it isn't religiosity.

Other religious groups will say that the Census only measures affiliation and what really matters is belief and attendance. Well, that's true but it's not exactly a wise path to go down if you want to make a case for the continued significance of Christianity in contemporary public life.

By contrast, some non-religious groups will claim that the public is now firmly in their camp and that they now serve as their de facto representatives, their interests to advance. Given that these groups have memberships levels in the thousands rather than millions, and that the non-religious are not the kind of unified group that has cohesive interests in this matter, this line doesn't convince either.

Still other organs of public discourse will highlight the fact that 6.5% of the population, or nearly four million people, tick the Muslim box and... isn't that a remarkable 44% increase from 2011 ... and I wonder what it might be next time... and then imagine what it could look like mid-century ... and, well, you know the rest.

And then there are the entertaining sub-plots.

Was it the public eloquence of the [QAnon-Shaman](#) that effected the ten-fold rise in Shamanism (up from 650 in 2011 to 8,000 today)? Should we see [London](#) – “the most religiously diverse region of England” according to Census 2021 – as model for, or an outlier from, the rest of the country? Why are people in Knowsley, Ribble Valley, and Copeland in the North West so godly (respectively 67, 66 and 65% Christian) whereas those in Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, and Rhondda Cynon Taf so godless (57, 56, 56% no religion)? And whatever happened to the Jedis? They were so full of energy and potential in 2011.

So many questions. No doubt we will be chewing over them for months to come. But here are a few quick aperitifs.

First. The Non-religion category is now large and merits serious academic attention, which it is slowly receiving. My colleague Dr Hannah Waite has made her own contribution to this [by analysing data from a large survey we conducted](#) at the time of the 2021 Census. The study asked people's religion but also multiple other questions about what they believed and what were their religious opinions. The results are fascinating and underline the fact that ticking the non-religious box does not mean you are anti-religious, or even (in some cases) that you lack 'religious-style' beliefs. Nones are a complex group.

Second. The rise in non-religiosity will naturally be used by anti-religious campaigning groups to further their long-standing objectives around schools, or disestablishment, or the composition of the House of Lords. The arguments shouldn't be dismissed merely as opportunism, but weighed seriously. Whatever else is happening in our society, the historic role of Christianity is changing, and it would be better for Christians to acknowledge and shape that creatively and positively rather than (be perceived to be) clinging to the wreckage of Christendom.

Third. We need to learn to live with difference. For the foreseeable future, the UK will be a mosaic of religious beliefs, commitments, and cultures, with no single affiliation hegemonic. (This is reflected in some of the Census data on ethnic make-up too). Even when, in 2031, non-religion becomes the largest single group or a few years after that, when it becomes the majority group, we will still be super-diverse as a nation, if only because, [as Hannah's research shows](#), the non-religion group is really a miscellany of different positions, some angrily anti-religious, some

culturally, or ethically, or spiritually sympathetic, others simply disinterested. Difference is here to stay.

In truth, as any historian will tell you, there has long been considerable variety at the ground level in the UK, even when Christianity was thoroughly hegemonic (church vs chapel anyone?) Without the centripetal forces of an overarching religious tradition, however, that diversity will be harder still to negotiate.

Moreover – and here’s the crucial point – for the first time ever, Census 2021 was able to provide insight into religious composition within those UK households (all 17.3 million of them) that had more than one person living in them. Of these, only 13.7% reported a combination of a religion and “No religion”, and a mere 1.1% (285,000) more than one religion. In other words, difference of this nature is not something we are going to learn at home.

So, if we are crass enough to want to know the real winners from the religious data of Census 2021, I would humbly suggest it is RE teachers and the BBC Religion and Ethics department. Or indeed anyone who is willing and able to help us honestly understand, respect, critique, and value the various non/religious commitments that now map the UK.

Nick Spencer

Ps. The answers were 47 & 82.