

Who are the 'religious nones' in Britain? Atheists, agnostics or something else?

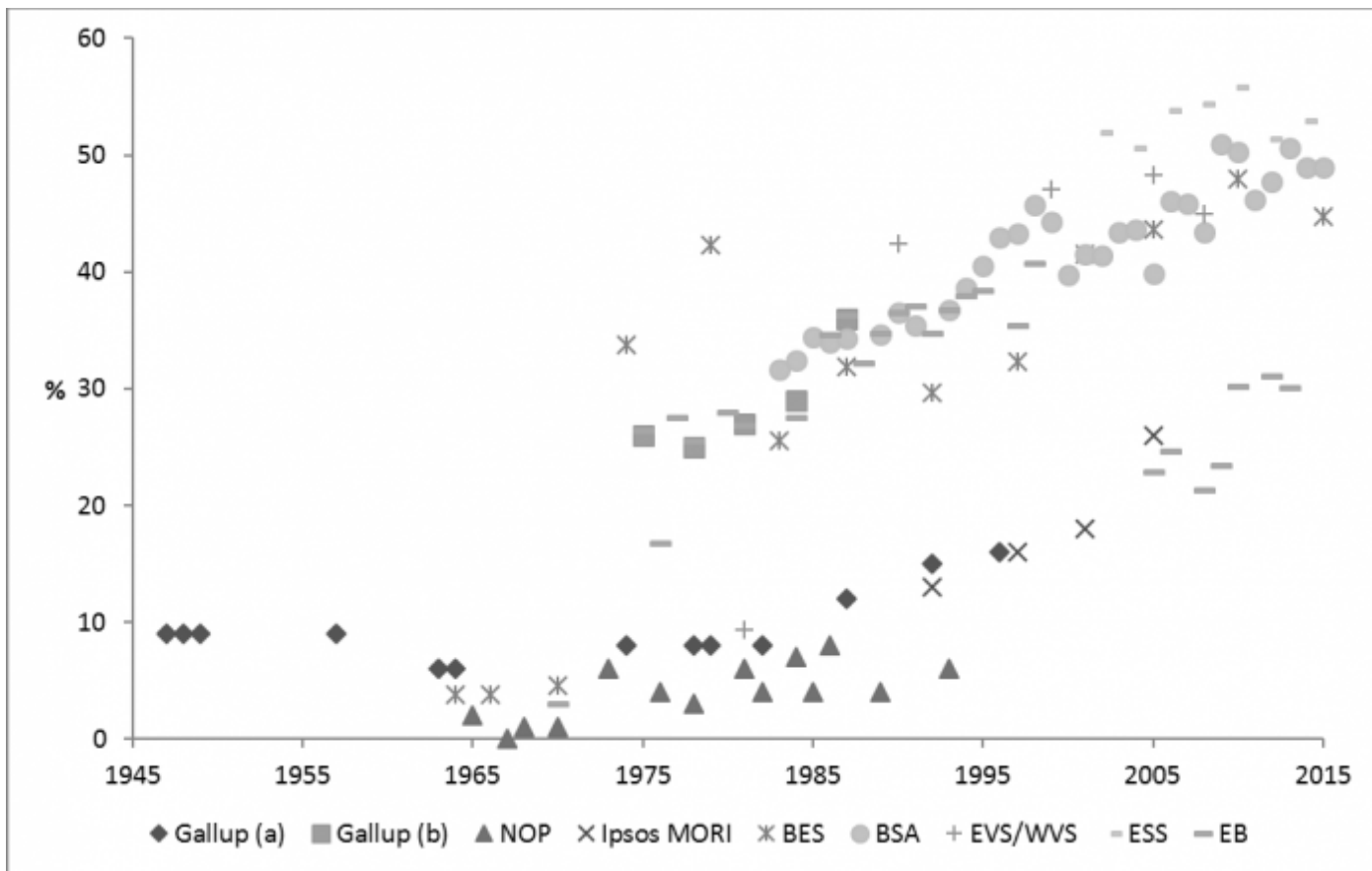
*The religiously unaffiliated, 'religious nones', have been a growing segment of the British adult population in recent decades, as recorded in social surveys and opinion polls. But, **Ben Clements** asks, can surveys and polls effectively shed light on which sorts of secular or non-religious identities feature within this expanding category?*

As measured by social surveys and opinion polls, major changes in the nature and extent of religious affiliation in British society have taken place in recent decades. This includes a substantial decline in levels of identification as Anglican or Church of England, and with the Nonconformist traditions, as well as increases in affiliation with non-Christian religions. Identification with Roman Catholicism has been relatively stable, while identification as a Christian but without being aligned to a particular denomination has increased. Religious affiliation as a whole has clearly declined. The counterpart trend has been the increasing proportion of British society that does not profess any religious identity – that is, the expanding group of what are often termed the 'religious nones'. As **David Voas and Siobhan McAndrew have observed**, for Britain and other countries 'in the midst of secular transition ... the dominant trend in nearly all Western countries is the rise of non-religion'.

The decline in religious affiliation is captured in Figure 1, which shows the growing proportions with no religious affiliation recorded in opinion polling and recurrent social surveys of the British adult population in the post-war period (using both country-specific and cross-national sources). It is clear that in the earlier post-war decades the proportions with no affiliation were generally low – there may well have been social and cultural pressures to maintain a sense of Christian identity, however nominal that identity – though more recent decades have seen much larger numbers declaring that they do not identify with any religion. Of course, **as previous research has noted**, responses to questions probing religious belonging are sensitive to how they are framed and worded (which is evident to some extent in the variation in levels of non-affiliation recorded in recent years, when the overall trend has been upward), which may serve to increase or depress the overall proportion of respondents saying they do not identify with any religion. The overall trajectory is clear, though.

Figure 1: Percent with no religious affiliation, adult population in Britain, 1945-2015





Source: Author’s analysis of various social surveys and opinion polls; NOP and Gallup data taken from: Field 2014 and Field 2015.

Survey guide:

- BES: British Election Study
- BSA: British Social Attitudes
- EB: Eurobarometer
- ESS: European Social Survey
- EVS / WVS: European Values Survey, World Values Survey
- NOP: National Opinion Poll

More detail on the current breakdown of religious affiliation amongst British adults can be seen in Table 1, which presents evidence from the most recent iteration of each of four long-running survey series (two single-country and two cross-national in scope). The question wording used for each survey is reported underneath Table 1. They all use a ‘belonging’ form of question wording, which – as previous research has noted – tends to elicit higher levels of non-affiliation. Questions which assume in their wording that respondents belong to a religion and ask which particular one, correspondingly register higher levels of affiliation.

For each survey, the modal response amongst adults in Britain is non-affiliation – a plurality in three cases (BES, BSA and EVS) and a majority in the fourth (ESS). For comparison, in the first ever BSA survey (undertaken in 1983), the proportion with no affiliation was 31%, with a plurality of adults (40%) identifying as Anglican/Church of England. In 2014, 49% reported no religious affiliation.

Table 1: Current religious (non)affiliation in Britain, social surveys

	No religion	CofE Anglican	/Roman Catholic	Other Christian	Other religion
BES 2015	43	21	9	19	8
BSA 2014	49	18	8	17	8
ESS 2014	53	24	10	8	7



EVS 208	45	30	11	6	9
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Question wordings:Source: Author's analysis of social surveys. Percentages, which sum across the rows, have been rounded and may not total 100.

BES and BSA: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?'

ESS: 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?'

EVS: 'Do you belong to a religious denomination?'

Across surveys, the overall proportion with some form of religious affiliation breaks down into the largest share having some form of Christian identity (Anglican, Roman Catholic, other Christian – both those belonging to a particular denomination and those who are non-aligned), with the remainder (less than a tenth) identifying with a non-Christian faith. Across three decades as recorded by the BSA surveys, affiliation has therefore fallen from around seven-in-ten to around half of adults.

These long-running social surveys provide an excellent barometer for registering areas of continuity and change in religious belonging, behaving and believing in wider society. And, to reiterate, one of the most significant areas of change has clearly been the steady rise in 'religious nones' in recent years. This highlights the growing need for scholars of religion in Britain to examine the diversity amongst those who comprise the growing segment of the 'religious nones' – to look within the black box. As **Smith and Baker** have recently observed: 'One of the major directions that future research can pursue is to emphasise and outline the nuance present among secular segments of the population' (2015: 5). Within the broader 'nones' category, scholars particularly need to research secular/non-religious subgroup identities held, the social basis of these subgroup identities, and whether they are consequential for social and political attitudes. **Linda Woodhead** has used recent surveys of the adult population in Britain to analyse in more detail those with no religion, labelling them 'fuzzy nones'. **Other research** has examined the socio-demographic basis of the religion nones over time using BSA surveys.

Unfortunately, the BSA surveys have never followed-up and directly probed 'religious nones' as to whether they see themselves as having some secular or non-religious identity (such as whether they self-identify as an atheist or agnostic). Specialist modules on religion carried in the 1991, 1998 and 2008 BSA surveys (**as part of the ISSP**) have, however, included a wider range of questions asking about religious belief (as well as other aspect of faith). **Research from the US context** has shown that levels of atheism tend to be higher when elicited via questions about belief in God than when respondents are explicitly given the option to self-identity as an atheist. Recent **research has shown** that the EVS surveys have, over recent decades, registered higher levels of atheism in Britain when asking questions about belief in God or in a personal God than via a question which allows respondents to identify themselves as a 'convinced atheist'.

A similar pattern emerges from a **poll conducted by YouGov in February 2015**, which asked a question about belief in God and also asked the 'religious nones' a follow-up question about having a secular identity. The 42% with no religion were accounted for by 19% saying they were atheist, 7% identifying as agnostic, and the remaining 16% seeing themselves as secular, humanist, something else (or they did not know). Compared to the 19% who identified as atheist, based on a belief question, a larger proportion – 33% percent of respondents – said they did not believe in any sort of God or higher spiritual power.

However, research into secular and non-religious identities also needs to recognise that, much as levels of religion affiliation can differ in response to the framing of questions, the same is also evident for questions which probe – either via belonging or belief questions – atheism and agnosticism. When the top-line data from the 2015 YouGov poll are placed alongside the results from previous opinion polls conducted in recent years (see Table 2), there is considerable variation across surveys in the responses given. The picture is obviously a patchy one: because **different** questions and sets of response options have been used by different survey **research**

organisations; but also because the levels of atheism and agnosticism thus recorded do not present a clear or consistent picture, in terms of overall levels or whether one is more prevalent than the other.

Table 2: Levels of atheism and agnosticism in Britain, recent opinion polls

Organisation and date	Question	Atheist	Agnostic
Ipsos MORI, April 2000	'What is your religion, if any?'	'None – Atheist': 5%	'None – Agnostic': 5%
Ipsos MORI, August 2003	'Which, if any, of the following would you say best describes you?'	'I am an atheist': 12%	'I am agnostic': 12%
YouGov, February 2007	'Which of these comes closest to your belief?'	'I am an atheist. The whole notion of a supernatural God is nonsense': 16%	'I am an agnostic. I don't think it is possible to know if there is God or not': 9%
YouGov, April-May 2011	'Which of the following best reflects your view?'	'I do not believe there is a God or gods, or any other spiritual power': 19%	'I am an agnostic': 6%
YouGov, February-March 2012	'Now thinking about questions of God, which of the following statements best reflects your view?'	'I do not believe there is a God or gods, or any other spiritual power': 21%	'I am an agnostic': 17%
YouGov, February 2015	'What is your religion?' If none: 'What would you describe yourself as?'	'Atheist': 19%	'Agnostic': 7%

Source: Compiled by the author from the Ipsos MORI and YouGov websites.

As has been clearly demonstrated in recent research, there are difficulties when using existing social surveys to try and examine non-religion in general and atheism in particular, whether in Britain or cross-nationally. However, given that non-affiliation has increased considerably in recent decades while theistic belief has also been on the decline, and that a growing share of the population reporting they are being raised without a religious upbringing (rising from 6% in the 1991 BSA to 19% in 2014), more inquiry is clearly needed in Britain in order to help delineate and explain the **'nuance present among secular segments of the population'**.

Table 3: Non-affiliation and non-religious upbringing, by age group

Age group	No affiliation (%)	Non-religious upbringing (%)
18-24	70	35
25-34	59	30
35-44	52	22
45-54	51	18
55-64	43	10
65-74	37	8
75+	22	7



Source: Author's analysis of the BSA 2014 survey.

Moreover, given the clear age-related variation, with younger people more much likely to have no affiliation and to report that they were not raised within a religious tradition (see Table 3), analysing the nature and extent of non-religion and secularity within British society is only going to become a more pressing task.

About the author



Ben Clements is Lecturer in Politics at the University of Leicester, and researches the role of religion in British politics and society. He has had two books published recently by Palgrave Macmillan: *Religion and Public Opinion in Britain: Continuity and Change* (2015) and *Surveying Christian Belief and Religious Debates in Post-War Britain* (2016).

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