

# The rise of ‘no religion’ in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority

*The British Academy Lecture  
read 19 January 2016*

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*Abstract:* This paper reviews new and existing evidence which shows that ‘no religion’ has risen steadily to rival ‘Christian’ as the preferred self-designation of British people. Drawing on recent survey research by the author, it probes the category of ‘no religion’ and offers a characterisation of the ‘nones’ which reveals, amongst other things, that most are not straightforwardly secular. It compares the British situation with that of comparable countries, asking why Britain has become one of the few no-religion countries in the world today. An explanation is offered that highlights the importance not only of cultural pluralisation and ethical liberalisation in Britain, but of the churches’ opposite direction of travel. The paper ends by reflecting on the extent to which ‘no religion’ has become the new cultural norm, showing why Britain is most accurately described as between Christian and ‘no religion’.

*Keywords:* religion, no religion, identity, secular, culture, ethics, liberalism, pluralism, Christianity

The ‘nones’ are rising in Britain—in a slow, unplanned and almost unnoticed revolution. It has been happening for a long time, but the tipping point came only very recently, the point at which a majority of UK adults described their affiliation as ‘no religion’ rather than ‘Christian’. This article explores the significance of this change. It starts by reviewing exactly what has happened, considers who the nones are, and suggests why the shift has occurred. Running through it all is the broader ‘so-what?’ question, tackled at the end by exploring the way in which ‘no religion’ has become a new norm and the extent to which Britain has ceased to be a Christian country.

## WHAT — THE RISE OF THE NONES

When I first began to carry out a series of large, nationally representative surveys of beliefs and values in Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland) in January 2013, the number of people reporting ‘no religion’ fell short of an absolute majority.<sup>1</sup> Just two years later that had changed: the same question revealed half the population reporting ‘no religion’.<sup>2</sup> ‘Christian’ had been pushed into second place. These findings are in line with those of the British Social Attitudes survey. In 2013 it found a majority of the total adult population reporting ‘no religion’, and its series of surveys since 1983 show ‘no religion’ rising by two thirds over the last thirty years (Table 1).

The UK censuses, which have asked a question about religion since 2001, also discover a swift rise of ‘no religion’, though they report a smaller overall proportion of nones in 2011—a third of the population of England and Wales, 44 per cent of the population of Scotland.<sup>3</sup> However, the censuses are likely to be undercounting nones. One reason is the way in which the religion question is posed in the Census for England and Wales, not as ‘do you have a religion?’ followed by a list of options, but the more leading ‘what is your religion?’, coming immediately after questions about ethnicity. Another reason is that census forms are completed by a head of household on behalf of others, but older people in Britain today are much more likely than younger ones to say they have a religion, so heads of household may be inaccurately imputing their own identity to children.

What is clear is that censuses and surveys agree on the rapid rise of the nones. This rise predates polling and, although the category of ‘no religion’ is in many ways an

**Table 1.** Proportion of British people reporting ‘no religion’.

	1983	1993	2003	2013
‘No religion’	31.4	36.8	43.4	50.6

**Source:** British Social Attitudes Survey

<sup>1</sup>In January 2013 the proportion asked who reported ‘no religion’ was 41 per cent (‘no religion’ 37 per cent; ‘Prefer not to say’ 4 per cent). The exact question is: ‘Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion, and if so, to which of these do you belong?’ It is reasonable to assume that those who prefer not to state their religion have ‘no religion’, with the exception of small numbers who do not wish to identify themselves for reasons of historic persecution. Survey sample size 4437 GB adults. Fieldwork 25–30 January 2013. Designed by Woodhead and administered by YouGov. Data and analysis available at <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/>

<sup>2</sup>‘No religion’ 46 per cent, ‘Prefer not to say’ 4 per cent. Sample size 1668 GB adults. Fieldwork 2–22 December 2015. Data and analysis available at <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/>

<sup>3</sup>Counting ‘no religion’ and not stated. Scotland’s 2011 Census question on religion is ‘What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?’ England’s is ‘what is your religion?’

artefact of that polling, the phenomenon has a much longer history in Britain. One indicator is the growth of civil marriages to become the most normal form of marriage solemnisation after their introduction in 1836; today only 30% of marriages in England and Wales are conducted according to religious rites.<sup>4</sup> Another is the way in which atheism and agnosticism became acceptable much earlier in Britain than in the USA—perhaps by the end of the First World War.<sup>5</sup> The growth of 'no religion' may have accelerated in the last few decades, but its rise is not new.

This rise is set to continue because of the youthful age profile of the nones: the younger you are the more likely you are to be one. As nones age and have children they are likely to pass on their non-religion, with the pool of nones swelling accordingly. By contrast, Christians are more likely to be in the older age range; indeed, the older you are the more likely you are to be a Christian. In that sense Christianity is literally dying out, whereas 'no religion' is expanding.

Table 2 shows this in detail. If we compare Christian and 'no religion' there is a striking contrast between the youngest cohort (18–24) with a majority (60 per cent) reporting 'no religion' and a minority (27 per cent) identifying as 'Christian', and the oldest cohort (60 and over) where the proportions are roughly reversed. If we exclude those belonging to non-Christian faiths (final column), two thirds of under-40s now say they have 'no religion'. Looking at the population as a whole, just under 60 per cent of under-40s are 'nones' and just over 40 per cent 'somes' (people reporting a religion), whereas amongst the over-40s the picture is reversed with 40 per cent nones and 60 per cent somes.

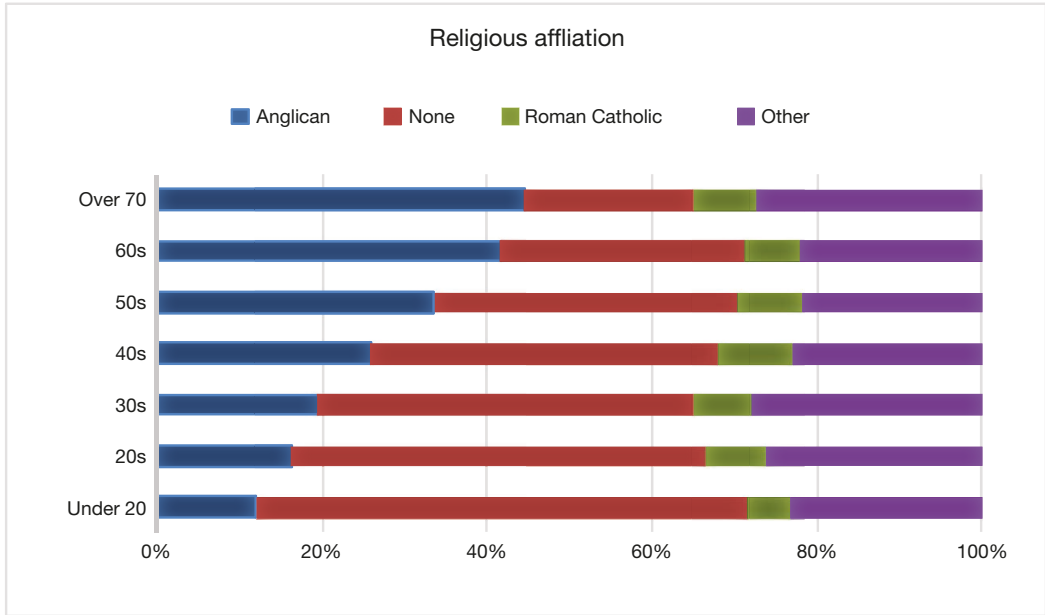
**Table 2.** 'No religion' and religion by age.

Age cohort	'No religion' (%)	Christian (%)	Other religion (including those who prefer not to state their religion) (%)	'No religion' as per cent of the population (excluding Other religion) (%)
18–24	60	27	13	69
25–39	55	32	13	63
Under-40s aggregated	56	31	13	65
40–59	45	46	7	49
60+	34	60	5	36
Over-40s aggregated	40	54	6	43
TOTAL	46	44	10	51

**Source:** Linda Woodhead/YouGov December 2015

<sup>4</sup>Haskey (2015). It is important to note, however, that there have always been a variety of reasons for having a civil marriage; being non-religious is only one.

<sup>5</sup>Budd (1977).



**Figure 1.** Religious affiliation by age GB. (Source: Linda Woodhead/YouGov January 2014)

The penultimate column, which counts the number identifying with an ‘Other religion’ (i.e. not Christian and not ‘no religion’), is telling because many of these religions have been growing rather than declining since the 1960s, mainly because of inward migration and high birth rates. Nevertheless, as that column shows, their growing share of religious affiliation has not been enough to counter the rise of ‘no religion’. So for younger people in Britain today being religious is very much the exception rather than the norm, whereas for older people it is the other way round.

We can probe this further by breaking the data down by Christian denomination (Figure 1). This shows that it is decline in the number of Anglicans that is the most important cause of overall Christian decline. Anglican numbers have halved since the 1980s, as has attendance in the Church of England, and the decline continues.<sup>6</sup> BSA data reveal that for every one convert, the C of E currently loses 12 people, mainly through death.<sup>7</sup> The Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church have seen proportionally similar losses, but this has been somewhat masked in the case of the Catholic Church by more resilient levels of adherence—people continue to identify as Catholic even if they do not go to church or follow church teachings—and by immigration, particularly of Catholics from eastern Europe.

<sup>6</sup>Data compiled in Brown & Woodhead (2016).

<sup>7</sup>See Bullivant (2016: 3).

## HOW

It is easy to imagine the rise of 'no religion' being driven by personal crises of faith in which adults become disillusioned and abandon their religion, but in fact the rise of 'no religion' and the decline of 'Christian' have much more to do with transmission from parents to children than with adult (de)conversions. Adults do sometimes change their minds and switch from identifying with a religion to identifying with no religion, or the other way round, but the more important story has to do with children. The massive cultural shift from Christian to non-religious Britain has come about largely because of children ceasing to follow the religious commitments of their parents.

Analysis of the British Social Attitudes survey, which asks a question about religion of upbringing, reveals that children brought up Christian have a 45 per cent chance of ending up as 'nones', whereas those brought up 'no religion' have a 95 per cent probability of retaining that identification.

Thus 'no religion' is proving 'sticky' in a way that Christianity is not. This means that not only are 'none' parents more likely to produce 'none' children, but that those children will do the same. This ensures the continued growth of 'no religion' even if the birth rate is somewhat lower for nones than for religious people. As a result, more and more children are being raised in Britain with little or no first-hand knowledge of Christianity. Currently many will still have Christian grandparents, but in a generation or two that will have ceased to be the case.

## WHO—CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NONES

As to who the nones are, their most obvious characteristic is of course their identification with 'no religion' on survey questions about religion. Existing surveys are sufficient to generate the category and monitor its growth, but do not tell us much about those who belong to it. I have investigated further by designing surveys with representative samples of nones, asking detailed questions about their beliefs, values, belongings and practices.<sup>8</sup> Even these can tell us only a limited amount about such a complex subject, and need to be supplemented by other methods—but they are a good place to start.

One thing they reveal clearly is that nones are not straightforwardly secular. Certainly, nones reject religious labels—but they reject secular ones as well. If we take 'secular' in a strong sense to mean hostile to public religion (e.g. faith schools) and

<sup>8</sup> Carried out between 2013 and 2015 with YouGov. Samples of around 2000 GB 'nones'. The largest of these surveys are available at <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/> I analysed the data with the assistance of Professor Bernard Silverman.

religious belief, surprisingly few nones are sympathetic. I created a ‘Dawkins indicator’ in tribute to the great atheist Richard Dawkins by assembling a basket of different indicators, including atheism and hostility to faith schools. Only 13 per cent of nones are secular in this strong sense—which amounts to under 5 per cent of the population. So the growth of ‘no religion’ cannot be conflated with the growth of the secularism championed by the ‘new atheists’. Indeed, atheism has not been growing anything like as fast as ‘no religion’, and atheism does not share the youthful age profile of ‘no religion’.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, only a minority of nones (41.5 per cent) are convinced atheists, as Table 3 shows. I asked about belief in God/a higher power on a sliding scale, allowing for shades of belief rather than a simple ‘yes or no’ answer. Unsurprisingly, nones are less likely to believe than ‘somes’ (those who identify with a religion), but the contrast is not black and white. Table 3 shows that the largest bloc of nones is made up of maybes, doubters and don’t knows, plus 5.5 per cent who definitely believe in God. As to what kind of God they believe in, less than a quarter of the nones who think there is a God adhere to the traditional idea of a personal ‘God’, with the rest believing in a spirit, life-force, energy, or simply ‘something there’. So the nones are not the phalanx of doughty secularists which some versions of secularisation theory expected, but they are certainly more sceptical about the existence of God than those who identify as religious—and that scepticism is growing with each generation.

When it comes to religious practices, again the picture is not straightforwardly secular. Fewer nones practise than believe, but a quarter report taking part in some kind of personal religious or spiritual practice in the course of a month, such as praying. What they absolutely do not do is take part in *communal* religious practices like church attendance and worship (unlike US nones). Nor do they join religious groups. On the whole they do not much care for religious leaders, institutions and authorities, but they tolerate them. Whilst many nones say that it is acceptable for religious leaders to speak out on various topics, they also say that they take no notice at all of what they say. The only leaders for whom nones have regard are Desmond

**Table 3.** Belief in God or a higher power.

	Nones (%)	Somes (%)
Yes, there is definitely a God or some ‘higher power’	5.5	39
Yes, there is probably a God or some ‘higher power’	11	29
No, there is probably NOT a God or some ‘higher power’	23	11
No, there is definitely NOT a God some ‘higher power’	41.5	6
Don’t know	18.5	15

Source: Woodhead/YouGov 2013, 2014

<sup>9</sup><http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/WFD-No-Religion.pdf>

**Table 4.** Top-3 religious leaders.

Per cent having a favourable impression of:	Nones (%)	Total population (%)
The Dalai Lama	56	57
Desmond Tutu	41	46
Pope Francis	29	40

Source: Linda Woodhead/YouGov for *The Tablet* April 2015.

Tutu, the Dalai Lama, and to a lesser extent Pope Francis (Table 4). It seems clear that nones dislike being preached at and told what to do; they prefer to make up their own minds.

Turning to politics, British nones do not have a clear profile (unlike US nones, who are overwhelmingly Democrat). I aggregated a large number of questions about political attitudes to form a scale of political commitments running from 'left' to 'right'. It shows that nones spread out across the political spectrum from moderate left-wing to moderate right-wing in much the same way as the British population as a whole, with under a third being left-leaning, just under a third right-leaning, and the rest—a plurality—being centrist. Nones are also similar to the general population in their economic attitudes; for example, in 2013 they shared the majority view that 'the welfare budget is too high and needs to be reduced'.

If we compare nones with somes, however, some clearer differences emerge, especially over questions about the EU, multiculturalism and diversity. Here nones as a whole display more cosmopolitan attitudes than somes, particularly when contrasted with Anglicans. On Brexit, for example, nones were more likely than somes—and notably more likely than Anglicans—to want to remain in the EU: 56 per cent of nones were 'remainers' versus 44 per cent of somes. Most Anglicans, especially those who are not in the highest class brackets, still identify strongly as English and care greatly about England and national sovereignty and autonomy, whereas nones have a greater sense of global citizenship. Whilst some of this difference is accounted for by age, not all of it is. This is in spite of the fact that nones are overwhelmingly 'white British' according to the census data—93 per cent of nones say they are 'white British' compared with 86 per cent of the total population. (This does not mean that non-religion is exclusive to white Britons: Chinese Britons, for example, are even more likely to identify as nones—there just aren't nearly as many of them in the UK.)

Turning to their ethical values, nones are different in degree rather than in kind from the wider population. Most British people place great value on the freedom of the individual and are decidedly liberal when it comes to matters of personal morality—they believe that it is up to individuals to decide for themselves how they live their own lives. Nones share these attitudes, but with even greater commitment. I discovered this by aggregating attitudes towards what, at the time of polling in 2013

and 2014, were still contentious and controversial issues in Britain—abortion, same-sex marriage and assisted dying—in order to construct a liberalism scale. Doing so revealed that 83 per cent of Britons are at the liberal end of that scale, but 100 per cent of nones.<sup>10</sup> In their strong commitment to liberalism, nones contrast most strikingly with Muslims, members of conservative evangelical Christian denominations, and Anglican and Catholic bishops—though ordinary Anglicans are almost as liberal as nones, scoring 92 per cent on the liberalism scale.

Overall, then, a typical none is younger, white, British-born, liberal about personal life and morals, varied in political commitment but cosmopolitan in outlook, suspicious of organised religion but not necessarily atheist, and unwilling to be labelled as religious or to identify with a religious group. Other than that, my surveys do not reveal any particularly significant correlations—not by class, education, gender, political inclination or region. Nones are distributed throughout the population, and exhibit considerable diversity. They are not a distinct minority, but a confident and rather unselfconscious majority. The choice of ‘no religion’ seems to be a negative more than a positive choice: a refusal of existing categories and a *dis*-affiliation from the organised religious groups.

### WHERE—‘NO RELIGION’ AROUND THE GLOBE

How unique are Britons in moving so decisively from a religious to a non-religious identity? The Pew Research Center, which carries out extensive statistical work on global religion, finds only a handful of countries around the world where nones make up more than half the population. In 2012 there were six such countries: China (by far the largest), Hong Kong, North Korea, Japan, the Czech Republic, and Estonia.<sup>11</sup> In its projections to 2050 Pew does not anticipate many more countries joining this rather exclusive club, because although more people switch to ‘no religion’ than to any other religion, the nones tend to have relatively low fertility rates. Although they are projected to increase by more than 100 million by 2050 (to 1.2 billion) that represents a falling share of the total world population, from 16 per cent in 2010 to 13 per cent in 2050.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> We (Silverman and Woodhead) set the ‘bar’ on the liberalism scale ourselves—the point is to test the relative position of different groups.

<sup>11</sup> Pew, ‘Global Religious Landscape’, Religious Composition by Country (<http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/12/globalReligion-tables.pdf>)

<sup>12</sup> Pew Research Center 2015, ‘Why People with ‘No Religion’ are Projected to Decline as a Share of the World’s Population’ (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/03/why-people-with-no-religion-are-projected-to-decline-as-a-share-of-the-worlds-population/>)



For various reasons, including the fact that Pew relies on census data, it is likely to be undercounting the nones—in the UK, for example, it found just 21 per cent in 2012. It is therefore worth noting the longer list of countries in which at least one in five people reported no religion. In 2012 they were: Australia, Belarus, Belgium, Botswana, Canada, Cuba, the Falkland Islands, France, Germany (especially in the east), Latvia, Luxembourg, Mongolia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, the UK, Uruguay, and Vietnam. Pew also reports on the growth of religion and ‘no religion’, projecting forwards to 2050. It expects Australia, the UK, France, New Zealand and the Netherlands to lose their Christian majorities by then, and for notable growth in ‘no religion’ in Japan, Germany and the USA to continue.<sup>13</sup>

The USA is an interesting case. For a long time people spoke about America as an ‘exception’ to European secularity. The UK and the USA were regularly contrasted as two liberal democracies with close historical ties, much shared religious history, but a different religious outcome.<sup>14</sup> However, over the last quarter century the USA has experienced a dramatic growth of no religion amongst younger generations, with the proportion of nones virtually doubling in the last decade to reach a quarter of the population.

Although the diversity of these countries undermines any attempt to identify a simple mono-causal explanation of the rise of the nones, a number of factors seem salient. The failure by any of the ‘world religions’ to attain dominance in these countries is one. Many Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and even Estonians, for example, engage in various religious, spiritual and ‘folk’ practices, but do not identify with a particular religious tradition, or classify their practices and traditions as religious. The historic sway of communism and its suppression of religion may also be a factor in some of these countries, though of course not in all. In others the values and institutions of liberal democracy are a salient factor, though not all ‘no religion’ countries are liberal democracies and not all liberal democracies have high levels of ‘no religion’.

The best illustration of the last point is the Scandinavian countries. Denmark, Norway and Sweden are close cousins of the UK (or at least England), liberal democracies with a shared religious history of Lutheran establishment, but they have experienced a far smaller growth of ‘no religion’. All retain sizeable Christian majorities, with Denmark’s being the largest at 77 per cent, and levels of church baptism, confirmation, weddings and funerals are also high, even though Sunday

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. and ‘The Future of World Religions’ (<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/> See also <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/>)

<sup>14</sup>For example, Berger *et al.* (2008).

attendance is low.<sup>15</sup> Pew predicts only a slow growth of Scandinavian nones. As I will argue below, however, this may well be because the churches in these countries have co-evolved with liberal democracy rather than fighting against it.

### WHY: EXPLAINING THE RISE OF ‘NO RELIGION’ IN BRITAIN

The patchy global distribution of ‘no religion’ undermines simplistic accounts of secularisation that imagined all countries propelled to the same secular destination point by the irresistible forces of modernisation. ‘No religion’ turns out to be a very odd fulfilment of secularisation theory—neither as secular nor as successful as was predicted. Nevertheless, the current fashion for dismissing such theories is overdone; the best of them can still shed light if not on universal trends at least on particular cases, like the rise of ‘no religion’ in Britain.

In order to explain the rise of British nones it is still helpful, then, to begin with Peter Berger’s old insight that cultural pluralisation is an important factor in religious change in modern societies. What he refers to in his latest book as the ‘twin pluralisms’ of (a) religious diversity and (b) religious/secular diversity are important factors in most parts of the world today, not least in the UK, a country which is now more religiously diverse than the USA.<sup>16</sup> Berger places particular emphasis on the way in which pluralisation undermines taken-for-granted cognitive frameworks and traditions. In contexts of diversity it becomes harder and harder for religion to be an unquestioned part of the culture, handed down from generation to generation, as natural as the trees and the sky. Even if a believer embraces his or her faith as the sole,

<sup>15</sup> A statistical comparison of the Church of England and the Church of Denmark

	CofE (2013) (%)	CofD (2014) (%)	<i>note</i>
Baptism	12	64	per cent live births
Weddings	20	34	per cent all weddings
Funerals	33	83	per cent all funerals
Average Sunday attendance	1.5	2	per cent of population
Self-identification/affiliation	c. 35 per cent (say ‘CofE’) 2 per cent are members (on electoral roll)	77 per cent (pay church tax & are members)	per cent of population
Christmas	4.5 (Xmas Eve & Xmas Day)	20 (evening only)	per cent of population

**Source for Denmark:** <http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/>; for church attendance, see Nielsen & Iversen (2014).

**Source for UK:** CofE, *Statistics for Mission 2013*, London: Archbishops’ Council, 2014  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2112070/2013statisticsformission.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Berger (2014).

infallible truth, it has still become a matter of personal choice.<sup>17</sup> This does not necessarily lead to religious decline, but it places new pressures on religious institutions, which can no longer depend upon affiliation by default or religious identity by ascription rather than choice. All this seems evident in Britain, where increased mobility, affluence, educational opportunity and contact with a wider range of cultures and religions have broken down religious enclaves and subcultures and shaken up the ordering of religious privilege. Denominational identities have ceased to be important in the way they once were (often intermeshed with political parties), and fractures and hostilities between religious majorities and minorities—whether Protestant/Catholic, intra-Protestant, or Christian/Jewish—have diminished or disappeared.

What's more, pluralism *de facto* has been reinforced by pluralism *de jure* as a new raft of human rights and equality legislation has been rolled out in the postwar period. This is undergirded by an ethical commitment to freedom of 'religion and belief', to equal treatment of religions and religious people, and to tolerance and mutual respect between them. In the process, claims about the exclusive or sufficient truth of particular religious denominations and groups have become harder to defend, and confidence in the providential nature of British Protestantism has evaporated along with the imperial endeavour it once helped sustain.<sup>18</sup> Such pluralisation is not just about increased social and cultural diversity; it involves an embrace of the *ideal* of tolerance, epistemological modesty (post-positivism) and respect for 'the other' and for 'difference'. The extensive study of religion and youth in English schools by Madge *et al.* reinforces this point: a multicultural value set is normative for the young people involved. Dissent from that, if it takes place at all, takes place in private.<sup>19</sup>

Pluralisation is not the only factor involved in the decline of Christianity and the rise of no religion. Equally important, though much less well theorised, is the growing liberalisation of British society. By liberalism I mean the conviction that each and every individual has the right if not the duty to make choices about how she or he should live her or his own life. It is the opposite of 'paternalism', understood as the view that one should defer to higher authority, whether of parents, God, scriptures, managers or whomever/whatever. Such ethical liberalism is entangled with institutions of political liberalism (strongly so in Britain) but can support other political arrangements. It should be wholly distinguished from 'individualism' understood as a mode of self-relation to others. Ethical liberalism implies equal freedom, a freedom

<sup>17</sup> Thus, Olivier Roy argues in relation to many second-generation and third-generation Muslims in Europe, it leads to a rejection of the 'cultural' Islam of their parents in favour of a purified, scriptural 'religious' version of the faith.

<sup>18</sup> Green (2011).

<sup>19</sup> Madge *et al.* (2014).

which has been fought for in a succession of political struggles: first freedom for men irrespective of class and economic status, then irrespective of race and ethnicity, and finally freedom for all, irrespective of gender and sexuality. The last battle is ongoing.

My surveys reveal the extent of ethical liberalism in Britain today. Contrary to the view that there is pervasive moral fragmentation, they show that there is actually a massive moral consensus about the importance of individual freedom of choice, with the overwhelming majority of British people (about 90 per cent), both religious and non-religious, affirming ethical liberalism. As mentioned above, none are at the extreme end of a liberal scale, but most of the rest of the population are not far behind. On issue after issue, a swelling tide of liberal opinion forced change throughout the course of the 20th century and into the 21st: on contraception, suicide, divorce laws, remarriage after divorce, sexual abuse and, most recently, same-sex marriage. The next battle will no doubt be fought over assisted dying, on which the law (opposed) and public opinion (around 70 per cent in favour) are currently at odds.

None of this is necessarily fatal to religion. Just as they can adjust to pluralism, so religions can, and do, take liberal forms. Indeed, historically, Christianity has been integral to the rise of Western liberalism.<sup>20</sup> In Britain the Church of England long had a powerful liberal wing, and its ascendancy from the late 19th century through to the 1970s saw Anglicans taking liberal stances on contraception, abortion, divorce and even homosexuality. The Roman Catholic Church also entered into a period of rapid liberalisation in the wake of Vatican II (1962–5), before retrenching in the wake of *Humanae Vitae* (1968). What affected the churches in Britain, however, and accelerated the rise of ‘no religion’, was a volte face by church leaders in nearly all the major British denominations after the 1970s, which saw them move in a more conservative direction and take an increasingly vocal stand against ethical liberalisation, especially in relation to gender and sexuality. The Church of England, aided and abetted by other churches, has fought successfully for exemption from the laws which prevent other public bodies from discriminating on the basis of gender, religion and sexuality.<sup>21</sup>

The result has been a growing values gap which has left a growing number of liberal British people alienated from the churches and identified with no religion. It is not just that Britain has become less religious but that religion has become more so; not just that people moved away from the churches but that the churches moved away from them. Most British people have never been very religious, but the mainstream churches have always been willing to accommodate them.<sup>22</sup> In sociological terms,

<sup>20</sup> Siedentop (2014).

<sup>21</sup> Brown & Woodhead (2016).

<sup>22</sup> A Suration survey in 2014 asked people whether they were ‘not religious’, ‘very religious’, or ‘somewhat religious’: only 8 per cent said they were very religious, but 61 per cent said ‘not religious’. There is little variation by age and generation. (<http://suration.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Huffington-Post-Results.pdf>)

these were societal churches, not sectarian ones.<sup>23</sup> Regular attendance was never the norm in the Church of England. By virtue of being English you had a right to be baptised, married, buried, schooled. You did not need to be religious. After the 1980s, however, in response to small but vocal fundamentalist wings, both this church and others shifted from being societal to sectarian, affirming sharper boundaries with society, raising barriers to entry (e.g. requiring conversion), and placing more emphasis on distinctive language, piety and moral purity (e.g. talking about 'Jesus' more than 'God' or 'Spirit'). What was once mainstream, bound up with cultural values and everyday life, has become increasingly separate: 'exculturated' rather than 'inculturated', to borrow the terms Olivier Roy uses to speak of contemporary Islam.<sup>24</sup>

In the process, a majority of British people have ended up on one side of a moral divide—the liberal side—with their old religious leaders on the other. This is clearest for the nones, but it is also true for many ordinary religious people (the 'somes'). Amongst self-identified British Catholics, for example, my surveys show that a mere 5 per cent now follow official church teaching on litmus test issues like regular church-going, contraception, and remarriage after divorce.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the vast majority of Anglicans supported the ordination of women decades before the Church of England finally accepted it, and a plurality of Anglicans now support same-sex marriage. A full 70 per cent of 'somes' support a liberalisation of the law concerning assisted dying, compared with 85 per cent of nones. Many of those over 50 who were raised religious retain their affiliation even if they find themselves out of step with the institutions which nurtured them, but those under 50 are more likely to have broken from religion altogether.

This is not to suggest that most people, even most young people, are actively hostile to the churches. About half now have little or no contact with them at all, and a majority are simply indifferent, as we see in Table 5. Nevertheless, amongst those who do hold negative attitudes, it is older people who are more likely to say that the churches are 'stuffy and boring', whilst younger ones say they are sexist and homophobic (in relation to the Roman Catholic Church, sex abuse scandals are also cited). Add to this the impact of religiously inspired or legitimated violence in Britain and abroad, particularly Al-Qaeda and ISIS-inspired attacks, and it is obvious how religion as a

<sup>23</sup> Moral opposition to wider society is a defining stance of sectarian religion, but is a contradiction in terms for 'societal' religion, which seeks to imbue the whole of society with religious value. Sectarian religion can flourish with a values gap—indeed it needs it—but societal religion cannot.

<sup>24</sup> Roy (2010).

<sup>25</sup> For the survey evidence and method of arriving at this figure see: <http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/WFD-Catholics-press-release.pdf>

**Table 5.** Attitudes to the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church.

	In your opinion, would you say that the C of E today is ...?	And the Roman Catholic Church?
A positive force in society	18	13
A negative force in society	14	28
Neither a positive or a negative force in society	58	47
Don't know	10	11

Source: Woodhead/YouGov 2013

whole can become tainted in some people's eyes, a 'toxic brand', prejudiced and illiberal at best, divisive and destructive at worst.

My argument is thus that growing pluralisation and liberalisation in Britain have, since the 1970s, been met by opposite tendencies in religion, and that it is this clash which helps to explain the increasingly rapid rise of 'no religion'. It's not that religion or spirituality per se have become objectionable to 'modern man', as some older secularisation theorists and 'enlightenment atheists' liked to think, but that the particular kinds of religion on offer in late modern Britain have not offered the social, spiritual and moral goods which younger people affirm and desire. Because religion has become bound up with forms of differentiation and exclusion which most younger people now reject, 'no religion' has started to become not just a negation but a positive option. It allows the very freedom which is now widely affirmed as a sacred value.

This explanation is compatible with the diversity and lack of coherence of 'no religion' revealed in my surveys. It explains why most nones are not actively or clearly secular, and why many believe in God and some are interested in religion and spirituality. Nones may reject organised religion, but they do not reject all it contains. 'No religion' begins as a sort of demographic dustbin category created to contain those who no longer fit the old religious pigeonholes, and only slowly and patchily begins to constitute an identity in its own right (as in the rise of non-religious funerals, for example). But nones are not at loggerheads with most 'somes', and are not dramatically different in their beliefs and values from previous generations and the majority of religious people in Britain. For most of them 'no religion' is not an identity they have actively chosen or fought for. It does not have creeds which express its beliefs or leaders who represent it. The nones are those who find that organised religion does not resonate with their lives, values and commitments in the way it used to for their forbears.

## THE NEW NORM

A final factor in the growth of 'no religion' seems to be its own self-reinforcing success. This is why I began this article with my finding that nones have just become the new

majority, and why I think it is so important. The 'norm', the unmarked, that which just 'is', does not have to justify itself in the same way that minority positions do. Of course, no set of commitments can ever fully occupy this position in plural societies, but 'no religion' is now closer to it than anything else, and benefits accordingly. When everyone used to have a Christian funeral, for example, that was just what you did when someone died; you did not have to choose, you did not even have to think about it. When non-religious funerals started to occur they were regarded as odd and deviant; people used to feel uncomfortable and to mock. These days they are the new normal, and it is *religious* funerals which have to be justified; people who choose them worry about 'imposing' them on non-religious people and people of other faiths.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, many aspects of a non-religious worldview, not just its ethics, have now become taken-for-granted in the way Christian teaching used to be. Thus the idea of 'creation' has been supplanted by the view that reality is brought into being by immanent cosmic processes and humans by naturalistic evolutionary ones—views which simply need not be defended these days. Ritually, there has been an incredibly swift normalisation of new rites like school proms, which are in effect ritual celebrations of each child and their achievements. Ethically, the normality of 'no religion' is evident in the non-negotiable view that all human beings have a duty and a right to fulfil their own potential and help others to do the same. As a journalist recently reflected in *The Guardian*: 'Do we really want children asking seriously what is wrong with torture or slavery, or why democracy is such a good idea? ... There are some humanist beliefs about sexuality and tolerance that schools are already committed (quite rightly) to enforcing rather than discussing.'<sup>27</sup>

But a further sense of 'norm' has to do with cultural institutionalisation. What counts as normal is also what is incorporated and reinforced by major national institutions like Parliament, the law, schools and universities, medicine, the media, and, in Britain, the monarchy. We can go through each one of these and consider how far religion and/or 'no religion' have been institutionalised, and how far they coexist and compete. As well as the growing institutionalisation of 'no religion' in life rites like weddings and funerals, there are baby-namings, divorce ceremonies, and a huge variety of new forms of memorialisation. But when we turn to societal-level institutions, a good case can be made for saying that it is still Christianity rather than 'no religion' which remains the norm, and the two exist side by side in interesting and sometimes uncomfortable ways.

<sup>26</sup>In a survey carried out in 2015, I asked a representative sample of the population of GB what kind of funeral they would prefer for themselves. A quarter said a 'religious funeral', over a third a 'non-religious' one, and just under a quarter a 'mix of religious and non-religious' (plus 7 per cent none of these, 9 per cent don't know).

<sup>27</sup>Brown (2015).

In state-funded schools, for example, the law touching on religion remains virtually unchanged since 1944, and still requires a daily act of worship of a predominantly Christian kind, and religious education throughout the entire school career.<sup>28</sup> This is a clear case of entrenched Christian institutionalisation. But in many schools the act of worship has nevertheless morphed into something ‘non-denominational’, and religious education has shifted from being ‘Christian Instruction’ to ‘Religious Education’ of a multi-faith kind, and sometimes into philosophy and ethics as well. In private schools, however, especially the most elite, Christianity remains firmly institutionalised, as it does in the ancient and most prestigious universities in Britain, in the judiciary, and in Parliament. The fact that Prime Ministers Cameron and May have both made a show of their Christian belief is not a coincidence.

And then there is, of course, British history, which continues to shape the ‘normal’ without anyone doing much about it, and which ties Christianity into time and space: calendars, place names, ‘Christian’ names, built environment, landscape, even the layout of parliamentary debating chambers, the backdrop to murder mysteries, and other mythic scenes of Britishness. In all these ways Britain remains a Christian country—as people from other religious and cultural backgrounds often see most clearly.

This means that whilst a majority of British people now identify as nones, and their dominance is set to increase, we cannot accurately describe Britain as ‘post-Christian’ or straightforwardly non-religious. A yawning values gap has opened between the churches and younger generations, but Christianity remains strongly institutionalised and influential, whilst other religions have grown in influence. Britain is no longer the ‘Christian country’ Mr Cameron and the *Daily Mail* imagine, but neither is it ‘no religion’. It exists somewhere in-between—between Christian, multi-faith and ‘none’.

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To cite the article: Linda Woodhead (2016), 'The rise of "no religion" in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority', *Journal of the British Academy*, 4: 245–261.  
DOI 10.85871/jba/004.245

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*Journal of the British Academy* (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by  
The British Academy—the national academy for the humanities and social sciences.  
10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH  
[www.britishacademy.ac.uk](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk)

