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Believing Vaguely: Religious Socialization and Christian Beliefs in Britain

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Abstract: Sociological research focusing on religion has customarily placed processes of socialization at the core of understanding not only individual religious identification, but also the broad aggregate transmission and survival of a generalised religious culture. In recent years scholars have begun to speak of the “crisis” manifest in religious socialization from one generation to the next, at least in the Western setting. This paper will largely centre upon a single “dimension” of the erosion of religious socialization namely Christian “beliefs” (broadly defined) in one national context, Britain. It will then consider the weakening impact of conventional agencies of such socialization, most obviously the Christian churches, and call upon empirical generational and long-term evidence, alongside engaging current theorising around the subject of “believing” in a post-Christian environment, if indeed the designation is an accurate one.

Keywords: beliefs, belonging, post-Christian, secularization

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Introduction

Leading up to Easter 2014 the former archbishop of Canterbury (the principal head of the Church of England and the symbolic leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion), Rowan Williams, expressed his view that Britain was no longer “a nation of believers”. He further opined that “(Britain is) post-Christian in the sense that habitual practice for most of the population is not taken for granted ... A Christian nation can sound like a nation of committed believers, and we are not that”. He surmised that the era of regular and widespread worship was over, and predicted a likely increasing demise of the Christian Church’s social influence in the years ahead¹.

The archbishop’s statement followed shortly after the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, sparked a national debate over the significance of Christianity in public life. Cameron prompted Christians to be “more evangelical” about their faith and claimed that Britain should be more confidently a Christian country. His remarks provoked a lively response from humanist and secular groups, and induced a raft of senior politicians to join the debate, culminating in Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat Party leader and deputy Prime Minister in the government coalition, calling for the disestablishment of the Church of England.

A poll conducted on behalf of the politically right-leaning newspaper the *Daily Telegraph* at the time of the deliberation appeared to show at least some national support for the Prime Minister’s aspirations² and lauded the findings that more than half of the British public (56 percent) still regarded Britain as a Christian country (a figure which notably rose to 73 percent among the over 65 year olds). This was nonetheless accompanied by concerns over the perceived vulnerability of Christians to abuse or discrimination. Even 62 percent of people who held Christian beliefs, but did not worship regularly, stated that they felt Christians were given “less protection” by the state than other faith communities.

Statistics of course can be construed differentially and the findings of this particular poll disguises the fact that Christian allegiance in Britain has

¹ “Former archbishop of Canterbury: We are a post-Christian nation”, Tim Ross, Cole Moreton and James Kirkup, *Daily Telegraph*, Retrieved May 4, 2014, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10790495/Former-archbishop-of-Canterbury-We-are-a-post-Christian-nation.html>.

² Findings from the ICM survey of 2,000 people conducted in April 2014.

declined over an appreciable length of time and the evidence of this deterioration has been utilised by some academics as evidence of secularizing trends (for example, Brown, 2001; Bruce, 2006). At the very least the debate as to whether Britain has truly become a post-Christian nation initiated by politicians and leading church leaders, alongside the findings of various opinion polls, point to a number of observable tendencies which are open to interpretation. Nonetheless, the widespread assertion of a sizeable section of the British public that the country remains “Christian” is itself a diminishing one. This general drift is accompanied by the long-term reduction in church attendance and deterioration in adherence to specific beliefs long regarded as central doctrines of the faith (the deity of Christ, sin, hell etc) which have conventionally informed Christian moral tenets.

As a result of the reading of numerous indicative measurements, including beliefs, Britain, along with other Western European democracies, is frequently referred to as a “post-Christian” society and therefore would seem to offer some insights into the relationship between the demise of a religious tradition in a national setting and conventional elements of religious socialization. This paper will call upon numerous survey findings and reports of Christian identification in Britain and the extent of subscription to core beliefs – broadly defined – before attempting to relate developments to the demise of religious socialization through particular agencies. In doing so, the paper will make reference to the pertinent theorising around religious socialization, as well as that which relates to more conventional models of secularization on the one hand and notions of “vicarious religion” and its theoretical derivatives on the other.

Religious Socialization

Today, religious socialization is typically conceived of as a “process” by which fresh generations gradually attain the religious values, beliefs and conceptions of preceding generations (for example, Cornwall, 1988; Fowler, 1984). More specifically, Furseth and Repstad (2006, p. 114) point out religious socialization as a generalised theory is based on the premise of continuity and control, meaning that via this process individuals are able to embrace ways of thinking and acting transmitted and dominated by the expectations of others to comply with these expectations. Social agencies

form an integral element of this complex process, albeit with divergent agendas: parents, peers, educational institutions and, most obviously, religious organizations.

What has been referred to as the “crisis” in religious socialization has drawn at least some attention from scholars in recent times (for example, Voas & Crockett, 2006; Sabe, 2007). Much of the reference has been in regard to Western societies, particularly European, which, nominally at least, are designated “Christian” and that this “crisis” has resulted in a form of “collective amnesia” in relation to perceptions and understandings of religious tradition (Hervieu-Léger, 1998). The major development in this respect is often assumed to be the decline of specifically faith organizations which partake of religious socialization as an integral part of their *raison d’être* in as much as they transmit beliefs across the generations. For advocates of the conventional “hard” secularization thesis the decline of church membership and attendance in Europe and in other parts of the Western world is a major and indisputable piece of evidence, conjointly with other indicators, of secularization dynamics and the simultaneous decline of beliefs. Thus, Steve Bruce states: “Whether we measure church membership, church attendance, the popularity of religious ceremonies to mark rites of passage, or the more nebulous matter of religious belief, we find that, though each index starts at a different level, and the rate of decline differs for each society, nonetheless, across the industrial world there is a steady and to-date unremitting decline in all religious indices” (Bruce, 2001, p. 250).

Bruce, developing the earlier work of Bryan Wilson (1982), takes up the theme of “societalization” which he sees as denoting the progressive disengagement of individuals from their traditional contexts of social reproduction such as family, community and social class. Societalization impacts upon religion in two pertinent ways. Firstly, it erodes established patterns of social facsimile through which traditional values, beliefs, practices and interpretations are sustained and propagated. Second, societalization undermines the possibility of habitual contact with religious institutions as their customary involvement in everyday life as a result of education, charity, rites of passage and other functions being increasingly undertaken by secular agencies. As a result, the “socio-logics related to (the) ‘fundamental features’ of modern society” entail the gradual attenuation of religion as both a widespread social phenomenon and prominent influence in the lives of communities and individuals –

weakening received religious tradition, namely in the Western world, Christianity (Bruce, 2006, p. 35).

There is plausibly more to the equation however. Karel Dobbelaere's complex account of secularization has also pulled attention to "individual secularization" whereby individuals display considerable agency in voluntarily deciding to undertake religious belonging and where "belief becomes a private decision" (Dobbelaere 2009, p. 608). As a consequence, religion assumes an intensifying "idiosyncratic" and "heterogeneous" nature as individuals fabricate their own religiosities through "compositions", "patchworks" and "bricolages" determined by subjective orientations rather than communal pressures (2009, p. 607). Such micro-level "secularizations of the mind" are thus manifest through the "compartmentalization" of subjective religiosity, resulting from the failure of individuals to apply their beliefs to otherwise "profane subsystems" (for example, economic, educational, family, legal, and political institutions) which they engage with in everyday life.

There are good grounds for suggesting that these developments may increasingly impact younger generations. As Jim Beckford argues, the matter of agency and the declining influence of religious organizations begs a re-direction away from a tendency to restrict studies of youth religiosity to formal processes of socialization with particular reference to the role of religious institutions (Beckford, 2010, p. xxvi). Indeed, studies have shown that young people today are not passive recipients of religious socialization in either formal and informal settings such as the family, but have become participants who exercise a high degree of critical autonomy in decision about religious belief (see Arweck & Jackson, 2013; Collins-Mayo & Dandelion, 2010 with reference to Britain). This may reflect general social trends or stages in the life course. For instance, "emerging adults", typically, are less religiously involved than their older age peers and for many, the college years offer a suspension from adult responsibilities and commitments, providing opportunities for personal exploration and experimentation (Bengston et al., 2012; Hout & Greeley, 1987).

Cutting across this tendency is the matter of generational dynamics – specific age cohorts experiencing distinct social environments which may lead to both a decline in religious belief and participation, subsequently marking a significant rupture with inter-generational religious socialization processes. Several commentators have recognised this development in the case of the USA. Thus, while the millennial generation (those born in the

period from approximately 1980 to the early twenty-first century) constitutes the vanguard of disaffiliation, earlier generations have also made their impression on American religious and cultural transformations. The baby boomers (born soon after World War II to the mid-1960s), in particular, stand out as the generation that precipitated a wide-ranging cultural transformation in American religion and society (Roof, 1993; Wuthnow, 1998). That the social dynamics of age and generation are currently providing significant momentum to religious change is underscored not only by the post-1960s shift toward disaffiliation, but by the on-going accelerated pace of disaffiliation (Dillon & Wink, 2007).

Many contemporary sociologists in the area of religious socialization have also come to recognise that any analysis of religious socialization must register rapid socio-cultural transformations, some of which make it apparent that apart from the family, church and school there are other channels for religious socialization enhancing the contribution of personal agency. Sherkat (2003), for instance, suggests that the life-time process of religious socialization is a two-way development which includes the impulses of purposeful social actors, rather than a one-way transference of knowledge. Moreover, this long-term process must also take into account social change and development within an individual's life-time as well as across the generations.³

This paper will be cognizant of a number of these theoretical frameworks in exploring why religious socializing agencies in Britain have weakened particularly over the last decade and registers the subsequent implications, while also noting further significant considerations. Firstly, there has been a sizeable rupture in the connectiveness between Christianity and national identity. Secondly, wider societal liberalising attitudes have accompanied the failure of Christian socialization agencies to retain traditional beliefs – in both a theological and “moral” sense. In turn, this has contributed towards the diminishing link between national consciousness and its perceived association with Christianity as traditionally understood.

³ There is not the space here to discuss the advent of new technologies and the increasing impact of the media – “social” and otherwise – in enhancing the tendency towards autonomous agency. So far, research indicates that this kind of socialization does not result primarily in membership of religious organizations (Bromander, 2012) or aid the transmission of inherited religion (Lövheim, 2012).

Christian Affiliation in the UK – Survey Evidence

Survey evidence can provide a meaningful picture of religious allegiance and its link to the adherence of specific beliefs but is not without inherent difficulties. Polls may be instigated by particular organizations with their own agendas and the findings interpreted accordingly. Further, previous research has shown that variations in question wording can generate significantly different results, and this is especially true of investigation into religion, while various surveys have differing sample size and employ a number of different modes of asking (face-to-face polling, by phone, etc).

Simultaneously, there are also conceptual difficulties around the designations of “affiliation” and “beliefs” and the calibration of the two. Both are notoriously difficult to quantify and therefore any survey poll should be primarily treated as a broad indication of such rather than a precise concrete measurement. Francis (2003), to name one source, points to the virtue of “affiliation” in marking a clear form of identity which distinguishes “Christian” claimants from other religious categories in sociological surveys in the public square, serving as a legitimate marker of social identity in much the same way as gender and ethnicity. However, “affiliation” categories may take on significantly dissimilar meanings among Christians of different denominational groups.

More problematic is “beliefs” which, along with matters of religious practice, are regarded generally as private issues of personal concern. Although “beliefs” may be open to clear conceptualisation, the formulation of indices of religious belief, Francis argues, are conceptually complex (both theologically and psychologically): it is the formulation of measures of belief which may distinguish one denominational group from another, the theologically educated from the theologically naïve, etc. Nonetheless, “beliefs” do offer some insights into the personal and social correlates of religiosity.

There are several formulations which have been used to assess Christian allegiance over the years in Britain, and these have often produced varying response rates. That acknowledged, numerous surveys over a protracted period indicate that the proportion of individuals who do not claim Christian allegiance and hold Christian beliefs is steadily increasing (although there are important national variations, especially Northern Ireland, discussed below).

Smaller polls tend to reveal a lower subscription to Christian allegiance as part of a broad picture. In Britain, those who describe themselves as non-religious, and in a country where Christianity is still the primary religion, have risen from 31 percent to 50 percent between 1983 and 2009 according to the annual British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) of 2011. An Ipsos poll, published two years earlier for the British Humanist Association, indicated that 36 percent of people were non-religious (around 17 million adults) and subsequently interpreted by the BHA as individuals who were humanist in their broad outlook. Among people aged between 18-24 the incidence of religious affiliation was merely 36 percent, suggesting a generational decline in religiosity. Putting matters in comparative perspective, a 2007 Ipsos poll Britain ranked 15th of the top fifty countries with the largest percentage of people who identified themselves as either atheist, agnostic, or non-believers in God.

The BSA Survey report of 2011 found that only 44 percent of people in Britain identify as Christians compared to 50 percent in 2008, and 66 percent in 1983. The small ICM survey of 2014 disclosed a slightly higher identification figure: some 52 percent of respondents described themselves as either practising or non-practising Christians, while a further 5 percent stated they belonged to another faith group (41 percent said they were not religious). Almost two-thirds of practising Christians in this survey indicated that they felt concerned speaking out about their beliefs.

It is however the decennial national census of England and Wales⁴ (polling 53.5 million of the British population of 63.7) which has attracted more attention given its scope of surveying the entire populous of these national constituents. The “religion question” was first asked in 2001 and the only voluntary question,⁵ as it was in 2011 (7.2 per cent of people did not answer the question). It involved the simple question: “What is your religion?” The findings below, which call heavily on the work of David Voas, provide only a “snapshot” of trends over ten years, but this remains a large and meaningful sample.

The two decadal censuses confirmed Britain’s increasing religious pluralism. Muslims constituted the second largest religious group at

⁴ Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own ten-year census.

⁵ Clive Field (2012) points out some of the complexities in the results, including the non-responses, which were partly due to the sensitivities which exist around the state investigating a topic which is often regarded as a personal and private matter.

1,546,626 in 2001. Jedi Knights (legally an official “religion”) had 390,127 followers and formed a larger group than several of the “major religions”: Jews (259,927); Sikhs (329,358); Buddhists (144,453); or minor religions such as Jainism (15,132), Zoroastrianism (3,738) or the Baha’i faith (4,645). In 2011 many of these smaller faith communities grew: Muslims to 2,706,066 (+ 75.0 percentage change), Hindus to 816,633 (+ 47.8 percentage) and Sikhs at 423,158 (+ 28.5 percent). This general direction of travel revealed by the 2011 census (published in December 2012), in comparison to those for 2001, came as no surprise and registered a non-Christian religion growth much faster than the growth in population.⁶

There were however two notable statistics derived from the census returns of 2001 and 2011. According to the latter, those claiming no religion were the second largest category, about two and a half times as many as all other (non-Christian) religions combined (at 15.5 percent of the population, from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent). In 2001, 7,274,290 people said claimed “no religion” (though only 10,357 specified that they were atheists). 14.1 million people, around a quarter of the population in England and Wales, reported they had no religion in 2011. The “nones” increased most of all the categories, more than ten times greater than the population as a whole and even faster than Muslims⁷.

The census of 2001 also indicated a “blip” on the radar that had for several years picked up a declining allegiance to Christianity through smaller surveys. It indicated a higher level of Christian belief than

⁶ One of the key demographic changes to have occurred in this period was the increase in the number of international migrants born outside of Britain but who were resident in England and Wales at the time of the census. In 2001 4.6 million answered this description (8.8 percent of the population); by 2011 there were 7.5 million (13.4 percent, roughly one-third from the European Union and two-thirds from elsewhere). Of these 7.5 million, over half had arrived in Britain between 2001 and 2011. Clearly this impacted the growth of non-Christian major religions.

⁷ Voas (2012a) highlights the fact that comparing 2001 to the 2011 census, the “other religion” count rose from 141,747 to 240,530 - an increase of 60 percent at the same time as the population grew by just 8 percent (if “mixed religion” is taken out of the total, the increase is 53 percent). In absolute terms, though, the rise of not quite 100,000 is dwarfed by the fall of more than 4 million in the Christian count. “Any other religion?” still accounted for less than half of one percent of the population of England and Wales. 33.3 percent designated themselves a Christian denomination and reassigned by Office of National Statistics to the “Christian” category. Voas (2012b) suggests that this did not materially affect the results of the 2011 census or help explain the major changes which have taken place since 2001.

anticipated and the question seemed to capture some kind of loose cultural affiliation: in 2001 over 70 percent of the population responded “Christian”; a far higher percentage than nearly every other major survey/poll on religious belief in the previous decade.⁸ Christianity remained the largest religion in England and Wales in 2011. Nevertheless, between 2001 and 2011 there was a significant decrease in people who identified as Christian (37,338,486 to 33,243,175: 71.7 percent to 59.3 percent). Christians were the only major religious group to have lost ground between the two censuses in terms of absolute numbers, and did so rapidly and substantially, that the decline took many commentators by surprise.

Age, Cohort and Disbelief

Of course such decline in Christian identification between 2001 and 2011 begs an explanation and there are several possibilities. Firstly, Christian allegiance, might suggest a lessening “prestige” effect – that it was somehow related to a sense of being “British” and the expected “thing to do”. The high level of identification in 2001 could be interpreted as a post 9/11 phenomenon and a felt need to stress national identity at time when Muslim ethnic minorities were attracting negative media coverage and immigration more generally had become a sensitive issue.

In their article on the 2001 religion census Voas and Bruce (2004) studied the results, addressing particularly the 72 percent of people in England and Wales identified as “Christian”. They point out that this figure is substantially higher than the proportion found by the BSAS and other national studies. Voas and Bruce compared the census with a number of these surveys and suggested two fundamental questions. Why did the census produce a higher figure than recurrent surveys for nominal Christian identification? And, why, when church attendance is larger in Scotland than in England and Wales, does the census show a higher proportion of

⁸ In a poll conducted by YouGov in 2011 on behalf of the British Humanist Association, when asked the census question “What is your religion?”, 61 percent of the sample in England and Wales ticked a religious box (53.48 percent Christian and 7.22 percent other) while 39 percent ticked ‘No religion’. When the same sample was asked the follow-up question “Are you religious?”, only 29 percent of the same people said “Yes” while 65 percent said “No”, meaning over half of those whom the census would count as having a religion said they were not religious.

nominal identifiers in the latter? Voas and Bruce argue that the answer to both questions is the same: anxiety about national identity during this period. Voas (2012b) conjectures that, given other religious changes during the decade, it might be possible to suggest the “prestige” effect of religion had lessened, and that a good number of individuals felt it less necessary to declare a faith in 2011 than in 2001. Moreover, since the “religion” question followed immediately after the “ethnicity” question in both years, it is possible that some people conflated the two. The result is that a very loose cultural affiliation is “measured” by the census in terms of religion with particular over-inflation of the Christian figure and an undercounting of the non-religious population.

A second explanation is the importance of cohort replacement effects, again explored in some detail by Voas (2012b), in regard to the differences in Christian allegiance. Sample surveys, such as the annual BSAS, have mostly tended to show that religious affiliation is fairly constant across a person’s life but declines over time in the country as a whole as a result of the death of older cohorts with a strong religious (especially Christian) identification and their replacement by young people with much lower levels of religious allegiance. However, the scale of the decrease in the Christian population between 2001 and 2011 is far greater than can be counted for by cohort replacement alone.

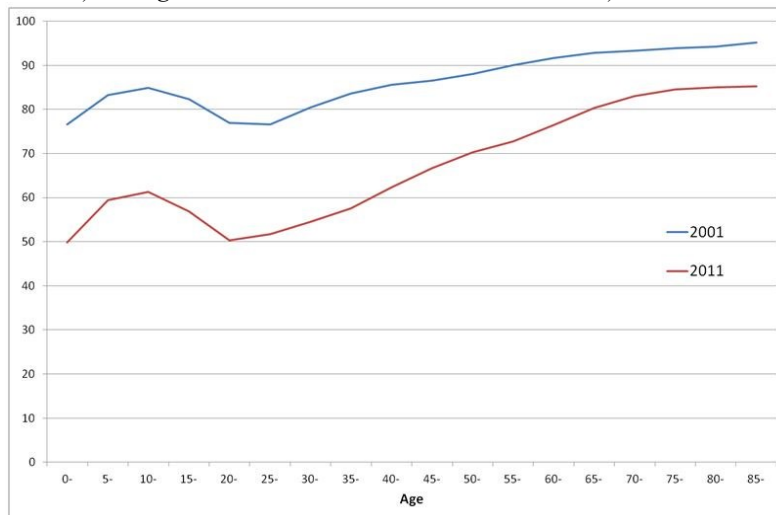
The third plausible explanation is that between the two censuses a sizeable section of the population simply relinquished being “Christian”. According to the analysis undertaken by Voas, based upon deaths during the decade, he projected that the number of Christians would only have fallen by 1.5 million, or from 72 percent to 69 percent of the population, as a direct consequence of cohort replacement. There is therefore the possibility that a good number of people who gave their religion as “Christian” in 2001 recorded themselves as of “no religion” in 2011 (the net decline in Christians constitutes 64.1 percent of the net growth of “nones”).

Over the same period, the number of Christians born outside the country increased from 2.3 to 3.6 million. In consequence, the total number of Christians dropped by just 11 percent, although the number of native-born Christians fell by 15 percent. Voas (2012b) points out that the collapse in the proportion of Christians might almost certainly have been worse but for these international migrants who often came from countries where Christianity was the dominant faith and who would not have been counted

in 2001. For example, Polish Christian 94.3 percent (a nine-fold growth in the number of Poles, who are preponderantly Catholic, resident in England and Wales between 2001 and 2011, following Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004). Voas also emphasises that immigrants are disproportionately young adults. Of people aged 25-34 in 2011, fully one quarter were born outside of Britain. The defection from Christian affiliation between 2001 and 2011 is therefore underestimated, particularly among young adults, because it is offset by an infusion of Christian immigrants.

The full significance of age categories is shown in the graph below.

Table 1. Christians as a percentage of the population (minority religious groups omitted) in England and Wales, 2001 and 2011 censuses)

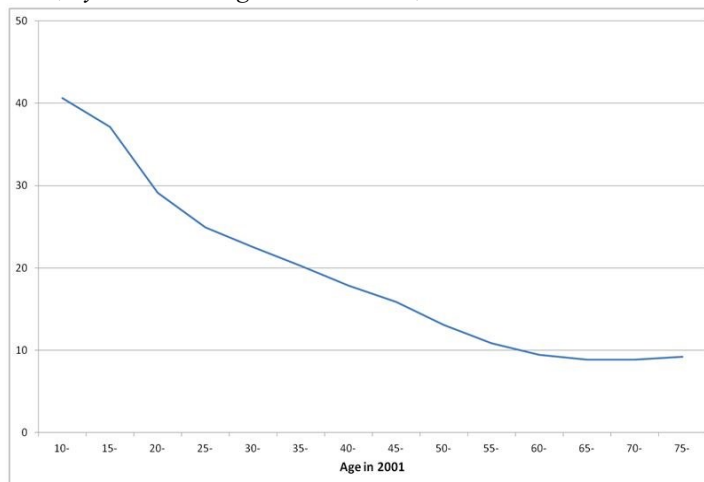


Source: Religious Census 2011 – What happened to the Christians? (Part II), Voas (2012b).

In exploring this development Voas suggests that the obvious point to note is that the pattern by age is almost identical in the two years. Parents answer the census questions for their children, and unsurprisingly children around age 10 are described as Christian with about the same frequency as their parents. Many people are not predisposed to assign a religious affiliation to very young children and, conversely, adolescents aged 15-19 are beginning to demonstrate their autonomy. These two factors produce

the conspicuous bulge in the graph of the reported affiliation of children. Subsequently the typical generational profile of religious belonging and affiliation steadily grows from young adults to the elderly. Although the contours of the graphs are similar in 2001 and 2011, the levels are remarkably different. Excluding minorities, more than three quarters of people aged 20-24 were labelled Christian in 2001; in 2011 the proportion in that age group was only one half. Nevertheless, the gap narrows as age rises. Of people in their 20s and early 30s in 2001 who designated themselves Christian, a quarter no longer did so in 2011. Not taking into account immigrant groups, those aged 10-14, 15-19, 20-24, etc. in 2001 correspond to those aged 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, etc. in 2011. The amount of disaffection from Christian identification within each cohort is indicated in the following graph.

Table 2. Percentage of Christians in 2001 no longer identified as Christian in 2011, by cohort in England and Wales, 2001 and 2011 censuses



Source: Religious Census 2011 – What happened to the Christians? (Part II), David Voas (2012b)

To conclude, while the two censuses of 2001 and 2011 deal with a short time period, the latter recorded a mere brief reversal of a long-term trend confirmed by earlier surveys (including that of the National Centre for

Social Research, see graph below): Christian identification is declining and that this is increasingly so with each generation of younger age cohorts.

Table 3. Christian Identification

| <i>Christian Identification (selected years)</i> | <i>Percent (rounded off)</i> |
|--|------------------------------|
| 1983 | 67 |
| 1990 | 61 |
| 1996 | 50 |
| 2000 | 54 |
| 2004 | 47 |
| 2010 | 46 |

Source: Religious Census 2011 – What happened to the Christians? (Part II), David Voas (2012b)

Christian Belief

Besides measuring broad Christian identification, over a number of years several surveys have focused upon explicit Christian beliefs (table 4) as identifiably held by the British population. Several selected data (which are rounded off) are produced by BRIN (British Religion in Numbers) and based on statistics originally compiled by Clive Field drawn from various polls over a number of decades (Field 2010). The data includes questions related to the divine inspiration of Christian scripture, belief in heaven and hell, belief in the Devil, belief in the divinity of Christ and his bodily resurrection, miracles, and belief in the virgin birth.

All except belief in heaven show a marked decline of these fundamental tenets of faith. Perhaps the major tenet of the Christian faith is to be found spread over the last categories: belief that Jesus Christ was a real person who died and came back to life and was the son of God. Interestingly, as far as Christian identification is concerned, in a poll conducted by YouGov in 2011, less than half (48 percent) of those who ticked “Christian” as their religion believed in this doctrine.

The only statistic that bucks the trend towards disbelief and changing attitudes to the doctrines listed above is belief in heaven, while the belief in hell is definitely less popular (a belief held by 62 percent of church-goers and 9 percent of non-church-goers according to a study by Robin Gill in 1991).

Table 4. Christian Belief

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Belief that the Bible is of Divine Origin</i> | |
| 1984 (Gallop) | 62% |
| 1991 (NatCen) | 40% |
| 2008 (NatCen) | 38% |
| <i>Belief that the New Testament is of Divine Origin</i> | |
| 1981 (Gallop) | 62% |
| 1991 (NatCen) | 40% |
| 2008 (NatCen) | 38% |
| <i>Belief that the Old Testament is of Divine Origin</i> | |
| 1960 (Gallop) | 60% |
| 1981 (Gallop) | 48% |
| 1992 (Gallop) | 44% |
| <i>Belief in Hell</i> | |
| 1965 | 58% |
| 2000 | 50% |
| 2005 | 49% |
| <i>Historical Accuracy of Gospel Miracles</i> | |
| 1984 (Gallop) | 25% |
| 1993 (Gallop) | 21% |
| 1996 (Gallop) | 20% |
| <i>Belief in the Devil</i> | |
| 1960 | 30% |
| 1980 | 20% |
| 2010 | 20% |
| <i>Belief in the Virgin Birth as Historically True</i> | |
| 1984 (Gallop) | 35% |
| 1996 (Gallop) | 44% |
| 2008 (ComRes) | 34% |
| <i>Belief in Christ's (bodily) Resurrection</i> | |
| 1984 (Gallop) | 34% |
| 1996 (Gallop) | 33% |
| 2008 (ComRes) | 30% |
| <i>Belief in Divinity of Christ</i> | |
| 1955 | 70% |
| 1965 | 64% |
| 1980 | 52% |
| 1990 | 46% |
| 2000 | 38% |
| 2010 | 39% |

Source: BRIN and Field (2010).

In commenting on the decline of Christian beliefs in Britain for over a century Bruce states “It is noticeable that the bad bits disappeared first: belief in hell declines faster than belief in heaven”. This he partly attributes to broad decline of religious socializations processes:

This shift was partly due to the sense of “increased mastery over fate” produced by technology, improved health, increased longevity, and

increased prosperity. It is also partly driven by privatization. It seems plausible to suppose that, when people are free to select from a cultural repertoire, rather than being socialized into a complete world view, they will pick the bits they like best ... in the realm of superstition this takes the form of continuing with the positive while dropping the negative (Bruce, 2011, pp. 138-39).

The decline in the British populous subscribing to traditional Christian beliefs, and the selective tendency evident, clearly stretches beyond the time-scale period of registered by the two national census between 2001 and 2011 and corresponds to the long-term decline in Christian identification. One aspect is the privatization and pick 'n mix of religious beliefs that Bruce alludes to. This development at least partially pulls attention to the lack of transmission of a cogent religious belief order over recent generations. A further component of this picture is that relevant socializing agencies are failing in the function of adequately passing on a coherent belief system. Prima facie it would appear that efforts towards religious socialization by families of faith and the educational system are far less successful in recruiting members for churches and denominations than they once did, as are the Christian churches themselves. Each of these can now be considered in turn.

The Churches – Participation

Christian churches are perhaps the most obvious agents of religious socialization since, to one degree or another, they submerge the individual into a religious sub-culture which inculcates central beliefs of the faith. The evidence shows that by various indexes the threads which tie the population to such socialization are becoming increasingly stretched.

Even if church attendance is not regular, traditional rites of passage do provide some marker of religious allegiance. Utilising the Church of England as an indication, then even such traditional ceremonies are clearly on the decline and have been over a protracted period of time. In 1900 Anglican child baptisms, the symbol of Christian commitment by parents to bring up their children in the faith, constituted 65 percent of live births. By the year 2000 this figure was down to 20 percent and within a further ten years had plummeted to 12 percent. In 1900 the Church of England performed 65 percent of all marriages. This declined to a mere 24 percent in 2000 (with a slight increase in

2010). Churches in general and the Church of England in particular enjoyed almost a monopoly on conducting funerals deep into the second half of the twentieth century. In 2000 46 percent of deaths were still marked by an Anglican funeral, but only 37 percent in 2010. In 1900 85 percent of all marriages were conducted in church. By 2003 two-thirds of weddings were civil ceremonies. Putting things in perspective Bruce (2011, p. 66) suggests that this is entirely to be expected: baptisms, wedding and funerals remain relatively popular since they do not insist on commitment and conformity in the way that regular church going does.

Church attendance in Britain, which provides regular contact with fellow believers, shared ritual practices, and the dissemination of beliefs for all age groups have also declined to become the third lowest in the European Union. According to Religious Trends No 7 (2007-2008) published by the Christian Research organization, overall church attendance had diminished rapidly in terms of percentages and in real terms. In 1990 5,595,600 people (10 percent of the population), regularly attended church. By 2005 this number had reduced to 3,926,300, (6.7 percent of the population). By 2015, the level of church attendance is predicted to fall to 3,081,500 (5 percent of the population).

There are undoubtedly denominational differences in church attendance with some small growth or at least static areas. Affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church (a minority denomination in mainland Britain) has remained relatively stable, while support for the historic Free Churches (such as the Methodists, Baptists and United Reform churches) has dropped quite dramatically. On the “plus” side Pentecostal and charismatic churches are relatively vibrant, especially black minority churches (Afro Caribbean and West African (ESRC Society Today 2006)⁹. Bruce nonetheless argues that these minor areas of “church growth” fall far short of compensating for much larger areas of decline (Bruce, 2013)¹⁰.

⁹ An average of three new churches a week have been started since 1998 (Christian Research 2006) – half this growth is from ethnic minority churches, especially black churches but also Chinese, Croatian, Portuguese and Tamil churches. However, at the same time some three churches a week have closed. In 2005, 17 percent of churchgoers were from non-white ethnic groups, an increase from 12 percent in 1998. Pentecostal churches have replaced Methodist churches as the third largest Christian denomination and were the only denomination that grew in the period 1998-2005 (Brierley, 2006).

¹⁰ See Bruce and Glendinning (2010) who trace the longer decline of Christian churches in the context of secularization.

Clive Field (2012) suggests that future research at a denominational level should particularly concentrate on affiliation to the Church of England (CoE), which is not only the “national” church but has long been recognised as the weakest and most nominal of all Christian churches. In 1963, when Gallup furthered the question “what is your religious denomination?”, of 20 samples aggregating to more than 21,000 adults, 61 percent replied “Church of England” (presumably, Field suggests, the same was true of its sister Churches in Wales and Scotland). According to the 2011 BSA survey 20 percent of the population is affiliated with the CoE (compared to 40 percent in 1983) but 48 percent of this constituency never attended services; only 8 percent of people who identified with the Church attended church weekly. The CoE has produced its own attendance figures¹¹ and they concur with this decline: between 2002 and 2008, average Sunday attendance figures have diminished from 1,005,000 to 960,000. Membership has halved from 40 percent of the population in 1983 to just 20 percent in 2010. The demographic profile of churches, not just the CoE, are also reflecting the “greying” population in attendance (mirroring overall level of Christian identification explored above), with the Tear Fund survey of 2007 showing an increase in the average age of regular churchgoers – indicating that future church attendance decline is likely¹² 50 percent of church attendees were over the age of 55; 11 percent between 25-34; and 9 percent between 16-24.

Christianity and Moral Change

Something should also be said about changing attitudes in respect of conventional Christian morality, the positive virtues of religion, and its centrality in people’s lives generally, since these are an integral part of religious belief and provide some measurement of their impact. There is ample evidence to suggest that in Britain religion generally is not seen as the guiding force of moral life. The Humanist Society of Scotland commissioned a poll in 2011 which revealed that 62 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that “Human nature by itself gives us

¹¹ Church of England, *Church Statistics 2010/11* provide a more recent up-date, http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1477827/2010_11churchstatistics.pdf.

¹² “Churchgoing in the UK” published by Tearfund in April 2007.

an understanding of what is right and wrong”, against 27 percent who said “People need religious teachings in order to understand what is right and wrong”.

A 2006 Guardian/ICM poll found that 82 percent of those questioned saw religion as a cause of division and tension between people (in the same poll only 17 percent of those surveyed believed Britain was best described as a Christian country – a slightly different wording than that offered by the *Daily Telegraph* survey above). In 2004, the ICM poll of in ten countries examined levels of belief. In response to the question “A belief in God (higher power) makes for a better human being”, 43 percent participants in Britain disagreed with this statement, substantially more than any other nationality. Also in 2007 a survey by YouGov discovered that 42 percent of the participants believed religion had a harmful effect. 73 percent of respondents of the BSA 2010 survey expressed the view that “people with very strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others”.

In the 2007-08 Citizen Survey participants were requested to identify factors that they regarded as important to their identity from thirteen options. The family was top with 97 percent, followed by “interests” (87 percent), but religion ranked bottom at 48 percent (consistently by all age groups up to 65+, where it only moved up to eleventh). Even “Christians” ranked religion as thirteenth as a factor important to their identity

Evidence of surveys of the beneficial/non-beneficial impacts of religion on the political world also provide insights. The BSAS of 2010 showed that of 75 percent of Britons questioned believed their religious leaders should not influence their voting behaviour: 67 percent believed they should stay outside government decision making; 45 percent that their involvement would have a deleterious effect on policy; only 25 percent of people believed religious involvement would produce better policy (this view was held by 82 percent of those who classed themselves as non-religious, and 63 percent of those who considered themselves religious). 74 percent of the British public believed that it is wrong that CoE Bishops have an automatic right to a seat in the House of Lords, including 70 percent of Christians according to an ICM survey conducted in 2010 on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. Distrust of Christian clergy is also evident (table, 5).

Indeed, the role of the clergy in the transmission of Christian values also has to be considered. Bryan Wilson once commented on the decline of “the

traditional devices for shaping (human) nature and responsible moral material” (Wilson, 2003, p. 45).

Table 5. Trust of Clergy

| <i>Trust in Clergy to Tell the Truth (BRIN)</i> | |
|---|-----|
| 1983 | 85% |
| 2000 | 78% |
| 2005 | 75% |
| 2009 | 71% |
| 2013 | 66% |

Source: ICM (2010).

Wilson stressed the increased specificity of roles which came with the enhanced division of labour of advanced societies and how they called for the relinquishment of more generalised moral norms and made greater precise demands for technical competence and performance, a process that he designated “de-moralization”.

Wilson highlighted two significant diffuse social roles: the teacher and clergy. These were roles until recently that were defined primarily in moral terms. “Their tasks were socializing tasks” (2003, p. 45), but have been transformed in that the moral dimension of these roles are diminishing. To this might be augmented the “internal secularization” of the churches generally in that they are becoming increasingly liberal in their attitudes with Wilson stating that “Moral permissiveness is indignantly justified by teachers and even by priests, when the charge is made that they should hold themselves responsible for moral waywardness of the young” (2003, p. 45). Wilson concluded that governments have sought to establish new moral codes backed by penal sanctions to enforce racial and sexual equality (2003, p. 51). This “political correctness” in its various guises could never be effective in the process of socializing children in morals and manners (2003, p. 291).

However, cultural and moral change has occurred so quickly in Britain that even such “internal secularization” of the churches and increasingly liberal views of the clergy have not kept in step. Clive Field (2012) suggests that if large-scale disaffiliation of Christians has occurred between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, then it is probably again in the Church of England where some answers could be excavated. One issue is the question of to what extent defections are a manifestation of growing dissatisfaction

with the Church – a kind of “protest vote”. He points out that three opinion polls conducted in 2012 by YouGov show that a clear majority of the nation feels that the CoE is out-of-touch with modernizing trends, 76 percent saying as much in the most recent survey, following the General Synod’s rejection of women bishops.

Indeed, at a time of growing liberalism in public attitudes to a diversity issues, the CoE’s continuing difficulties over sexuality and gender do present a dilemma (Field 2012). Only 17 percent of respondents in the YouGov poll in 2005 thought that the CoE was “very important” in contributing to a sense of Britishness, while 23 percent thought it was “not important at all” (the CoE came 32nd out of 37 in a list of what people think defines ‘Britishness’). The 2011 report (p. 182) of the BSAS summed up by saying that what could be discerned was “a continued increase in liberal attitudes towards a range of issues such as abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia, as the influence of considerations grounded in religion declines”. The link between public values and Christian values are thus increasingly divergent.

Parental Socialization

It has long been proven that the largest predictor of a person’s religiosity is the religion of their parents when s/he was a child (for example, Bengtson et al., 2012). Not only does this imply primary religious socialization but that it is parents who provide the initial and often sustained contact with further agents of socialization. In short, it is parents’ early inputs into religious preferences and ties which help guide the individual’s interactions with others of faith and faith organizations.

Religious change is often described with cumulative figures on affiliation, practice and belief and this is suggested by the data above. Studies inform that secularization occurs because each cohort is less religious than the one before, and socialization in childhood and habits established in young adulthood are overwhelmingly responsible for religious decline. This has fairly recently been substantiated on an international comparative basis and studies within Britain.

Storm and Voas (2010) utilised data from the International Social Survey Programme to examine the extent and magnitude of religious decline at the level of the family, whether parental influence is greater in

more religious countries, and which particular variables impact the inter-generational diffusion of religious practice and whether these vary between different nations. They surmised that secularization mostly happens because many individuals are rather less religious than their parents, and relatively few are more religious. The findings suggest that patterns of transmission are significantly stable – parents are no more influential in religious countries than in non-religious countries, and there is no suggestion that they have lost influence over time.

Providing more evidence for this tendency in Britain was an Economic and Social Research Council funded study in 2005 which discovered that religious belief is declining faster than attendance at services in Britain and, in addition, that parents' beliefs, practices and affiliations have the most impact on children. Symbolising a concern around this tendency for Christian socialization, the Bible Society in Britain announced in 2014 that it had launched a five-day "Bible Bedtime Challenge" for parents as a result of an Easter poll showing that children regularly confuse stories in the Bible with fairy tales and fables¹³.

Bruce similarly calls upon a number of surveys to conjecture that the demise of childhood socialization is the key to understanding church attendance decline over recent decades (Bruce, 2011, p. 70). Firstly, a report by the Bible Society/Churches Together in England (1992) indicated that of "new Christians" four-fifths were derived from a Christian family background and three-quarters had attended church-related organizations as children. The second source of relevant data he points to are surveys of the age of defection. For instance, the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey asked those who had ever attended church regularly and no longer did when they stopped. The most popular ages were between 12 and 16. Well over half had stopped by the age of 20. While this is an age range (where the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood is usually accompanied by a decline in religious participation) increasingly exposed to alternative sources of socialization, there is clearly more to the picture.

Bruce (2011, 70-71) also points to an earlier work of Storm and Voas (2008) and that of Kelley and de Graaf (1997) which show that the ability

¹³ Children's Easter Knowledge posted on April 21, 2014 by Clive Field. Asked which symbol of Easter was most important to them, 55 percent of children opted for chocolate eggs, 20 percent the Christian cross. <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2014/easter-round-up/>.

of parents to pass on their spiritual capital is impacted by the general levels of “ambient religion” in the culture, by which is meant such aspects of the environment as religious socialization in schools, general cultural support of the churches, and the beliefs and attitudes of peers. Bruce suggests that while disaffiliation is substantially a generational effect in Britain, a main aspect of the explanation of any particular reduction in enrolment lies, not in the period where it is apparent, but a generation earlier.

Declining church members raises the question as to why parents did not endeavour more to ensure that their children followed the faith and were not encouraging them to join Christian youth organizations or attend Sunday School. Bruce sees this as a long term trend engendered by the disruptions initially fashioned by the World War II which disturbed patterns of interaction between the extended family, school, and the neighbourhood (Bruce, 2011, pp. 71-74). Bruce (2011, pp. 73-4) thus critiques Callum Brown’s (2001) view that the decline in the interest of religion was a generational and “period effect” of the impact of the liberalising/permissive culture of the 1960s.

Finally, in providing evidence of a localised study of the impact of the social milieu of adolescents, Vincett et al. (2012) report the findings of their qualitative research in Glasgow, Scotland. In examining transformations in religious identity and practices of young people (including Christians) aged 16-27, the researchers argue that young people’s religiosity has primarily been determined by large-scale social trends in the West, including secularization and pluralization. They argue that these influences have promoted a religiosity that de-emphasises propositional belief systems in favour of what they call “performance Christianity” which highlights religious action in the everyday or secular, combined with a discourse of authenticity and a pluralistic approach to religious institutions. Vincett et al. conclude that young people’s “performance Christianity” destabilises traditional ideas about belief and what it means to be Christian and that this development is likely to influence subsequent generations.

Religious Education

Christian religious education can occur at different levels including that of the traditional Sunday School run by churches, specialised

denominational schools, and religious studies taught in the context of state schools. All of these are worth considering with reference to the broad sphere of Christian socialization.

Sunday Schools have traditionally been the mainstay of religious socialization instigated by churches for the inculcation of religious beliefs. Christie Davies (2004) has traced the demise of Sunday Schools in England and Wales. At the peak of their influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such schools reached a large number of young people and a high proportion of their age cohorts. Not only was there high enrolment but it has been estimated that between two-thirds and three-quarters of pupils attended on any given Sunday (Gill, 1992, p. 96). The Sunday Schools at their height were a considerable force in not only inculcating Christian beliefs and moral values but created a devout church-attending population. By the year 2000 fewer than one tenth of children attended a Sunday School. Davies comments that as far as potential church-goers were concerned “An entire culture had been lost” (Davies, 2000, p. 45).

Perhaps surprisingly around one quarter of British primary and middle schools fall into the independent religious schools category (some 3 million pupils). These schools are required to adhere to specified national educational standards but to one degree or another are concerned with the inculcation of faith. They are predominantly Christian with the Church of England constituting by far the largest component¹⁴, claiming a distinctive Christian ethos but, as a sign of increasing pluralism, are inclusive and serve children who are of the Christian faith, those of other faiths, and those with no faith¹⁵. There is some evidence that in Britain pupils from Christian schools display stronger and more consistent attitudes toward religion and morality (Tritter, 2002). However, Vermeer (2009) has also pulled attention to the changing ethos of denominational schools, suggesting that their pedagogical task today is not so much to transmit faith but rather facilitate the formation of personal identity as a core aspect of contemporary broad socialization processes.

¹⁴ See Department for Education Annual Schools Census, BRIN, Religious Character of Schools, 2009, <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/#Schools2009>.

¹⁵ “A Christian Presence in Every Community”, The Church of England, <http://www.churchofengland.org/education/church-schools-academies.aspx>.

Furthermore, the British public clearly expresses a negative view on the merits of such schools. In an Ipsos Mori poll commissioned by the teachers union NASUWT and Unison in 2010, when asked which group is the most apt to run state-funded schools, only 4 percent of the population sampled answered “religious organizations”. When asked which group should not state-fund schools, 35 percent said religious organizations (the highest figure obtained by any organization listed).

In a YouGov/accord poll of 2009 57 percent believed that state funded schools that selected students according to their religion harm community cohesion; 72 percent agreed or strongly agreed that all schools should implement recruitment/employment policies that do not discriminate on grounds of religion or belief; 74 percent held the view that all state schools should teach an objective and balanced syllabus for education about a wide range of religious and non-religious beliefs. According to the BSA survey 2010, 42 percent of all those questioned indicated an objection to any form of faith school.

Religious Education (RE) is a compulsory subject in the state education system in England. Schools are required to teach a programme of religious studies according to local and national guidelines.¹⁶ The subject consists of the study of different religions (moving away from the Christian basis to reflect a multi-faith society), religious leaders, and other religious and moral themes. However, the curriculum is required to reflect the predominant place of Christianity in religious life and hence Christianity forms just over half of the content of the subject. Additionally, all schools are required by law to provide a daily act of collective worship, of which at least 51 percent must be Christian based (where previously it was exclusively so) over the course of the academic year.

How effective is this policy? Many pupils leave school with negligible knowledge or understanding of religion and beliefs, according to a report by Ofsted (the official schools inspectorate of educational standards in England) in 2013. The report stated that one of the weakest aspects of

¹⁶ Religious Education in England is mandated by the Education Act 1994 as amended by the Education Reform Act 1988 and the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. See Robert (2013) who overviews the design of the religion and religious education in England (briefly discuss the current systems in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). He suggests that secularization and pluriformizing of society seem to have given changed targets for religious education, putting specialist teachers of religious belief in knowing what the priorities are.

religious education is the teaching of Christianity, which is judged to be “inadequate” in one in three primary schools. Lessons in primary and secondary schools, were characterised by low standards, weak teaching, a confused sense of purpose about RE, and a lack of searching questions in examinations. In addition, the report found that the subject is being squeezed out of the curriculum by the government’s education reforms – partly because of its exclusion from the English Baccalaureate school league table which ranks schools on their performance in English, maths, science, languages and the humanities (history or geography). The report found that some schools had abandoned teaching religious education altogether or compressed it into lessons on personal, social and health education. One in four had reduced resources for the subject. It also revealed that in 250 schools and academies not a single pupil was entered for an accredited qualification in RE in 2011, and it cited an earlier report into the subject in 2010 which revealed many of the schools inspected “did not pay sufficient attention to the progressive and systematic investigation of the core beliefs of Christianity”¹⁷.

Ulster: The British Exception?

Before embarking on the discussion element of this paper focusing quite where the standing of Christian beliefs are in Britain and engaging with further recent theorising around the subject, it is necessary to say something about Britain’s unique religious “exceptionism”, Northern Ireland. This “exceptionalism” is identified by continued high levels of Christian religious affiliation and practice (compared to the rest of the country) related historically to Catholic and Protestant sectarian conflict where community differences are marked by religious boundaries. Brewer points out that Northern Ireland is significant for two closely related processes. Firstly, in retaining very high levels of religious identification and, secondly, a very violent form of civil unrest. The so-called “troubles” helped to maintain religious observance and identification by means of articulating ethno-religious identity in what seemed to most people, including many locals, to be an intra-Christian conflict. Brewer insists,

¹⁷ *Education News*, “Ofsted says religious education teaching 'not good enough’”, Retrieved May 28, 2014, at <http://tapir.pdc.no/pdf/NJRS/2012/2012-02-3.pdf>

however, that the conflict was not historically about theology or different interpretations of scripture. Rather, it was essentially about the legitimacy of the state and about equal access to the scarce resources such as housing distributed by the state. He concludes that the *substance* of the conflict was entirely political. Space permits only a small short synopsis of recent developments.

Using data from the last three national censuses in Northern Ireland, John Brewer (forthcoming) charts the relative strength of Christian religious identification against the trend to secularization elsewhere in Britain and observes that the decline has been uneven. Moreover, Brewer draws a contrast between secularization and liberalization – where Northern Ireland is seemingly experiencing a decline in Christian observance as well as liberalization in what Christians believe, rather than a large decline in identification as “Catholic” or “Protestant”. Nonetheless, he notes, on the evidence of religious change between 1991 and 2011 Northern Ireland censuses, that the contemporary churches (both Catholic and Protestant) are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy caused by their irrelevance to the process of conflict transformation, which is combining with several other social changes and trends to weaken people’s allegiance to them, most notably amongst the young, particularly mainstream Protestants. Brewer observes that Catholic families transmit their religion much more effectively than mainstream Protestants, meaning that Protestant congregations are more elderly and thus disproportionately affected by higher mortality rates. This helps explain the over-enumeration of Protestant school children in the school census, and poses a real trial for the Protestant denominations which are disproportionately losing their young.

Calling on other sources, Brewer points out that two-thirds of the adult population in Northern Ireland attended church at least weekly in the 1960s; by the 1990s this had decreased to two-fifths and to just below 40 percent by 2008 (Hayes & Dowd, 2010, p. 2). Brewer also notes that as part of the religious landscape in Northern Ireland it is also necessary to acknowledge that a good proportion of those of “no religion” ascribe to Christian beliefs. This is not an anomaly, he suggests, for the “no-religion” category contains two kinds of people: those who have rejected God and those who have merely rejected institutionalised religion. “Religious independents” may well have relinquished the institutional Church but not all on belief in God. Acclaiming this to be secularization thus seems problematic.

In earlier work Brewer described these changes to religious practice as liberalization rather than secularization (Brewer, 2003), and he advances this as a better description of contemporary patterns of identification and practice. By liberalization Brewer means the context in which there is the greater freedom to deconstruct monolithic ethno-religious identities and to experiment with non-traditional and non-communal religious practices. Liberalization tendencies are evident not only in less regular observance but also in what it is that Protestants and Catholics believe:

Table 6. Belief in Christian Tenets

| <i>Belief in Christian Tenets as a Percentage – Northern Ireland (by percentage)</i> | | | | |
|--|------|----------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| | None | Catholic | Mainstream Protestant | “Other Christian” |
| Life after death | 13.9 | 41.5 | 37.8 | 59 |
| Heaven | 12.3 | 52.5 | 47.1 | 60.2 |
| Hell | 9.5 | 39.9 | 38.6 | 57.8 |
| Miracles | 2.7 | 36 | 19.3 | 36.6 |

Source: Brewer (2003, 25)

Another dimension of a growing rejection of theological conservatism is the conviction that there is but one true religion (“denomination” or “world faith”), usually the one that a person subscribes to. Brewer’s survey of 2003 asked respondents “which of the following comes nearest to your views” and what might be called “liberal” and “conservative” responses were offered. The liberal response, “there are basic truths in many religions”, was agreed with by 77 percent of Catholics, 63.9 percent of mainstream Protestants and 45.2 percent of “other Christians”, while the conservative position, “there is truth only in one religion”, was agreed with by only 10.9 percent of Catholics, 17.3 percent of mainstream Protestants and 28.6 percent of “other Christians”.

Brewer concludes that the institutional Church is now facing a crisis of legitimacy that is affecting its moral authority in Northern Ireland, which is potentially very threatening given that rejection of institutional religion is one of the motivations of religious change. This crisis is rooted in several broad factors but includes a particular consideration: the conservative moral agenda of both the Irish Catholic Church and Protestant evangelical churches on issues such as gay marriage, women’s rights, divorce, and abortion generally runs counter to the trend to moral liberalism, especially

amongst the young, who are precisely the people that the churches are finding it hard to retain.

At the same time, Brewer highlights the distancing between religious and national identity. He points out that the 2011 census was the first to ask citizens about their sense of national (as distinct from religious) identity. There were some surprising results. Two-fifths (40 percent) had a British-only identity, a quarter (25 percent) an Irish-only identity, and just over a fifth (21 percent) held a Northern Irish-only identity. Significantly, only one quarter of Catholics designated themselves as Irish only. Thus, it is no longer feasible to equate a person's religious identification with their national identification in the province. The deconstruction of monolith religious communities and identities, reflected in religious liberalisation rather than secularisation, is impacting on political and constitutional issues.

Theorizing Change

The analysis above has been wide-ranging and necessarily so, given that the examination of socializing agencies bring us to the very heart of debates about believing (including believing in particular Christian tenets) and belonging. This paper has focus upon numerous surveys to suggest that traditional agencies of socialization are losing their influences in Britain (acknowledging a complex picture in Northern Ireland for specific historical reasons) and that, in turn, this potency results from a wider milieu of secularization or to use Bruce's terminology general levels of "ambient religion" in the wider cultural environment. Hence, there is a reciprocal relationship between wider cultural change and the potency of specialised agencies of religious socialization. The results over a period of time have been highlighted by several commentaries. Simon Green (1996, p. 380) spoke of the "strange death of religious Britain" which marked the end of religious confidence and fervour by the 1920s – a view succeeded by Callum Brown's (2001) *The Death of Christian Britain* in which he suggested that the entire Christian identity had been effaced. Brown's claim, however, might constitute an overstatement that fails to take into account numerous subtleties and these require some scrutiny.

The phrase "believing without belonging" was initially coined by Grace Davie (1990) and the notion has had considerable impact in sociological

circles. Focusing on Britain, she suggested that the population may be “unchurched” but it is not secular. Davie insists that belief remains high despite falling attendance and affiliation. She examines European Values Surveys and concludes that a high percentage of people believe still in God, heaven, sin and the soul and prayer (1994, pp. 74-92). Surveys of beliefs, then, are open to interpretation. Believing without belonging, put succinctly, signifies the “persistence of the sacred in contemporary society” (Davie 1994, pp. 94).

The “believing without belonging” thesis has been rigorously interrogated, notably by Crockett and Voas and also by Bruce who have produced some challenging evidence (as partially engaged with above) that points to the erosion not just of belonging but also of belief. Voas and Crockett (2005) analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) from people questioned in 1991/2 and then in 1999/2000. They looked at affiliation (whether people regard themselves as belonging to any particular religion), belief (when people say religion makes a difference to their life) and attendance. Affiliation was highest, attendance lowest and belief in the middle. Over the eight-year period they found fewer people affiliating, believing and attending. The decline of each seemed to occur at roughly the same rate. Yet it is not that individuals are becoming less religious as they get older (although this may occasionally happen). The main decline is instead across different age cohorts: each age cohort is less religious than the last¹⁸.

British Social Attitudes surveys over a longer period also find relative stability in belief as people age, but confirm that each younger age cohort has lower rates of belief. Age and cohort have the most influence over declining belief. Voas and Crockett argue that this is due to upbringing – socialization which relates mainly to the relationship between the religiosity of parents and children. Using BHPS data questioning young adults aged 16-29 they found that if children have two attending parents, 46 percent of them still attend. If they were brought up with one attending parent the likelihood of the child attending is 23 percent; with none attending it is only 3 percent, suggesting “that in Britain institutional religion now has a half-life of one generation, to borrow the terminology of

¹⁸ Similar findings are found elsewhere in Western Europe See de Graff and Grotenhuis (2008).

radioactive decay” (Voas & Crockett, 2005, p. 21). Voas and Crockett explain: “At least in Britain in recent decades, change has occurred because each generation has entered adulthood less religious than its predecessors” (Voas & Crockett, 2005, p. 24). It is these younger generations that are more secular and liberal in their attitudes.

There is perhaps however even a more fundamental question. The emphasis of this paper has been on surveys related to believing and how this connects with belonging and general identification with Christianity and how they are transmitted through particular traditional agencies of socialization. But is this really the place to look? Are beliefs much more abstract and less easy to define in any given population? It may well be then, that examining Christian allegiance in terms of specific “beliefs” and their decline via religious socialization misses the point: socialization is much more diffuse and unquantifiable. This possibility is exemplified by the recent prominence of cultural sociology. Hence, Roberto Cipriani (2003), developing the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), suggests that the presence of values of historic religions may be deeply rooted at the cultural level. These values are best comprehended as represent idealistic motives, key concepts, basic ideas, parameters of reference, and ideological inclinations which underpin the personal and interpersonal action of individuals and make them reasonable, socially relevant and sociologically classifiable. In short, for Cipriani, religious experience of religious practice (and belief) forms its own accord an ideal, value-laden habitus which tends to persist far beyond visible religiosity.

Cultural sociology also includes the analysis of the socializing processes through which normative behaviour is inculcated by popular modes of symbolic expression and aesthetic production. As part of such analysis Davie has more recently offered the concept of “Vicarious Religion” (Davie, 2006) – a perspective addressing the nature of Christian institutional allegiance apparent in the prevailing conditions of late-modernity. This, she argues, can aid resolving a number of contemporary paradoxes, particularly concerning the widening gulf between institutional affiliation and institutional participation. In short, vicarious religion denotes religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand but approve of what the minority is doing.

Day (forthcoming) takes vicarious religion as the point of departure in suggesting that the idea that a religious institution is an ideal to which

people subscribe and aspire (rather than a physical place or fixed point of reference) whose function is to establish and nourish a particular social order. While it is evidently the case that currently fewer people regularly attend church than they did fifty years ago in Britain, widespread evidence suggests the majority continue to hold fast to the premise that the Christian institution provides societal cohesion and order. Such adherence takes several forms, from selecting a Christian identity on surveys and censuses, to participating in public discourse about culture and other social norms, to supporting the Church “vicariously”. While Day moves the focus to institutional affiliation, she also brings in the matter of beliefs and in doing so moves the spotlight, attempting to show that these actions are underpinned by anthropocentric beliefs about human and other-than-human belonging, rather than to beliefs in specific theocentric doctrines and dispositions.

Such notions, in turn, have been rigorously scrutinised with reference to empirical evidence. Bruce and Voas (2010) also offer a critique of Davie’s concept of “vicarious religion”. They agree that examples of the phenomenon can be found, but they question whether popular sympathy for religion provides evidence for this conjecture. Bruce and Voas review the various illustrations provided by Davie and offer alternative readings that they see as more plausible. They also argue that the trajectory of change in marginal religious involvement seriously weakens its ability to diminish the evidence of secularization. Moreover, they point to the fact that the Christian churches have considerably declined in popularity, power, and prestige over the twentieth century in Britain.¹⁹

Summary

The discussion in the previous section above raises a number of crucial

¹⁹ See also Bruce (2013) where he discusses how secularization paradigm has gone from take-for-granted orthodoxy to passé intellectual dead-end and it is now common to talk of post-secular Europe and de-secularization. This paper presents a very large body of data to demonstrate that despite the change in intellectual fashion, secularization continues apace in Britain. Religion, Bruce argues, has become more contentious; it has not become more popular.

and contrasting viewpoints which interpret the evidence differentially. But the central matters of the socialization of Christian beliefs remain. As a whole, this paper has attempted to produce an overview of the evidence pointing towards the erosion of Christian beliefs in Britain. This is no easy enterprise. Bruce, identifies beliefs as a core measurement of secularizing tendencies, but is forced to concede religious belief is a “nebulous matter” – not easy to define and no less easy to quantify. Nonetheless, specific Christian beliefs and the morality they may instil has undoubtedly declined considerably as evidence by numerous surveys. In the light of these developments this paper has attempted to identify the reducing impact of conventional patterns of religious socialization, most obviously the Christian churches but not exclusively so since their fate is tied up with the secular nature of other socialization agencies and the wider secular milieu. This has been a long term trend, yet one that has increased in rate and potency in recent years as evident in the Christian identification of younger age cohorts of which a sizeable majority neither believe nor belong.

The broader belief that Britain is a Christian country and that Christianity is part of national identity has also weakened (Bruce 2001, 2003, 2009), although this reduction in sentiment is uneven. It might be said that Britain remains a nation which has a Christian heritage and retains Christian cultural motifs. It may have Christian institutions to which the attitude of the population at large might be described as “vicarious”, but this in turn, may be viewed as some kind of cultural remnant in a largely post-Christian environment.

This paper commenced by referring to public debates around the significance of Christianity in Britain. It is an on-going and contentious one. Frank Field (2012) has called attention to the relevance of the British Humanist Association’s 2011 census campaign that employed the slogan of “If you’re not religious, for God’s sake say so” which the organization sought to put on its advertising. This seemingly sought to persuade the British public to abandon their “cultural Christianity” and to embrace “no religion” on their census returns. Something of a foray followed (a previous BHA campaign in 2009, under the banner of “There is probably no god, now stop worrying and enjoy your life”, had previously proved controversial). The BHA was informed that its slogan was likely to cause widespread and serious offence and had to be modified for advertising purposes. Companies owning advertising space in railway stations refused to display three different BHA census posters, thereby depriving the

organization of a major propaganda opportunity. BHA posters on 200 buses in London and six other cities had to be rephrased to read (less provocatively): “Not religious? In this year’s census, say so”, a modification which presumably would not to disturb public sensibilities or at least those of a section of the British public.

We can conclude by rejoining the debate initiated three years later over the relevance of Christianity in Britain initiated by the British Prime Minister David Cameron. To this debate, former archbishop, Rowan Williams, who remains a member of the House of Lords, furthered his view that Britain’s “cultural memory” was “quite strongly Christian” and that parents, peers, educational institutions tell them so ... It’s a matter of defining terms. A Christian country as a nation of believers? No. A Christian country in the sense of still being very much saturated by this vision of the world and shaped by it? Yes.” Williams predicted that there may be “a further shrinkage of awareness and commitment” as a result of a lack of knowledge about Britain’s Christian legacy among younger generations, under the age of 45”. If this conjecture is correct, then it is clear that many Britons now believe vaguely.

The term “vaguely” is not used here to denote some kind of conceptual sociological tool. It is merely utilised to suggest a “collective amnesia” in relation to perceptions and understandings of religious tradition as related to Hervieu-Léger’s analysis to the loss of a religious “memory” across the generations. The term signifies, further, an understanding of Christianity that is subject to what Dobbelaere might characterise as an “idiosyncratic” and “heterogeneous” form of religion as individuals undermine a monolithic world view and forge their own religiosities through “compositions”, “patchworks” and “bricolages” determined by subjective orientations rather than communal pressures. Believing “vaguely” plausibly also refers to a declining perceived connectivity between Christianity and national identity. When understood in these broad modes, it might be suggested that younger and forthcoming generations are likely to believe more vaguely and even perhaps less vicariously.

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