



The Nonreligious

Lois Lee
March 2018

Religion Media Centre

Collaboration House, 77-79 Charlotte Street, London W1T 4LP |
info@religionmediacentre.org.uk
Charity registration number: 1169562



Who are the nonreligious?

- The *nonreligious* is a general term with several meanings and uses. When it is used to describe people or populations, it usually indicates those with *nonreligious identities*, ie those who identify themselves as having ‘no religion’ or as being ‘nonreligious’.
- The *religiously unaffiliated* is a related term, used to describe people who do not identify with religion, a slightly broader category than those who positively identify as being not religious – a subtle distinction that is often lost in translation, but can make a notable difference to the figures. (Eg in the last census for England and Wales, 25% identified as nonreligious (*nonreligious identity*), while a total of 32% did not identify with a religion (*religiously unaffiliated*.)
- The phrase *religious nones* can refer to nonreligious identity or the religiously unaffiliated, but usually the latter.
- *Atheism* and *nonreligion* are sometimes used as synonyms, but those who identify as nonreligious are not necessarily atheist or agnostic in their beliefs. The majority are, but some are theistic or hold similar beliefs (just as some people with religious identities are atheist or agnostic).

Nonreligious population size and change

UK

- In the UK, the number of people identifying as nonreligious has risen steadily, especially since the 1960s, but building on a longer history of ‘nonreligionisation’ of British identities.
- In 1993, nonreligious identifications overtook Anglican ones to become the most popular ‘religious’ self-description of those offered by the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. Nonreligious identifications became an absolute majority for the first time in 2010, and around 50% have consistently described themselves as having no religion since then.
- British Social Attitudes survey data is corroborated by other data,¹ but recent censuses have found much lower levels of nonreligious identification – only a quarter of the population in 2011, compared with half the population in the BSA. This reflects differences in how the question is asked.

¹ E.g. <http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/WFD-No-Religion.pdf>

- Each generation is more nonreligious than the last, and people maintain their nonreligious identities as they age. Half of children brought up by religious parents will go on to identify as religious, whereas almost all children of nonreligious parents will go on to identify as nonreligious.²

Worldwide

- The growth of nonreligion in the UK reflects global trends: the number of people identifying as nonreligious is large and growing. People are more likely to convert to a nonreligious identification in their lifetimes than they are to convert to any other religious identity. Paradoxically, the nonreligious represent a *decreasing* share of the global because nonreligious populations have lower-than-average birth rates.³
- Although nonreligion is often associated with Europe, three-quarters of the global nonreligious population live in the Asia Pacific region, including 64% in China alone.⁴
- Around the world (including the UK) there is substantial regional variation in the distribution of nonreligious people.

Nonreligious population, demographics

- Historically, the nonreligious have had a distinctive demographic profile: the nonreligious were more likely to be young, male, and well-educated. In the West, they also tended to be white.

However:

- Several of these demographic effects can disappear over time. This happens when nonreligious populations become so large that they inevitably come to resemble the characteristics of the general population more and more. Eg in the UK, high levels of education no longer correlate with nonreligious identity, especially among younger generations. Men and women are now equally likely to describe themselves as nonreligious among under the 35s.⁵

² Source: Voas, David and Alistair Crockett. 2005. Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging. *Sociology*. 39 (1): 11

³ Source: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/07/why-people-with-no-religion-are-projected-to-decline-as-a-share-of-the-worlds-population/>

⁴ Source: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/07/why-people-with-no-religion-are-projected-to-decline-as-a-share-of-the-worlds-population/>

⁵ Source: <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2017-may-no-religion-report.pdf>

- Demographic effects should not be overstated. Eg although men are more likely than women to identify as nonreligious, women are well represented within nonreligious populations. Over the past decade, the British Social Attitudes survey shows that 44%-49% of those saying they have no religion are women (compared with 51%-56% who are male). In broadly half of nonreligious people identify as female; this means that close to a quarter of all British adults are nonreligious women.

Nonreligious identity and beliefs

- Identifying as not religious is not the same thing as not believing in God. In the UK, only 38% of those who identify as nonreligious say they do not believe in God, though a further 27% take the strong agnostic view that it is impossible for humans to know about the existence of God. Alongside this, 65% of ‘unbelievers’, a significant minority (10%), say they tend to believe in God and 16% say they believe in some kind of higher power.
- In the US, the majority of those identifying as nonreligious believe in God. Since changes in identification are often observed prior to changes in belief, this may change as the minority nonreligious population continues to grow.
- Since people with religious identities do not consistently believe in God, these apparent inconsistencies between nonreligious identity and belief should not be seen as unique to the nonreligious.

The beliefs and worldviews of nonreligious people

- In the UK, where the majority of nonreligious people are atheists or agnostics, a minority have beliefs and practices associated with religion, such as belief in the afterlife or the use of prayer.⁶ However, nonreligious people are less likely than religious people to have these beliefs and practices.⁷
- It is increasingly recognised that people with nonreligious identities have existential beliefs about the nature and meaning of life. These existential beliefs are often referred to as *nonreligious worldviews*.

⁶ Source: http://www.comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Tearfund_Prayer-Survey_all-respondents.pdf

⁷ Source: http://www.comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Tearfund_Prayer-Survey_all-respondents.pdf

- Because nonreligious worldviews are not usually associated with large organisations and institutions as religious worldviews have often been, nonreligious worldviews can be hard to describe, identify or quantify (though this is changing).
- ‘Humanism’ – associated with humanist associations such as Humanists UK – is the notable exception to this, though humanist worldviews are probably more widespread than humanist identification would suggest.
- In general, the nonreligious worldviews remain largely undocumented and probably include,
 - humanist worldviews
 - non-human-centred forms of materialism, associated with post-humanist ideas and some environmentalist movements
 - a worldview which emphasises / celebrates the limits of human knowledge, referred to variously as agnosticism, post-humanism, post-modernism, and
 - alternative spirituality
- Nonreligious worldviews entail new practices as well as beliefs. Eg while nonreligious people are less likely to marry than other religious groups, marriage remains common but new ceremonies are emerging. Civil ceremonies are most popular, overtaking religious weddings in popularity in 1977. There is also growing interest in humanist ceremonies.

Resources – websites

- Nonreligion & Secularity Research Network, <https://nsrn.net/>
- Understanding Unbelief, <https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/>
- Oxford Dictionary of Atheism, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191816819.001.0001/acref-9780191816819>; important definitions are freely available at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/resources/concepts/glossary>
- British Religion in Numbers, <http://www.brin.ac.uk>
- Religion and the Public Sphere, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionpublicsphere>