

Britain's religion and belief landscape

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Abstract

An overview of the scale and multi-dimensional nature of the current change in British religious belief, belonging and identity with a concluding reflection from a humanist perspective.

Keywords

change, Christianity, Humanism, Islam, no-belief, religious belief, religious identity, secularism

Before looking at the data, it is important to be aware of what is being measured here. ‘Religion or belief’ is an umbrella term used in equalities legislation and elsewhere for a phenomenon with at least three dimensions: belief; belonging or identify; and behaviour, including practice. Each of these can be analysed separately. In general, many more people have a sense of identity or belonging to a particular ‘religion or belief’ world view than hold the beliefs that are associated with it, or who practise it in a conventional sense.

An analysis provided via *British Religion in Numbers*¹ of the detailed data on religion and belief provided by the 2008 British Social Attitudes Survey showed that the percentage of those who said that they were ‘uncertain or with no belief in God’ included 41 per cent identifying as Jews, 35 per cent as Anglicans, 17 per cent as Catholics and 8 per cent as Muslims.

Likewise, the Church of England’s *Statistics for Mission 2018*² indicate that its ‘Worshipping Community’, the key measure of practice, is only 2 per cent of the population, or around one in six of those who identify as Anglicans.

Bearing in mind that religions and other defined world views such as Humanism are characterized by a combination of belonging, belief and behaviour, let us now turn to the data.

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Key data

The most solid set of data we have on religion and belief in Britain is from NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA), which has been conducted annually since 1983. The way questions are asked in this area is important. The key BSA question is a two-step enquiry about belonging/identity. First: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' If the respondent says 'Yes', then there is a follow-up question asking which one.

The importance of getting the question right is illustrated by comparing the BSA data with the Census. Unlike the BSA, which is annual, sample-based and asks respondents every question, the Census is nationwide, conducted every ten years, and has asked about religion twice, in 2001 and 2011. Unfortunately, it uses an optional, 'leading' one-step question, 'What is your religion?', which presupposes that you have one. The result is that, compared with other sources, it greatly overstates 'Christian' and understates 'no religion'. In 2011, the Census gave 59 per cent 'Christian' and 25 per cent 'no religion', compared with 47 per cent and 46 per cent respectively in the BSA. The main benefit of the Census is that it enables analysis down to small local areas, but it provides no long-term trends or any breakdown among Christian denominations.

In the results from the BSA from 1983 to 2018, there are year-to-year variations, reflecting the fact that the survey is sample-based, but the trends are clear. Those with no religious identity now comprise over 50 per cent of the population. The growth in that segment is mirrored by the dramatic decline in the Church of England, from 40 per cent in 1983 to below 14 per cent now. This is probably driven by a combination of a general move away from religion, hitting the main Church hard, and the increase in social acceptability in 2018 of denying a religious identity as compared with 1983. But, in historical terms, Anglicanism is falling off a cliff.

By contrast, the proportion of Catholics has declined far more slowly. This is not because of lack of attrition, but largely because immigration, notably from Poland, has compensated for the losses. That also makes the Catholic population on average younger than the Anglicans.

Apart from 'no religion', there are two groups whose numbers are increasing. The British Muslim population is young and rising. But contrary to the perceptions of many, the actual number of British Muslims remains at around 5 per cent. The Pew Research Center forecasts that it will reach 11 per cent by 2050.³ These figures are far lower than many people's perceptions: according to the Ipsos MORI 'Perils of Perception Survey 2018',⁴ the average perceived size of the current Muslim population is 17 per cent – more than three times too high.

Islam is by far the largest non-Christian faith: the BSA data for 2013–15 show Islam/Muslim at 4.4 per cent, Hindu 1.7 per cent, Sikh 0.8 per cent and Jewish 0.4 per cent.

The other group showing an increase is 'Christian: no denomination', which, at 13 per cent in 2018, is the same as the Anglican figure. This appears to be a mix of two components: those who retain a generalized Christian identity but do not align

with any particular denomination, and those who are ‘non-denominational Christians’: that is, they belong to independent churches or new churches, which are often broadly Evangelical or Pentecostal in character. This is supported by ‘Faith Survey’ data⁵ from the reputable Brierley Consultancy, which shows increases in Pentecostal and new churches – such as Newfrontiers and Vineyard Churches – as well as Lutherans and Orthodox churches, notably the Romanian Patriarchate. Much of this growth is associated with immigration.

Other established Christian denominations have declined substantially.

Future trends

These are the past trends. The question, then, is: where are they going in the future? Responses to the BSA question ‘Which religion or denomination do you consider yourself as belonging to?’ suggest the following:

- ‘No religion’ will continue to rise. According to BSA data released for 2015–17, over 60 per cent of under-35s fall into this category, including nearly 70 per cent of 15–24-year-olds. It includes a clear majority of parents of school-age children. The BSA review on religion published in 2019 concludes that ‘religious decline in Britain is generational... institutional religion in Britain now has a half-life of one generation’.⁶
- Identifying with the Church of England is likely to continue in its precipitous decline: according to the 2019 BSA report, only 1 per cent of the under-25s identify with it, compared with 33 per cent of the 75 and overs.
- The number of people identifying as Catholics, currently at around 7%, is also likely to decline, but more slowly.
- The Christians of ‘no denomination’ seem likely to plateau at around 14 per cent.
- The Muslim/Islam population will continue to grow.

These forecasts ignore the impact of changes in immigration or in patterns of switching from one category to another either by individuals or between generations.

The ‘stickiness’ of faith from one generation to the next varies considerably, with non-Christian religions on average ‘stickier’ than Christianity: that is, there is less attrition from one generation to the next. Once a family has become non-religious, few of the next generation adopt a faith themselves. In other words, ‘no religion’ is on average much ‘stickier’ than any of these high-level faith categories.

As Stephen Bullivant says in the Catholic Research Forum report *Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales*, it can be derived from these data that ‘for every one Catholic convert in England and Wales, ten cradle Catholics no longer identify as Catholics. For every one convert to Anglicanism, twelve cradle Anglicans now no longer identify as Anglicans.’⁷

Regional variations

Below the level of these national data are regional and local variations. London is both the ‘most religious’ region and – just – the least Christian, and Wales the least religious, closely followed by Scotland and the North-East.

According to Census data – the only source we have at the local level – the least religious (i.e. the highest ‘no religion’) local authority area in England is Norwich, closely followed by Cambridge and Brighton, while the most religious (i.e. lowest ‘no religion’) is the London borough of Newham, largely due to its high Muslim and Hindu populations (32 per cent and 9 per cent respectively in 2011).

British Christianity

British Christianity is changing in character. According to the Brierley Consultancy, the only types of churches whose membership grew between 2008 and 2013, and are expected to continue to grow, were Pentecostals, Orthodox and new churches. The Orthodox growth is from a low base, driven by immigration, notably from Romania. Pentecostalism is both home-grown and immigration-based. The result is Brierley’s forecast for 2022: Roman Catholic 25 per cent, Anglican 21 per cent, Presbyterian 11 per cent, Orthodox 11 per cent, Pentecostal 9 per cent and other churches 23 per cent.

Not only are the numbers of people identifying with non-mainstream, Pentecostal/Evangelical churches growing, but, as Linda Woodhead and Greg Smith say in their LSE blog post ‘How Anglicans tipped the Brexit vote’:

Evangelicalism is increasingly influential amongst bishops and senior clergy in the Church of England, but appeals to only a minority of the laity. Over time, as older, more traditional Anglicans die out and the CofE continues its precipitous decline, that balance may change. In the process the CofE [will shift] from a moderate religion of the people to a more sectarian religion for an evangelical minority.⁸

If they are right, there will not be much non-Evangelical Protestantism left.

As the Church of England is overtaken by a multiplicity of independent churches, the Roman Catholic Church is likely to emerge as the largest Christian denomination. In a 2015 article for the *Catholic Herald* titled ‘What English Catholicism will look like in 2115’, Dominic Selwood speculated that ‘[f]or the first time since the reign of King Henry VIII, [in 2115] the Catholic Church will again be the largest Christian denomination in England’.⁹ On the basis of current trends, he will only have to wait till the early 2020s for that to happen.

On the other hand, the Catholic Church currently faces major challenges worldwide, particularly in the wake of the various clerical abuse scandals. It is not yet clear whether Catholics’ personal religious identity will hold, through family influence, despite any disillusionment with the Church as an institution, and a lack of adherence to key tenets of Church-defined Catholicism. A large-scale return of Polish Catholics from the UK to Poland would also have a substantial impact.

British Islam

After Christianity, the largest religion in Britain is Islam. Britain has one of the most ethnically diverse Muslim populations. While roughly half are ethnically from Pakistan/Bangladesh, the other half are from all over the world, including some ‘White British’ converts.

In terms of types of Islam, both globally and in Britain, the great majority of Muslims are Sunnis, with Shias a significant minority. But care is needed not to ‘read across’ to Islam the denominational structures of Christianity. Islam is essentially a non-institutional faith. There are no ‘churches’ and no priests as intermediaries between Muslims and God, although scholars play an important role as interpreters of Scripture, and Shia ‘Twelvers’ often follow a particular imam. Sunnis tend to follow one of four schools of thought (*madhhab*), but these are not institutionalized and there are divisions within them. Sufis have a more mystical perspective. Then there are different national and ethnic overlays. It is hugely complex.

Of the main Sunni sects seen in the UK, the Deobandis – named after a town in northern India – were a reaction to the Indian Mutiny/First War of Independence (1857). They are conservative and anti-colonial and their founders rejected Sufi practices, such as celebrating Muhammad’s birthday. Like traditional Sufis, the Bareilvis follow a more mystical form of Islam, reflecting that previously prevailing in the Indian subcontinent, and were a reaction to the Deobandis. Although often seen as less conservative than the Deobandis, many take a very strong position on anything they view as defamation of the Prophet. The Salafis are revivalists, seeking to emulate the approach followed under the first three generations of Sunni Muslims after Muhammad, with roots in the eighteenth-century Wahhabi movement in what is now Saudi Arabia. They fall into three categories: quietists, activists, and the small fringe of violent jihadis.

Overlaid on these categories are twentieth-century global Islamist/political movements established in reaction to modernity and colonialism. These include the ‘Islamic Movement’, founded by Abdul A’la Maududi in Pakistan; the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan), founded by Sayyid Qutb in Egypt; and Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), founded by Sheikh Taqiuddin al-Nabhani in Palestine. All of these are present to differing, and changing, degrees in Britain.

The 2017 ‘Muslims in Britain’ analysis¹⁰ shows the dominant sects or ‘themes’ of the approximately 2,000 mosques and active prayer rooms in the UK (see Figure 1). It comes with a health warning: unlike Christian denominations, it cannot be assumed that everyone who attends a mosque with a particular theme necessarily follows it.

Among the smaller groups are the Ahmadiyya, founded in the nineteenth century and seen as heretical by many others, as their founder is regarded as breaking the ‘Muhammad was the Final Prophet’ rule. There are also new structures, such as the ‘Inclusive Mosque Initiative’, an attempt to bridge all the divisions, with women playing leading roles and LGBT people fully accepted.

While the great majority of British Muslims simply want to get on with normal life, there is a significant split among activists. On the one hand, there are

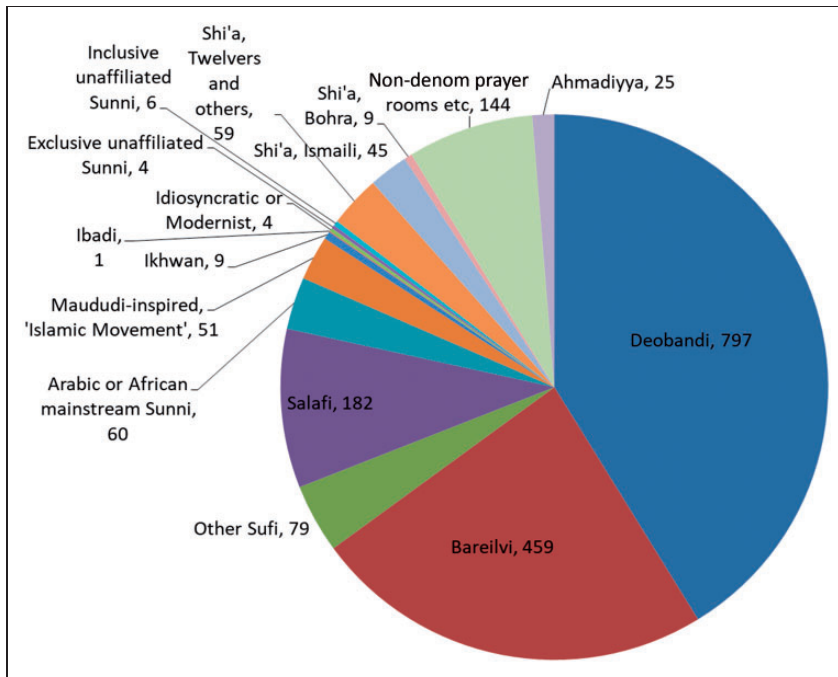


Figure 1. Number of mosques by 'theme' in 2017.

Source: Based on data from the directory of mosques and Muslim places of worship in the UK at <<http://www.muslimsinbritain.org/>>.

progressives who emphasize human rights, democracy and the integration of British Islam as a constructive element of wider society, and scholars who argue for a theologically sound basis for a British Islam fit for the twenty-first century. On the other hand are those who can be broadly categorized as 'Salafi Islamists', who advocate the form of political, Salafi-style religious conservatism that has grown in recent years in many other countries.

In common with all faith groups, British Islam is dynamic, and there are differences between individuals, generations, education levels, geography, ethnicity and types of Islam. There is also a growing cohort of ex-Muslims, both overt and covert.

Unlike Christianity, where the key trends seem reasonably clear, the future of British Islam is hard to predict, other than the virtual certainty of growth.

The non-religious

Those who do not identify with any religion now comprise over 50 per cent of the population, but it is only relatively recently that their 'non-religious world views' have been studied to a significant degree. The Nonreligion and Secularity Research

Network (NSRN), an international, interdisciplinary network of researchers, was founded in 2008. The (unfortunately named) ‘Understanding Unbelief’ project is a large, international research study to ‘advance the scientific understanding of atheism and other forms of so-called “unbelief” around the world’, headed by Dr Lois Lee at the University of Kent. It published interim findings¹¹ for six countries, including the UK, in 2019. This quantitative study uses populations based not on belonging or identity – the key dimension for the BSA – but on belief: those who said they ‘don’t believe in God’ or ‘don’t know whether there is a God, and don’t believe there is any way to find out’. Atheists and agnostics. The UK sample included 15 per cent who identified as Christians. Not surprisingly, it showed that atheists, and to a lesser extent agnostics, are far less likely than the general population to believe in things like reincarnation, astrology, or people with mystical powers. But just over a quarter of atheists said that they believed that ‘significant events are “meant to be”’ and in ‘underlying forces of good and evil’. Just under 30 per cent had a purely ‘naturalistic’ world view, probably reflecting the fact that everyone is influenced by their culture – even the most naturalistic atheist may brush aside a moment of doubt before walking under a ladder. Across a number of other points, there was little difference between the views of atheists/agnostics and those of the general population. In particular, the study reported ‘remarkably high agreement...concerning the values most important for “finding meaning in the world and your own life”’. Family, freedom, compassion and truth featured in the top five for both categories in the UK sample. One point the analysis clearly illustrates is that ‘unbelief’ is the wrong term for this population. Humanists and other atheists have beliefs and values, just not religious ones.

A YouGov poll for Humanists UK in 2017 indicates that roughly half of those identifying as non-religious have a broadly humanist world view, irrespective of whether they use that term. This is based on the percentage of people who both said that they did not belong to a particular religion and agreed with three statements:

1. Science and evidence provide the best way to understand the universe.
2. What is right and wrong depends on the effects on people and the consequences for society and the world.
3. Our empathy and compassion give us an understanding of what is right and wrong.

Roughly half the non-religious agreed with all three statements (as did around a quarter of people who identified with a religion), suggesting that approximately a quarter of the total population holds a broadly humanist world view.

In terms of belief, data from a YouGov/*Times* survey in 2015 indicated that 63 per cent of those who identify as non-religious also ‘do not believe in any sort of God or higher spiritual power’. Given that BSA data indicate that around 70 per cent of 15–24-year-olds identify as non-religious, this suggests that atheists are likely to be on the cusp of being an absolute majority in this age group.

Increasing religiosity

In terms of behaviour, as the 2013 YouGov Westminster Faith Debates data showed, British Muslims are, on average, more religiously observant (and believing) than Catholics, and Catholics more than Anglicans. Although not included, it can probably be assumed that non-denominational, Pentecostal/Evangelical Christians also tend to be more devout than the average Anglican. So while ‘religion’ is shrinking overall, the forms of it that are growing, or declining more slowly, increasingly comprise people for whom their faith is a more significant part of their lives.

What could 2040 look like?

Taking the simplistic approach that the position of people aged 20–30 in 2013–15¹² is a guide to the landscape we will see in 2040, the picture may be something like the one shown in Figure 2.

In common with most forecasts, this is likely to be wrong. But it provides a rough indication. We also know that virtually every segment here contains multiple subdivisions of belief and world view, almost down to the level of the individual.

In historical terms, this situation is unprecedented.

Challenges and responses

Both the current and future situation present a number of challenges, including polarization, conflicting values, lack of social cohesion, uninformed generalizations

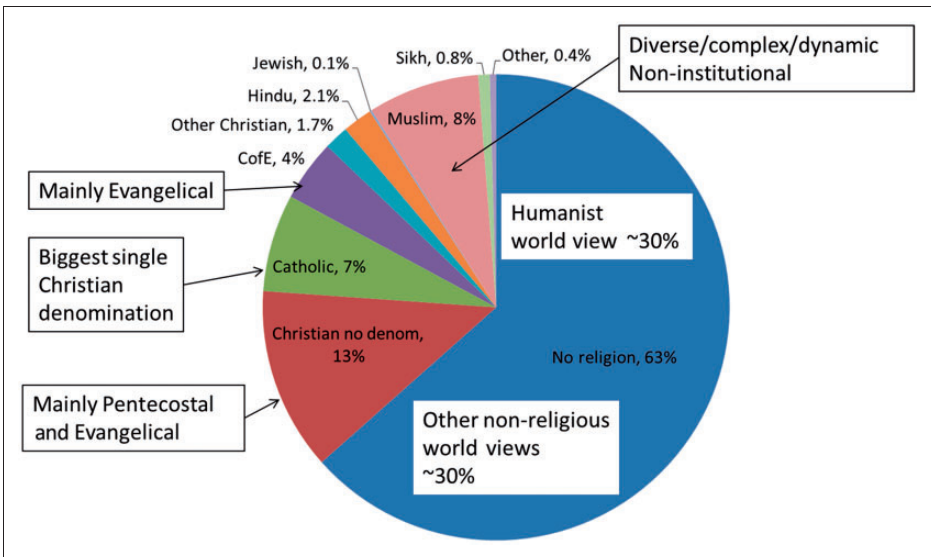


Figure 2. How the British religion and belief landscape might look in 2040.

about ‘the other’, religious institutions defending outdated privileges, loss of local community and charitable activity, and threats to shared cultural heritage, including historic buildings.

From my humanist perspective, three responses should help: secularism; dialogue and engagement; and education.

*Secularism*¹³

Andrew Copson’s 2017 book *Secularism: politics, religion, and freedom* defines secularism using three principles from the work of French historian and sociologist of secularism Jean Baubérot:

1. ‘Separation of religious institutions from the institutions of state, and no domination of the political sphere by religious institutions.’
2. ‘Freedom of thought, conscience and religion for all, with everyone free to change their beliefs, and manifest their beliefs, within the limits of public order and the rights of others.’
3. ‘No state discrimination against anyone on the grounds of their religion or non-religious world view, with everyone receiving equal treatment on these grounds.’¹⁴

This seems the only fair basis for our plural society. We already have freedom of religion or belief and equality enshrined in law, if not always in practice. But the head of state is still the head of the Church of England, an institution with which less than 5 per cent of people under 35 identify. Uniquely among democratic countries, 26 seats in the legislature (the House of Lords) are reserved for Church of England bishops. Christianity remains embedded in public life, from Remembrance ceremonies to prayers in parliament. More significantly, a large – and still growing – number of state-funded schools are run by religious organizations, principally the Church of England and the Catholic Church, but now also Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu groups. If there is competition for places, these state schools are legally allowed to discriminate against children on the basis of their parents’ faith, or lack of it, with resultant social selection. These things need to change.

But at the same time, freedom of religion or belief must be strongly defended, provided the rights of others are not eroded. Religious people must be as free as anyone to seek public office and argue from their convictions, and the Archbishop of Canterbury must be able to argue for political change on the basis of his faith, and as leader of his organization. But their arguments should be given the same weight in the public square as anyone else’s.

The application of the three principles of secularism would not avoid future disputes about the role of religion and belief in national life. But it would minimize them and provide the fairest foundation on which to build a peaceful, plural society.

Dialogue and engagement

Living with Difference, the 2015 report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (chaired by Baroness Butler-Sloss), made a number of recommendations in response to the changes in the landscape highlighted here. The report included a chapter devoted to dialogue, with the recommendation that: ‘It should be a high priority, not only for interfaith organisations but also for all religion and belief groups, educational institutions, public bodies and voluntary organisations, to promote opportunities for encounter and dialogue.’¹⁵

There is an important distinction between dialogue and traditional debate. In a normal debate, the aim is to win or beat one’s opponent or to convince them they are wrong. In dialogue, the aim is to listen to each other respectfully to gain mutual understanding, and there is no winner or loser, which means understanding differences as well as common ground.

In practice, humanists are involved in at least five categories of dialogue. In all cases a basic dialogue skill set is necessary to make the most of the opportunities:

- ‘Interfaith dialogue’ and participative action via established organizations, often local forums affiliated to the semi-official Inter Faith Network for the UK, as well as other organizations, notably the Faith & Belief Forum (formerly Three Faiths Forum or 3FF).
- Public dialogue events, often organized jointly with others, and sometimes with titles suggesting debate, but conducted in a ‘dialogic’ manner. Examples include a 2017 event organized jointly between Humanists UK (then the BHA), New Horizons in British Islam and Conway Hall titled ‘Islam and atheism: irreconcilable enemies? How can humanists and Muslims make it work’; and a 2018 event organized by Farnham Humanists, the local Christian community and the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics (OCCA) to ‘explore the meaning of life’.
- Private bilateral dialogue series, involving small groups of people meeting several times, ideally including eating together.
- Informal dialogue: anyone with friends or colleagues from different religion or belief backgrounds can engage in some form of dialogue, especially those working in areas such as pastoral support.
- Academic exploration, the prime example of which being Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman’s collection *Religion and Atheism*¹⁶ and the follow-up discussions (see *Theology* Vol. 122, no. 2).

Education

While there are disagreements between secularists and others about the existence of state-funded faith schools, and especially faith-based admissions to publicly funded schools, there is a high level of agreement on the need in a plural society for

children both to understand the views and beliefs of those who are different from them and to be able to develop their own thinking.

Humanists UK is a long-standing member of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) and supported the REC's establishment of an independent 14-person Commission on Religious Education (CORE), chaired by Dr John Hall, Dean of Westminster, to investigate the position of the subject in British schools and make recommendations for its future.

Its final report, after two years' work, *Religion and Worldviews: the way forward*, concluded that 'Religious Education (RE) in too many schools is not good enough to prepare pupils adequately for the religious and belief diversity they will encounter, nor to support them to engage deeply with the questions raised by the study of worldviews.'¹⁷ They reported that 33 per cent of all schools offer no RE at Key Stage 4 (ages 14–16), despite it being a statutory requirement. There was an urgent need for reform.

It made 11 recommendations, including:

- 'The subject should explore the important role that religious and non-religious worldviews play in all human life . . . an essential area of study . . . whatever their own family background and personal beliefs and practices . . . we propose that the subject should be called *Religion and Worldviews*.'¹⁸
- 'A statutory National Entitlement should apply to all schools, and . . . be subject to inspection . . . [which] encapsulates a common vision within which schools will be able to develop their own approach . . . [and] national programmes of study should be developed to support schools in their work.'¹⁹
- There should be a 'sustained programme of investment in teacher education and development . . . [and] local . . . structures [supporting RE] . . . should be re-envisioned to enable this important contribution to continue.'²⁰

There was support for the recommendations, notably from the REC itself, which includes representatives from 63 member organizations across faith and belief communities, and organizations of RE professionals. Two notable organizations rejected the recommendations: the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Catholic Education Service.

Unfortunately, the Secretary of State for Education at the time, Damian Hinds, also declined to accept the key recommendations, saying that 'some stakeholders have concerns that making statutory the inclusion of "worldviews" risks diluting the teaching of RE', and concluding that 'now is not the time'. In a strong response,²¹ John Hall, in his role as chair of CORE, said: 'The current situation is in our view not sustainable and we would regard refusal to act at all as an abdication of responsibility.' He also corrected some inaccuracies in the Secretary of State's letter, including that: 'The law already makes possible the inclusion in RE of a range of worldviews, both religious and non-religious. [So] we have not called for legal change so that non-religious worldviews can be "added" to the subject.'

The work of CORE, with its broad backing, remains the best opportunity for many years to make ‘religion and world views’ fit for the purpose of preparing children for life in a plural society, and of enabling them ‘to engage deeply with the questions raised’.

Notes

This article is based on a talk given at the ‘Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide’ follow-up meeting in January 2019 (<<https://religionandatheism-beyondthedivide.com/uncategorized/the-religion-and-belief-landscape/>>). For similar arguments, see also my articles at <<https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/5501/the-complex-picture-of-religion-and-atheism-today>> and <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/01/what-do-secularists-mean-by-secularism/>>.

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12. BSA (three-year average for 2013–15): the total split in 2013–15 is around the same as the age 45–54 split. This implies that in 2040 it will be around the same as age 20–30 in 2013–15 (mean 15–24 and 25–34).
13. An earlier version of the section titled ‘Secularism’ was first published on the LSE blog on 9 January 2019: <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/01/what-do-secularists-mean-by-secularism/>>.

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