

At a presentation on “Nominal Christianity in the UK” at the Denton Conference in 1985, one of the participants strongly objected to the title of the paper on the grounds that the two words “nominal” and “Christian” were incompatible. Such an objection would be most unlikely in the 21st century in the UK. When the results of the 2001 Population Census were declared, which had asked a person’s religion for the first time in such a Census since 1851, 72% of the population declared themselves to be Christian. Since, at best, only 8% regularly attended church in 2001,¹ there was an obvious huge disparity between the two figures.

Census results

The religious community as identified by country in the UK in the 2001 Census is shown in Table 17.2.1. While clearly the bulk of that community is Christian, there are other religions of significant size also, of which the largest is Islam. Surveys of the Muslim community in 1986² and 2008³ revealed a similar result – at best half (50%) attend a mosque once a year and only a quarter (25%) attend once a month or more frequently. The issue of nominalism, the word used in the sense of the difference between a stated adherence to a faith and a committed application of that faith, is not confined to Christianity.

Table 17.2.1: Community percentages by religion, by country, 2001 and 2010

Religion	2001				Total UK %	2011 Total UK %
	England %	Wales %	Scotland %	N Ireland %		
Christianity	72	72	65	86	72	59
Islam	3 1	1		0	3	4½
Hindu	1 0	0		0	1	1½
Sikh	1 0	0		0	½	½
Jew	½	0	0	0	½	½
Other religions	½	0	1	0	½	1
No Religion	14½	19	27½	3	15	26
Not stated	7½	8	5½	11	7½	7
Base (millions)	49.1	2.9	5.1	1.7	58.8	63.2

As the largest religion in the UK, most of this paper will look at Christianity, partly because more data is available, but also partly because it is but an example (a major example) of the problems and issues relating to “nominality”. The most recent figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) from the 2011 Population Census are shown in Table 17.2.1.⁴

Arguments for and against these figures

However, not everyone accepted the figures in Table 17.2.1 as trustworthy and Professor Steve Bruce of Aberdeen University especially queried them.⁵ His main reasons were reporting uncertainty (some Census figures were adjusted by ONS), methodological variations, different contexts on the form itself, additional detail requested in Scotland and N Ireland, the general social context of the time, the difference between the Census and other major studies like the British Social Attitudes Survey, the possibility that the Head of Household in completing the form imputed a religion not really present, and the “default option.” An old lady had said to Steve Bruce, “I put down Church of Scotland because I wanted to say this is a Christian country,” similar to what Don Posterski said:⁶

People living in ... historical Christian strongholds may default to the word “Christian,” simply because they don’t identify strongly with any other group.

Many of these have counter arguments. It may well be that some of the Census 2001 figures are slightly inaccurate, but the issue is less whether the 72% should be 62% or 82% but whether it ought to be, say, 42%. The approximate size of the figure is what is at stake. There is other evidence that would suggest that the 2001 figure could be of the right order of magnitude, such as the level of belief in God (67% in 2000⁷), the popularity of Christian values reflected in the number of Primary Schools which are much sought after church Schools (36%⁸), the percentage of people having their babies baptised (47% in 2001 and 34% in 2010⁹), the number of religious marriages (33% in 2010), the number of church funerals (38% in 2009 which were just Church of England), the number of religious books published (about 4% of all publications), the popularity of programmes like *Songs of Praise*, the huge numbers who attended Sunday School when young (about 50% of all 80-year olds in 2010¹⁰), and so on.

It may thus be argued that the 72% figure revealed by the 2001 Population Census is probably as accurate as any other Census statistic, and has affirmation from other measurements of religious assessment.

Overview of Religious Positions

While it may be argued that the 2001 Census figure of 72% of the population saying they were Christian is reasonable, there is no question that in terms of other measured behavioural characteristics it is very different. In 2005, just 6.3% of the population attended church regularly.¹¹ That same study showed that only 27% of churchgoers read their Bible at least once a week outside church, another expected behavioural manifestation of Christian faith. An attempt to put these various figures into context is shown in the following Table breaking down the population into different groups:

Table 17.2.2: Overview of Religious Positions, 1980 to 2020

Year	Belief in the Christian God					Non-belief in Christian God		
	Total %	Regular attenders		Non-regular attenders		Total %	Other Religions %	Non-religious %
Not Church members %		Active Church members %	Nominal Church members %	Notional Christian %				
Column	A	BC		D	E	F	G	H
1980	77	3	8	9	57	23	4	19
1990	75	3	7	8	57	25	5	20
2000	72	2	5	8	57	28	6	22
2010	60	2	4	7	47	40	7	33
2020	50	2	3	6	39	50	9	41

This Table may be read as follows. The figures in Columns A and F total 100%, which represents the entire population. Column A is the total of Columns B, C, D and E; Column F is the total of Columns G and H. Regular churchgoers are the total of Columns B and C. Church members are the total of Columns C and D. In this Table a Nominal Christian (Column D) is defined as “a church member who rarely if ever attends” (maybe just at Christmas), such being mostly elderly and who are literally dying out. Notional Christians (Column E) are “those who call themselves Christians but who never attend church and do not necessarily make any effort to follow the Christian ethic,” (maybe because they confuse “Christianity” with “Britishness”). There is no suggestion that any of these definitions is watertight. Figures for 1980 and 1990 were first published in 1997¹², but have been updated in this Table; figures for 2000 were originally based on data in *UK Church Statistics 2005-2015*, as were the original figures for 2010, but these (and those for 2020) have been revised in the light of the 2011 Census figures.

The value of the Table is that it gives a total national perspective, and that it seeks to indicate trends. The figures shown come from a variety of sources – attendance (B + C) largely from Church Censuses, membership (C + D) largely from individual denominations, the percentage who are Christian (A) from government, the numbers belonging to other religions (G) from those various religions. The split between Columns B and C relies on sample surveys. This means that the figure in Column E is the balancing figure between Column A and Columns B, C and D, and the figure in Column H the balancing figure between Column F (which is always 100% less the percentage in Column A) and Column G.

The figures in Column A are critical. The 2000 figure of 72% comes from the Population Census. The 2010 figure is taken from the 2011 Census (which put it at 59%), but it at odds from the figure from British Social Attitudes (BSA) which would put it lower. The 2020 figure, inevitably a forecast, is based in part on the number of church funerals (Table 2.8), the age of churchgoers (Table 16.8.2), and the number likely to join the church in the 10 years to 2020. The BSA larger numbers for those who say they have no religion (40%) are similar to the 2011 YouGov survey of 64,300 people of whom only 55% said they were Christian,¹³ and to the 2011 Premier Radio study which showed 56% Christian, 35% No religion and 9% Other religions.¹⁴

The key trends shown are:

- Church membership (total of Columns C and D) declines by half in the 40 years 1980 to 2020;
- The proportion of the population who are *churchgoing* church members (Column C) declines much faster than the *non-churchgoing* members (Column D);
- The declining proportions of nominal Christians, largely, one assumes because many are older people who are literally dying out (Column D);
- The fast declining proportion of notional Christians (Column E);
- The fast increasing proportion of the non-religious (Column H).

Those in Column D say they believe in the Christian God but virtually never (if ever) attend church, even though they are church members, indicating they probably attended church at one stage. Some call this group “de-churched” – they have come out of a church involvement. Is there a confusion between their agreement with “I believe in God” with “I believe in Christianity,” as Edward Bailey has argued?¹⁵ Some in Column D would describe themselves as “deconverting”¹⁶ because “God did not help them, especially in times of trouble.” In his latest book David Martin quotes Regis Debray’s comment, “The twilight of the gods turns out to be the morning of the magicians.”¹⁷

Why should those in Column E who are not church members and have never attended church be included at all? Simply because they say they believe in God and sign themselves as “Christian” on a Census form. The fact that this proportion stayed at almost three-fifths (57%) of the population for the period 1980-2000 suggests that it is these, rather than nominal Christians, who might be mistaken as followers of an implicit religion. As Callum Brown indicates, “what [once] made Britain Christian was the way in which Christianity infused public culture and was adopted by individuals, whether churchgoers or not, in forming their own identities.”¹⁸ They are different from those in Column H who neither believe nor say they are Christian. Those in Column E, however, decline by a third between 2000 and 2020, suggesting they are a dying group.

Too rigorous an analysis

The above comments may be helpful in discerning some key trends, but some would argue the logic is too rigorous and that life is much more messy than that. It probably is! Table 17.2.2 may help define “religiousness” but it does not define “spirituality,” and answers to different sets of questions in public surveys show that many people are unclear about what these words mean. Often answers may be shown in the form of Table 17.2.3:¹⁹

Table 17.2.3: Religiousness and Spirituality

		Religious?		Total
		YES	NO	
Spiritual?	YES	18%	29%	47%
	NO	21%	32%	53%
Total		39%	61%	100%

Is there a link between Tables 17.2.2 and 17.2.3? Does the 18% in the Religious/Spiritual box in Table 17.2.3 correspond to the total of Columns B, C, D and G (20%)? The 32% Not Religious/ Not Spiritual box corresponds with Column H (33% in 2010). Notional Christianity (Column E) is then somehow a mix of “Not Religious but Spiritual” and “Religious but Not Spiritual”. But Nominal Christianity is surely a mix of these two as well.

What is Spirituality or Religiousness?

Spirituality is seen as something inherent which people develop or shape for their own individual selves rather than it being shaped by the formality of a religious organisation. Spirituality is somehow about “inner being” rather than community or society, and is expressed by “buying” resources (like a meditation course or going on a pilgrimage or taking yoga classes). The World Values’ Study suggests that spirituality is higher in Catholic and Orthodox countries, and is thus more to do with a belief in the beneficent spirit world, such as angels, or saints.

Spirituality differs from religiousness in that if a person feels they are spiritual they will still continue to feel that as they get older, whereas those who say they are religious are more likely to stop calling themselves that as they get older, despite the fact that people have more confidence in religious institutions as they age. Spirituality, which Prof Steve Bruce calls “alternative spirituality,”

“is the preserve,” he says, “of middle-aged, middle-class women with university-level qualifications. Women with no educational qualifications do not engage with holistic practices centred on personal growth: they prefer horoscopes, fortune-telling, astrology and tarot.”²⁰

In terms of holistic spirituality, Bruce suggests it “lacks any levers to extract more commitment than the participant wants to give at any time.”²¹ He suggests spirituality consists of three elements: a belief in some sort of supernatural force or entity, how one understands and feels about the world, and an ethical dimension – spiritual people should be better people.

The word “spirituality” conjurs up different meanings for different people. The Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust undertook a comprehensive survey on the topic, in which the first question asked, “What is spirituality?”, the largest answers to which are shown in Table 17.2.4.²²

Table 17.2.4: What is spirituality?

75%	It can sometimes be expressed through religion, but not always
72%	It is about the deepest part of our "inner self"/"soul"
71%	It forms part of our identity
69%	It helps us in a hard time/crisis
68%	It is a source of peace
64%	It gives us our values
63%	It is a source of hope
...
31%	It is about relating to God

Religiousness. The Table shows that spirituality and religion are perceived differently, although one may sometimes embrace the other. Religion perhaps implies a formality or a tangibility, whereas spirituality is more informal and less tangible.

The phrase being favoured in 2011 about this uncertain type of religiosity is "Fuzzy Christianity" which has been introduced by Prof David Voas.²³ He suggests that religious commitment in Great Britain comprises three groups of people: the Religious (25%), the Non-religious (35%) and the Fuzzy Faithful (40%).

Why do people become less religious? Is it because they are less involved with communities of faith? A loss of faith in God? Is it because religion is seen more as a choice, such as which sport shall I play? Does "God" figure less in people's account of the world? Is it that children are brought up to think more independently? Or do religious values become swamped by materialism and pleasure activities? All these ideas have been suggested, including the idea that the 2011 "Arab Spring was not primarily religious, even if spirituality plays a part."

Involvement with a religious person may well be the prelude to engagement. Transmission in a family context is still key. Some have suggested that the Methodist decline is partly because leadership expected parents to pass on the faith to their children and that hasn't happened. Denominations taking a more individual approach, like the Pentecostals, are growing. In other words, being "religious" implies a more personal commitment, perhaps to an external authority.²⁴

Church there when we need it?

In March 1996, a madman went loose in a school in Dunblane, Scotland, and shot 16 children and a teacher. The following night a huge queue of people waited outside the small Cathedral there wishing to pay their respects, or pray, or try to come to terms with the tragedy. Likewise in Soham, Cambridgeshire, when two young girls were killed in August 2002, there were thousands upon thousands of flower bouquets sent and the village church was full of teddy bears.

These tragic events indicate that death touches many hearts, and frequently people turn to the church for solace even if they cannot begin to understand "why". Princess Diana's death in 1997 also released a flood of flowers and hundreds of thousands signed books of condolence, as well as increased church attendance in the immediate aftermath, as sometimes happens during or after great national events or calamities (as when George VI called national days of prayer).

"Most people," wrote Professor of Philosophy, Dr Harriet Baber, "are not cranked up to a high level of existential angst, but need what Churches offer in time of trouble and serious reflection. The Church once provided a common language for expressing our feelings, making sense of our lives, and for coping with every aspect of the human condition. It was there when we needed it. Now, our emotional language is impoverished, and we struggle to invent the means to deal with events that mark the course of our lives. We have contrived secular rituals for commemorating public tragedies and there is an emerging folk-religion of poetry readings, political candle-vigils, and roadside teddy-bear shrines to mark the deaths of children in traffic accidents."²⁵

Discussion

What does all this add up to? Declining church attendance has been the norm for the past half century, but, with increasing immigration, the larger numbers belonging to other faiths in the UK has, in recent years, brought "religion" more into the public space, especially when atrocities are committed in the name of religion.

What this analysis shows, however, is that, contrary perhaps to the secularisation hypothesis, while the demise of church attendance increases the numbers of non-religious, there is a substantial core of people who believe in God even if they do not attend church, or have stopped attending, and who will describe themselves as "Christian" while exhibiting no personal commitment consistent with that label. "Fuzzy" is perhaps a valid description of them.

The next stage is to consider how may fuzziness be turned into conviction. Alpha, Christianity Explored, Emmaus and a host of other courses seek to describe, in popular terms, the theology and practical application of Christianity, and some 4 million of the UK's 62 million people have probably attended one of such courses. For the churches which host these, attendance has increased some 10%. Other events like Back-to-Church Sunday every September and Fresh Expressions (creative attempts to run churches often in non-church building settings) have also proved popular means of attracting some to return. But the numbers dying exceed the numbers of conversions, so overall the total continues to decline. But the emphases on teaching, welcome-to-worship, and fun fellowship are having an impact. This analysis shows that the ostensible "market" for such remains large.

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21st November 2011; updated with latest statistics