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Catholic Research Forum Reports 3

# The “no religion” population of Britain

Recent data from the British Social Attitudes Survey  
(2015) and the European Social Survey (2014)

Stephen Bullivant

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# Ten key findings

1. Those who identify as 'No religion' (i.e., Nones, the nonreligious) are 48.6% of the British adult population. This is roughly 24.3 million people. [See figs 1.2, 2.1]
2. Inner London has, by far, the fewest Nones in Britain at 31% (compared to 58% in the South East, and 56% in Scotland). Inner London also has, by far, the highest proportion of those from Non-Christian religions (28%). [See fig. 1.2]
3. In 1983, 67% of Britons identified as some kind of Christian. In 2015, it was 43%. Over the same period, members of Non-Christian religions have more than quadrupled. [See fig. 1.3]
4. British Nones are predominantly White (95%) and male (55%). Nevertheless, there are 10.9 million nonreligious women. Among 18-34s, men and women are equally likely to be Nones. [See figs 2.5, 2.2]
5. Nones are younger than average: 35% are under 35, compared to 29% of all British adult. (To compare: just 6% of Anglicans are under 35, and 45% are 65 or older.) [See fig. 2.3]
6. Among 25-54 year olds, the nonreligious have the lowest proportion of university graduates among main (non)religious groupings. [See fig. 2.7]
7. Three-fifths of Nones say that they were brought up with a religious identity. Fewer than one in ten of those brought up nonreligiously now identify with a religion. [See figs 3.1, 3.3]
8. For every one person brought up with No religion who has become a Christian, twenty-six people brought up as Christians now identify as Nones. [See fig 3.5]
9. 43% of Nones described themselves as being 'Not at all religious'. 75% never attend religious services. 76% never pray. [See figs 4.2, 4.3, 4.5]
10. Nevertheless there are roughly 0.8 million Nones who both pray monthly or more, and rate their own level of religiosity highly. A further 2.8 million either pray monthly or more, or rate their own religiosity highly (but not both). [See fig. 4.7]

# Acknowledgements

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Needless to say, research of this nature would be impossible if not for the regular availability of high-quality, nationally representative datasets. I wish therefore to express my deep gratitude to NatCen Social Research, the Economic and Social Research Council, and all those involved in administering, participating in, and – by no means least – funding the British Social Attitudes Survey and the European Social Survey.

# About the author

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Professor Bullivant is a consulting editor of *The Catholic Herald*, and has also written for *New Scientist*, *America*, and *The Guardian*. Television and radio credits include EWTN, the BBC, LBC, and Vatican Radio. His research has received funding from, among others, the AHRC, the British Academy, the Higher Education Academy, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission. He is currently co-Principal Investigator of the three-year *Understanding Unbelief* project (with colleagues at Kent, Coventry, and Queen's University Belfast), funded by a £2.3 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

Professor Bullivant has held visiting positions at the Institute for Social Change, University of Manchester, and the Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London. He is currently a Visiting Researcher at Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford.

# About the Centre

The **Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society** was launched at St Mary's University, Twickenham, in 2016. It was named in honour of the Pope Emeritus' role, over many years, as a leading contributor to public and academic debates concerning the relationship of religion and the social sciences. St Mary's was proud to host Pope Benedict during his 2010 Papal Visit to the United Kingdom.

The Centre is founded upon the conviction that interdisciplinary research, in which the sciences are brought into direct engagement with theology and ethics, is central to the life of a Catholic university (cf. Pope St John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 46). Accordingly, through publications, media activity, events, and attracting research students, we seek to make a major contribution to academic, ecclesial, and public debates concerning the place of religion (and non-religion) within contemporary societies.

The Centre's inaugural report, *Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales*, was released in June 2016. It received global media attention, including coverage from *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Spectator*, Sky News, BBC Radio 4, LBC, *La Croix*, *Time*, and *The New York Times*. A subsequent report, *The Take-Up of Free School Meals in Catholic Schools in England and Wales*, released in April 2017, received prominent coverage from the BBC, *The Tablet*, and *The Catholic Herald*.

Organisations interested in commissioning research from, or qualified individuals interested in pursuing a PhD with, the Centre should contact its administrator, Kit Penny, in the first instance: [BenedictXVI.Centre@stmarys.ac.uk](mailto:BenedictXVI.Centre@stmarys.ac.uk).

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# Introduction

It is no secret that a large proportion of the British population consider themselves to have no religion. This has been a consistent finding of polls, social surveys, and censuses over the past several decades. In fact, the rise of the nonreligious is arguably *the* story of British religious history over the past half-century.<sup>1</sup>

This report has a simple purpose: to provide a set of clear, reliable, up-to-date, and interesting statistics on the adult nonreligious population of Britain. Among the topics covered here are overall proportions, including regional data and historical trends (chapter one); breakdowns by age, sex, race, and education (chapter two); upbringing, conversion and 'nonversion' rates (chapter three); and items relating to personal religiosity, religious practice, and prayer (chapter four). To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that such basic data on so significant a group has been made available in this way. Furthermore, while No religion is the focus throughout, a great deal of comparative data are also given for different religious and denominational groupings.

All information presented here comes from original analysis of publicly available data from two well-regarded academic social surveys. These are the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA), conducted annually by NatCen Social Research since 1983,<sup>2</sup> and the European Social Survey (ESS), administered in Britain by NatCen on behalf of the ESRC every two years since 2002. Both survey programmes yield high-quality, nationally representative data, derived from several thousand face-to-face interviews in each round.<sup>3</sup> The majority of data presented in this report come from the most recently available round of the BSA: the 2015 dataset was released to researchers on 21 December 2016. On occasion, earlier years of BSA data are used to show historical trends, or where particular questions have only been asked in certain years. In addition, we will use the most recently available data from the ESS (i.e., 2014) to explore a select number of topics not normally included in the BSA.

To an extent, this report is a sequel to last year's *Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A Statistical Report Based on Recent British Social Attitudes Data* (available for free download from the Benedict XVI Centre's website [here](#)<sup>4</sup>). Certainly, the interest it generated, especially regarding the small amount of data it provided on the nonreligious, suggested that a dedicated follow-up might be a good idea. That said, this new report was already planned before the original was released. Please note, however, that statistics are not directly comparable between the two reports: whereas *Contemporary Catholicism* concerned England and Wales, here the focus is on the whole of Britain (i.e., England, Scotland, and Wales).

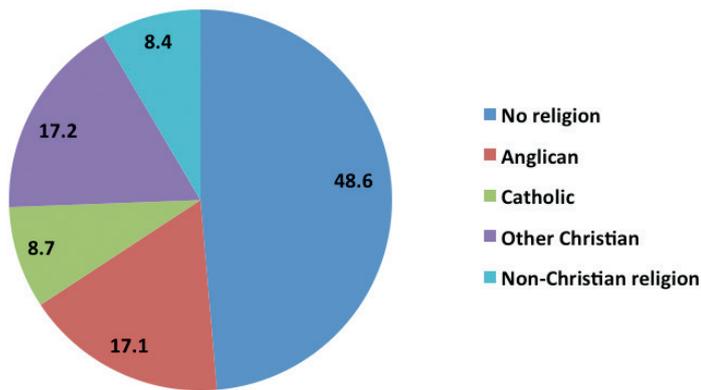
Finally, a note on terminology. The primary category used in this report is that proportion of the adult (i.e., 18+) British population who are recorded as stating 'No religion' when asked (BSA) 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' or (ESS) 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?'. That is to say, No religion is being taken here as a matter of religious affiliation or identity (or, perhaps, the lack of one<sup>5</sup>), rather than directly one of nonreligious beliefs, felt (non) religiosity, or of low or non-existent levels of religious practice. (And in fact, while there is normally a strong correlation between these different modes of nonreligiousness, this is by no means always the case: a fact we shall explore in some detail in chapter four.)

However, 'people who identify as having "No religion" on social surveys' is an awkwardly convoluted descriptor. For elegance and variety's sake, therefore, I will tend to refer to such people as 'the nonreligious' or, more simply, as 'Nones'. This latter term, well-established among (especially American) sociologists of religion since the 1960s,<sup>6</sup> is now commonly used as a convenient shorthand in American reporting on religion. For the purposes of the present report, therefore, a 'current None' is a person who now identifies as having no religion, whereas a 'cradle None' is someone who answers 'No religion' when asked which, if any, religion or denomination they were brought up in. Developing this theme, in chapter three we will meet the concept of a 'nonvert' – that is, a person who says they were brought up in some religion, but who now identifies as having no religion.<sup>7</sup>

# 1. The British religious context in 2015

To understand the No religion population, we must first explore the wider British religious context of which they form, by far, the largest part. Accordingly, this chapter will look at levels of religious affiliation in Britain as a whole (fig. 1.1), by region (fig. 1.2), and over time since the early 1980s (fig. 1.3). We will also consider the religious upbringings of the British population (1.4), and how these rates differ from rates of current affiliation (fig. 1.5).

Fig. 1.1: Religious affiliation of the British population

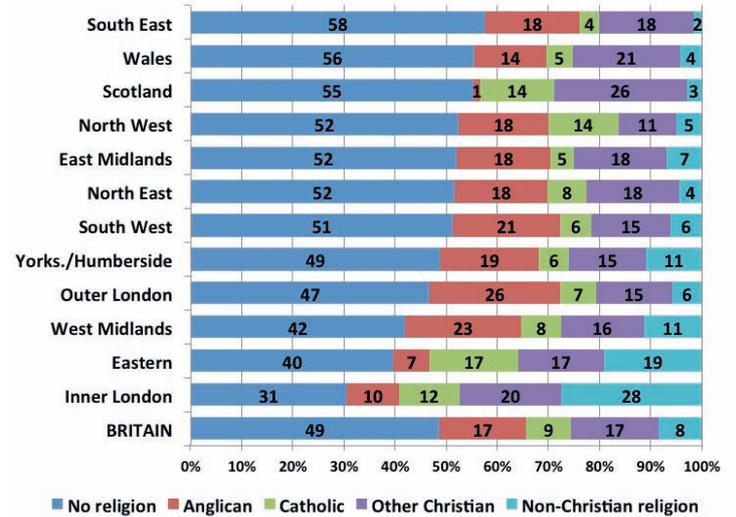


Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 4312 valid cases. Question asked: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' NB: Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

The nonreligious account for almost half of the British population, at 48.6%. By contrast, all those claiming a Christian affiliation make up 43.0%, with Anglican and Other Christian contributing equally to form the bulk of this. It is important to note Other Christian is a combined category, formed from nine separate options in the original survey. Of these, the largest is 'Christian – no denomination' (12.3%).<sup>8</sup> Among other mainstream denominations included in Other Christian, Methodists account for 1.7% of the total population; Presbyterians, 1.2%; Baptists, 0.5%; and the United Reform Church, 0.2%. Meanwhile, the separate category of Catholics is 8.7% of the British population: the second largest denomination, by affiliation, after Anglican.

Affiliates of Non-Christian religions make up 8.4% of the British population. This too, obviously, is a combined category. Included within it are Muslims (3.9% overall), Hindus (2.0%), Sikhs (0.9%), Jews (0.6%), and Buddhists (0.3%).

Fig. 1.2: Religious affiliation by region



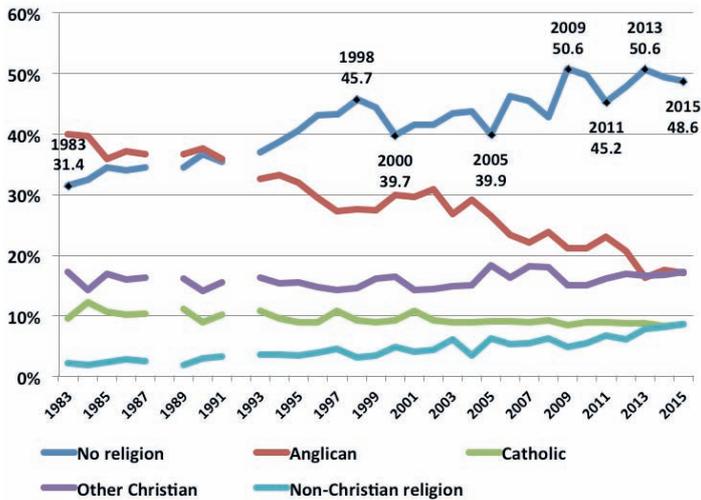
Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 4312 valid cases. Question asked: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' NB: Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Fig. 1.2 breaks down current religious affiliation in Britain by region – or more precisely, by the ten regions of England (as defined by the Office for National Statistics<sup>9</sup>), and the countries of Wales and Scotland.

While there is no need to comment on each specifically, the variability between them is notable. No religion is, admittedly, the largest single category in all. However, the proportion of Nones in the South East (58%), the highest, is almost double of that in Inner London (31%), the lowest. Interestingly, this order is reversed when one looks at members of Non-Christian religions: the highest proportion of whom, by far, are in Inner London, while the lowest are in the South East. The Inner London 'microclimate' is all the more remarkable given the close geographical proximity of the two regions.

Nones make up an overall majority in seven of the regions, including Scotland and Wales, which are the most nonreligious-affiliating areas after the South East. Anglicans (including all members of the Church of England, the Church of Wales, and the Episcopal Church of Scotland), are most prevalent in Outer London (26%), the West Midlands (23%), and the South West (21%), and least so in Scotland (1%) and Eastern England (7%). Meanwhile, the Catholic strongholds are East Anglia (17%), Scotland (14%), and the North West (14%), while the least Catholic areas are the South East (4%), Wales (5%), and the East Midlands (5%).

Fig. 1.3: Religious affiliation in Britain, 1983-2015



Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data. Number of valid cases in each year ranges between 1464 (1984) and 4468 (2008) based on 4312 valid cases. Question asked: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' NB: BSA not undertaken in 1988 or 1992.

Turning to historical trends, it is clear from the above graph that No religion has been Britain's largest religious grouping for over two decades: 1993 was the first year to record more Nones than Anglicans, and this has remained the case ever since. Looking at the long-term pattern, the nonreligious share of the population has shown strong growth over our whole period, with a mean increase of 0.5 percentage points per year from 1983 to 2015. The year 2009 was the first in which Nones outnumbered all Christians put together. With the single exception of 2011, this pattern has held ever after. In two years, 2009 and 2013, Nones formed a majority of the adult British population.

That said, this story has not simply been one of constant, inexorable growth.<sup>10</sup> This too is clear from fig. 1.3. For example, consistent nonreligious gains between 1983 and 1998 were followed by several years of relative decline: it was not until 2006 that 1998's high of 45.7% was bettered. Following another significant jump, up to 50.6% in 2009, all subsequent years have been either at (2013), or below (2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015), this level. While the difference between this and 2015's figure of 48.6% - i.e., two percentage points - may seem insignificant, if applied to the British adult population as a whole (see fig. 2.1), it would amount to around one million fewer Nones from 2013 to 2015.

Looking to our other categories, there have been heavy Anglican declines over the whole period. The proportion of self-describing Anglicans in Britain has more than halved, from 40% in 1983, down to 17% in 2015. That said, the past three years are worth highlighting. If talk of even a modest Anglican revival would be premature, one certainly can speak of a newfound stability.

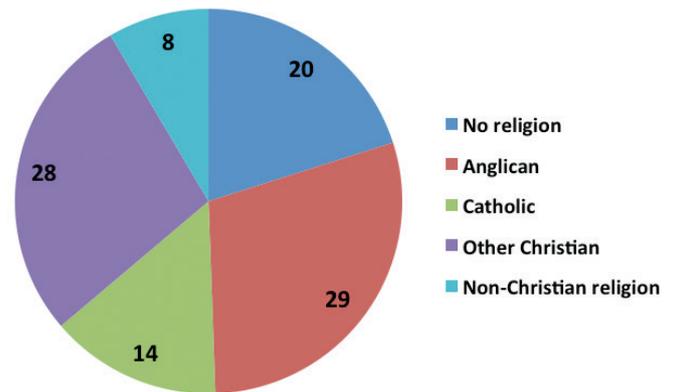
Other Christian has fluctuated over the period, between highs of 18%

and lows around 14%. However, this relative stability masks significant amount of change within the category (not shown on the graph). In general terms, this is mostly a decline of the traditional denominational identities (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) and significant increases in the hard-to-interpret<sup>11</sup> phenomenon of people describing themselves simply as 'Christian', without any denominational qualifier.

Catholic identification has held more or less steady over the whole period, at roughly the 9% mark, albeit with an occasional flirtation with double digits (though not since 2001).

The proportion of the non-Christian religious has also increased, fairly steadily, over the entire period, more than quadrupling from 2.0% in 1983, to 8.4% in 2015. Within this, the main source of growth has come from Muslims: from 0.6% of the population in 1983, to 3.9% in 2015 (though itself down from highs of 4.7% and 4.6% in 2013 and 2014). Hindus have also shown growth over the period: from 0.5% of the population in 1983, to 2.0% in 2015.

Fig. 1.4: (Non)religious upbringing of British population



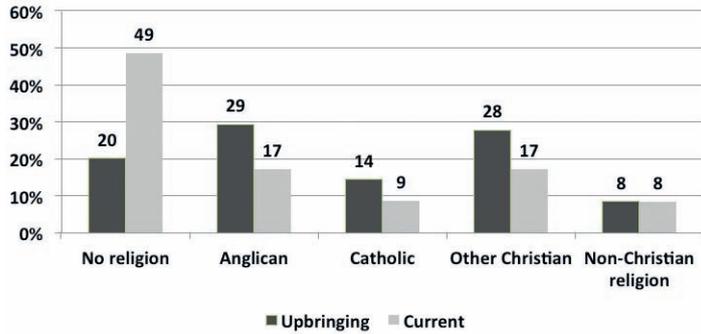
Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 4312 valid cases. Question asked: 'In what religion, if any, were you brought up?' NB: Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

While the previous graphs explored levels of current affiliation (i.e., at the time of asking), fig. 1.4 shows how adult Britons characterise their upbringing in religious terms. How respondents choose to interpret what counts as being 'brought up in' a given religion is, of course, up to them, and undoubtedly differs from person to person.

Here, almost three fifths of the population say they were brought up as either Anglicans (29%) or Other Christian (28%). 20% say that they were brought up in No religion (for brevity's sake, we will be terming such people 'cradle Nones' in later sections). 14% say that were brought up Catholic, and 8% that they were brought up in a Non-Christian religion.

## 2. British nones

Fig. 1.5: Comparison of (non) religious upbringing and current (non) religious affiliation within British population



Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 4310 (upbringing) and 4312 (current affiliation) valid cases.

Fig. 1.5 presents a direct comparison of information given in two previous pie charts: figs 1.1 and 1.4. It shows the overall differences in the proportion who say they were brought up in, and the proportion who currently identify with, each of our main five categories.

That is, while only 20% say that were brought up with No religion, fully two-and-a-half times as many (i.e., 49%) now self-describe in this way. (This topic will be explored more fully in chapter three.) In contrast, there are roughly two-thirds the number of current Anglicans, Catholics, and Other Christians as there are born-and-raised Anglicans, Catholics, and Other Christians. The combined Non-Christian religions, meanwhile, have the same proportion of born-and-raised as they do current adherents.

In this chapter, we investigate adult British Nones in more detail. This is not a straightforward task: we are, after all, referring here to fully half of the population. Easy characterisations are, obviously enough, not possible here.

Nevertheless, it is possible to profile the nonreligious in terms of some key indicators. Following an estimate of the overall numbers of Nones (fig. 2.1), we will proceed to break down this (huge) group in terms of age and sex (figs. 2.2, 2.3, 2.4), race (fig. 2.5), and education (figs 2.6, 2.7). Where thought helpful, comparisons will be offered to other religious groupings.

Fig. 2.1: Estimated size of the British non-religious population

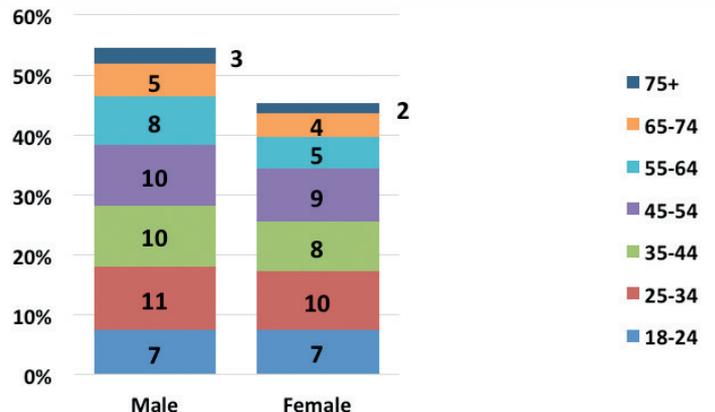
	2015 estimate (millions)
Total adult (i.e., 18+) population*	49.9
Current Nones^	24.3
Cradle Nones^	10.0

\* Office for National Statistics, mid-2015 estimate.<sup>12</sup>

^ Based on percentages of overall adult population – 48.6% (current) and 20.1% (upbringing) – derived from BSA 2015.

Fig. 2.1 ought hopefully to speak for itself. It is simply the application of the percentages presented in the previous chapter, for both current and cradle Nones, to the government's population estimates for 2015. Hopefully, this helps to 'make real' the statistics presented in this report. It is one thing to think in terms of '48.6% of the population'; it is quite another to recall that that abstraction represents upward of 24 million real individuals.

Fig. 2.2: Composition of British adult Nones, by age and sex combined



Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 2094 valid cases.

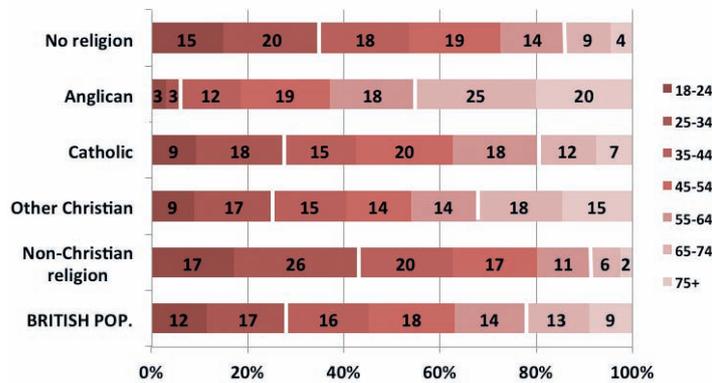
The above chart breaks down these 24.3 million people in terms of both age and sex. (NB: the individual column 'layers' here would add up to 100% – i.e., to the None population as a whole – were it not for rounding.)

As should be clear, those identifying with No religion are more likely to be men than women: 55% vs 45%. This is consistent with previous studies of British nonreligiosity, and indeed, with a great wealth of scholarship exploring religion and gender across time and space: generally speaking, women tend to be more religious (and, ipso facto, less nonreligious) than men.<sup>13</sup>

However, this point, while valid in itself, admits of two important qualifications. Firstly, while the No religion category may be disproportionately male, it is scarcely an exclusively male preserve. After all, 45% of 24.3 million still amounts to 10.9 million nonreligious women in Britain. Secondly, the age breakdowns for each sex reveal something very interesting. In the two youngest cohorts, 18-24 and 25-34, there is an almost exact gender balance. That is, of the 14% of all Nones who are aged 18-24, half are women and half are men; of the 21% who are aged 25-34, the skew in favour of men is only very slight. If these trends continue into the future, then the 'nonreligious gender gap' will become progressively smaller.

In fact, with the exception of the 55-64s, the gender differences in each age category are quite small: within one or two percentage points. Across the whole range of ages, though, these add up to an overall difference of ten percentage points.

Fig. 2.3: Age profiles of main (non) religious groups, and the general adult population, of Britain



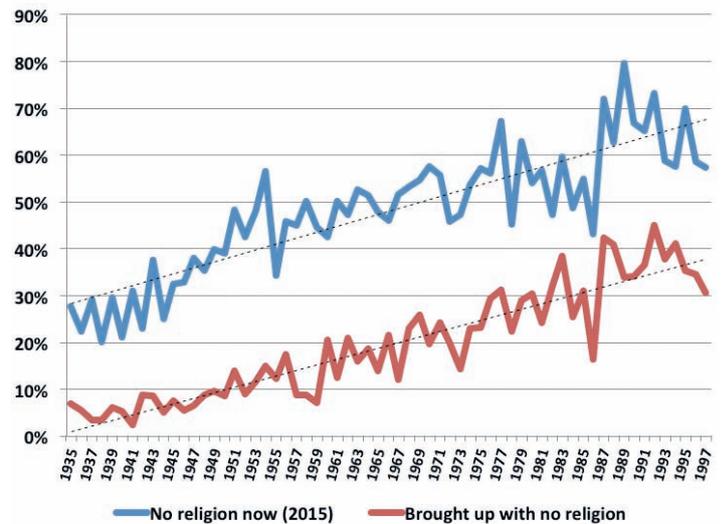
Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 2097 (No religion), 736 (Anglican), 375 (Catholic), 739 (Other Christian), 365 (Non-Christian religion), and 4312 (British pop.) valid cases.

The overall age profile of Nones is best explored in relation to both the British population as a whole, and age profiles of our four other main religious groupings. To aid comparisons, two white lines have been added to each bar. Towards the left-hand side of the chart, these show the extent of the two youngest age brackets (i.e., 18-24 and 25-34); at the right-hand side, they show the extent of the two oldest (i.e., 65-74 and 75+)

Next to the overall population (of which, of course, they account for almost half), the nonreligious are notably youthful. 35% of all Nones are between 18 and 35, compared to 29% of general population. And at the other end, just 11% are aged 65 or over – half the national average of 22%.

Compared to our religious groupings, the Nones are older than those from Non-Christian religions, fully 43% of whom are under 35. However, in comparison with our three Christian categories, things are very different. The age profile of Anglicans, especially, is very heavily skewed towards the older generations: only 6% are between 18 and 34, whereas 45% are 55 or over. Meanwhile, among Catholics and Other Christians, slightly over a quarter of each fall in the 18-34 brackets. However, Catholics have a much higher proportion of those in the 45-54 and 55-64 brackets, and a notably lower proportion of the 65-or-overs, than do Other Christians.

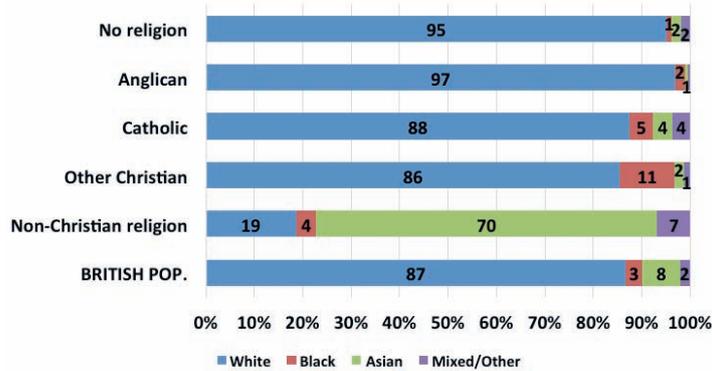
Fig. 2.4: Proportions of British population who were brought up with No religion, and who now affirm No religion, by year of birth (1935-97)



Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 4309 valid cases.

Fig 2.4 shows the percentage of both cradle Nones (red) and current Nones (blue) by year of birth, going back as far as 1935. This shows very clearly two things. Firstly, the gradual increase in both bringing one's children up nonreligiously (or at least, in a way that they would, in retrospect, identify as having been nonreligiously), and coming to identify as having No religion. That is to say, of those born in 1950 (and thus roughly 65 when surveyed in 2015), around 10% say that they were brought up with No religion, but almost 40% say that they now have No religion. For those born in 1995 (and roughly 20 when surveyed), the proportions are around 35% and 65%. Secondly, comparison of the trend lines (dotted) shows that the percentage of nonverts in a given birth year has remained roughly constant over the whole 60-plus year period. That is, for any given birth year, the proportion of current Nones (in 2015) is roughly thirty percentage points higher than the proportion of cradle Nones.

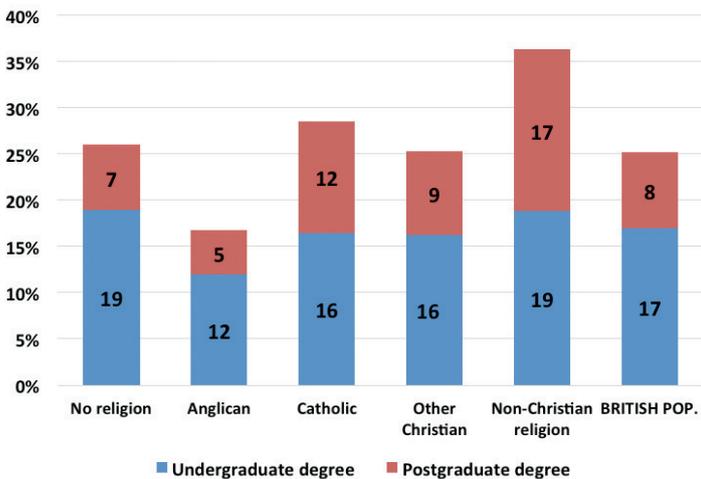
Fig. 2.5: Race/ethnicity profiles of main (non) religious groups, and the British adult population



Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 2097 (No religion), 736 (Anglican), 375 (Catholic), 739 (Other Christian), 365 (Non-Christian religion), and 4312 (British pop.) valid cases.

In terms of race, Nones are significantly Whiter than the British average. Overall, among the nonreligious, 1% identify as Black, 2% as Asian, and 2% as Mixed or Other. This puts them significantly behind our other groups, excepting only Anglicans, in terms of racial diversity. Unfortunately, although the BSA offers a number of different Black and Asian categories (combined here), it has only a single, undifferentiated White category. It remains possible, therefore, that this masks a degree of ethnic diversity among White Nones – as, for instance, it certainly does in the case of Catholics.<sup>14</sup>

Fig. 2.6 Proportions of university graduates in main (non)religious groupings (ages 25+)

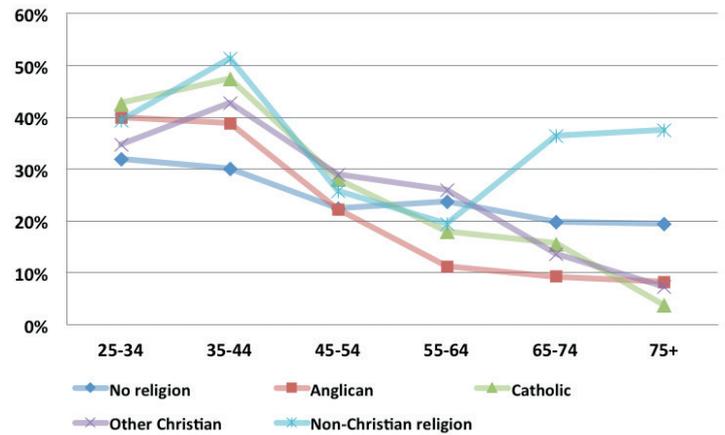


Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 1782 (No religion), 712 (Anglican), 340 (Catholic), 675 (Other Christian), 301 (Non-Christian religion), and 4312 (British pop.) valid cases.

Fig. 2.5 shows the proportions of each of our five main groupings to have attained an undergraduate and/or postgraduate degree as their highest level of educational attainment. (NB: It would be a fair assumption that a large majority of those who specified ‘postgraduate degree’ also have an undergraduate one, but if so, these are not counted twice.) The data excludes those under 25 years of age, since, in the case of groups with large proportions of younger affiliates – i.e., No religion and Non-Christian religion – to include many of those who have not yet had time to gain degrees, would give a misleadingly low figure.

First of all, to take the overall proportion of graduates (i.e., each column as a whole), the nonreligious have slightly more than does the British population in general, though fewer than do Catholics and (especially) the Non-Christian religions. In terms of those specifically with postgraduate degrees, the Nones have the second lowest proportion, behind Anglicans. Catholics and (again, especially) members of Non-Christian religions stand out here too.

Fig. 2.7 Proportion of graduates in main (non)religious groupings (ages 25+), by age group



Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 17821 (No religion), 735 (Anglican), 339 (Catholic), 675 (Other Christian), 299 (Non-Christian religion) valid cases

The above graph breaks down the total-graduates data presented in fig. 2.6 by age category. This helps to reveal some remarkable facts about the changing relationships between religious identity and university education over time. For example, among the oldest cohorts (65-74 and 75+) 20% of the nonreligious are university graduates: much higher proportions than for any of our three Christian groups (though again, the proportion of graduates in Non-Christian religions is much higher still). However, Nones’ above-average levels of higher education fade as one works down through the age groups. Thus the nonreligious have the lowest levels of degree-level education among 25-34 and 35-44 year olds, and the joint-lowest (with Anglicans) among 45-54 year olds. Incidentally, this is not the first piece of research to note this general phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

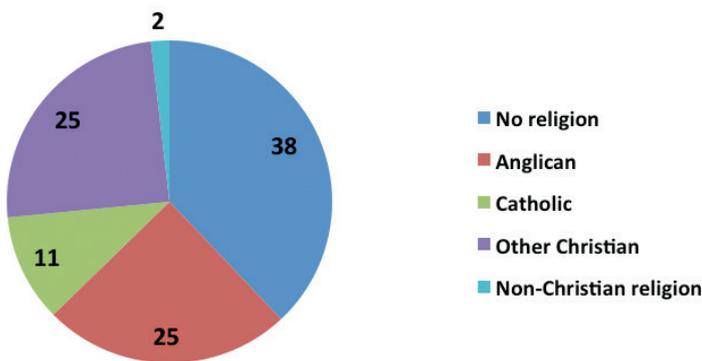
A reverse effect is also evident among the Christian groupings. This is especially true for Catholics, who while the least well-educated among the 75-and-overs, are the best-educated among 18-24 year olds, and second best among 25-34 year olds.

### 3. Upbringing, conversions, ‘nonversions’

As should be clear from previous chapters (see, e.g., fig. 1.5) the growth of the No religion population in Britain – as in other countries – is, to a large degree, the result of people who were brought up with a religious affiliation coming, later in life, to identify with none. As we’ll see, it is not the only effect at work. But this phenomenon of nonversion – i.e., from a religious affiliation to a nonreligious one (and thus, in a manner of speaking, a kind of deconversion or perhaps anti-conversion) – is the major factor.

This chapter therefore presents statistics shedding some light on this phenomenon, and indeed, on several others relating to questions of (non)religious upbringing and retention. Accordingly, figs 3.1 and 3.2 will explore the religious backgrounds of current Nones. Conversely, fig. 3.3 will look at the current affiliations of cradle Nones. Figs 3.4 and 3.5 will show the net effects of nonversions (and much fewer conversions in the opposite direction) on the different religions and denominations.

Fig. 3.1: Religious upbringing of current Nones in Britain

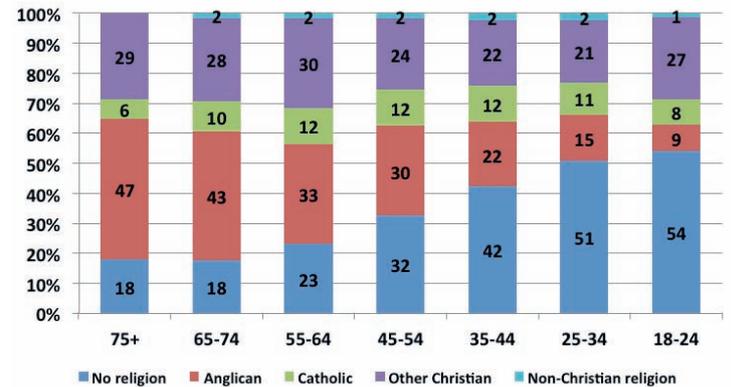


Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 2096 valid cases.

As has been noted several times already, the number of current Nones in Britain significantly outstrips the number of cradle Nones. That is to say, a large proportion of Nones must have been brought up with some kind of religious identity which they have since (largely) left behind.

The above pie chart demonstrates that this is indeed the case: slightly under two fifths of current Nones were brought up with No religion. Meanwhile, fully 61% of Nones are cradle Christians of some sort, with the bulk coming from Other Christian or Anglican backgrounds. (Incidentally, for those interested in Christian evangelisation, this highlights an important fact: there can be no hard and fast distinctions between outreach to ‘the nonreligious’ and pastoral concern for ‘non-practising Christians’. For indeed, a clear majority of the former are also the latter.) Meanwhile, only one in every fifty Nones was brought up in a non-Christian religion.

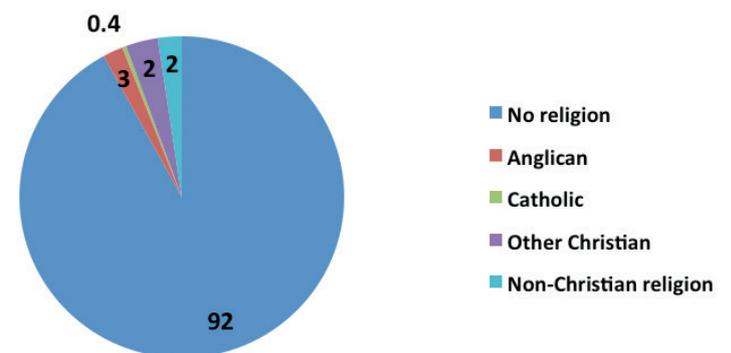
Fig. 3.2: Religious upbringing of current British Nones by age group



Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 2091 valid cases, and ranging between 94 (75+) and 427 (25-34) in each individual category.

Fig. 3.2 breaks down the previous data by age cohort: it shows the (non)religious upbringings of current Nones by our standard age categories. As with most of the age breakdowns in this report, there is a large degree of variation here. Most of it can likely be explained by a simple fact: as the proportion of cradle Nones has grown in the population (see fig. 2.4), the contribution from nonverts to overall None numbers has decreased over time. (And of course, the more cradle Nones there are, the fewer cradle religious there are around to convert in the first place.) Note, however, that even in the two youngest groups, a large proportion of Nones (albeit less than half, unlike in all older age groups) were not themselves brought up with No religion.

Fig. 3.3: Current religious affiliation of British cradle Nones

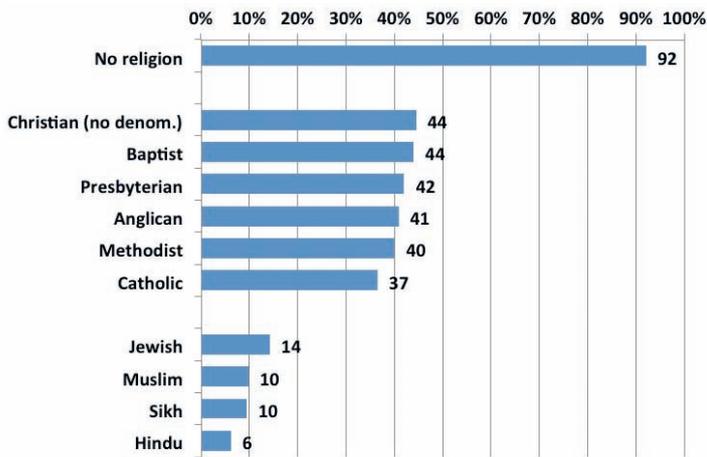


Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 865 valid cases.

Having looked at the upbringings of current Nones, we now turn to consider the current religious affiliations of those brought up with No religion. Most striking here is the very high proportion of cradle Nones – indeed, more than nine out of ten – who have retained this identity into adulthood. That does not mean, of course, that no one brought

up nonreligiously ever comes to identify with a religion in later life. The numbers are not, however terribly large. 3% of cradle Nones now identify as Anglicans, 2% as Other Christians, and 2% with one of the Non-Christian religions. Less than half of one percent are converts to Catholicism.

Fig. 3.4: Proportion of British adults born-and-raised in selected religious groups who now identify as having No religion

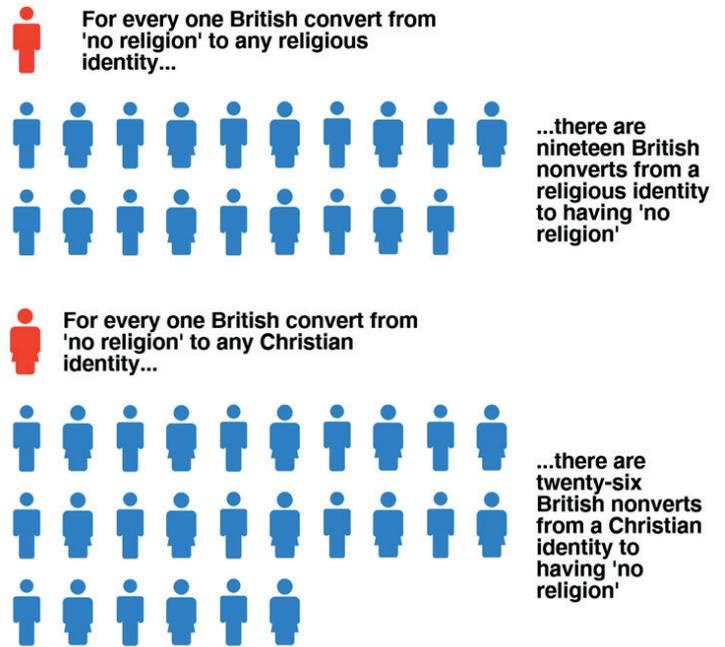


Source: BSA 2015. Weighted data, based on 4320 valid cases, and ranging between 28 (Jewish) and 42 (Sikh), and 1266 (Anglican) in individual categories.

As we have seen above (especially figs 3.1, 3.2), a very large proportion of current Nones say that they were brought up within a religion and/or specific denomination. Here we present data showing precisely what proportion of those brought up in each main Christian denomination or non-Christian religion in Britain now say they have No religion.

We have already seen (fig. 3.3) that 92% of cradle Nones now identify as Nones. The same is true, though, of roughly two fifths of those brought up in each of Britain's six main Christian groups: ranging from 44% of cradle Baptists and 'Christians - no denomination', down to 37% of cradle Catholics. By contrast, much smaller proportions raised in non-Christian religions have 'nonverted' (see also fig. 1.5). Even these, though, are not impervious to the temptations of None-ness: 6% of cradle Hindus, 10% each of cradle Muslims and cradle Sikhs, and 14% of cradle Jews now regard themselves as having No religion.

Fig. 3.5: Nonversion ratio



Source: BSA 2015.

Two key trends identified in this report – high levels of retention among those brought up with No religion, and significant numbers of those raised religiously ending up with No religion later in life – come together in fig. 3.5. This infographic presents the ratio of converts from cradle No religion to a religious affiliation, to nonverts to No religion from a cradle religion.

When one looks at all religious affiliations - that is, cradle Nones later identifying with any religion, and those brought up in any religion becoming Nones - the ratio is one to nineteen. That is, for every nineteen people raised religiously who are 'lost' to No religion, only one person raised nonreligiously has converted to a religion.

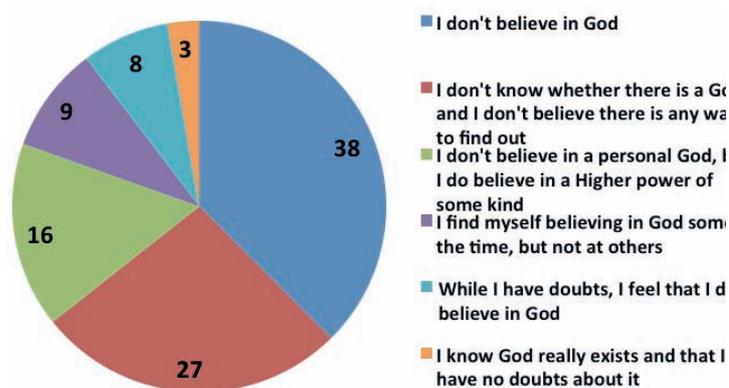
These numbers are starker still when one looks only at cradle Nones becoming Christians, and cradle Christians becoming Nones. For every twenty-six former Christians who now identify with No religion, there is only one former None who now identifies with a Christian label of some kind.

## 4. Religiosity, church attendance, prayer

In this final chapter, we turn to what might seem a counterintuitive topic: the religiosity of the nonreligious. Recall, however, that throughout this report we have been defining the nonreligious in terms of affiliation: that is to say, as those who answer ‘No religion’ when asked ‘Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?’. That does not, in itself, preclude a person from otherwise regarding themselves as a ‘religious person’ in some sense, from attending religious services, from praying, or from having religious and/or theistic beliefs. Remember also that fully three fifths of current British Nones were, by their own assessment, brought up in a religion.

Whereas all previous figures presented in this report have been taken from the British Social Attitudes survey (all, except for historical data, from 2015), most of those in this chapter come instead from the 2014 wave of the European Social Survey.<sup>16</sup> This is because the ESS asks questions on self-reported religiosity (fig. 4.2), attendance at religious services (figs 4.3, 4.4) and frequency of prayer (figs 4.5, 4.6). With the exception of religious attendance, the BSA only asks these questions on a periodic basis as part of a dedicated suite of religion questions: the last time this occurred was in 2008. However, since the ESS does not routinely ask about belief in God, in fig. 4.1 we do present data on this topic from BSA 2008 (although, given the time lapse, between then and now, this should to be taken as broadly suggestive, and not as a reliable proxy for the contemporary situation). Finally, we end this report by showing, based on the foregoing ESS data, the proportions of British Nones who, despite, their religious affiliation, might fairly be described as being religious or semi-religious Nones.

Fig. 4.1: Belief in God of British Nones (2008)

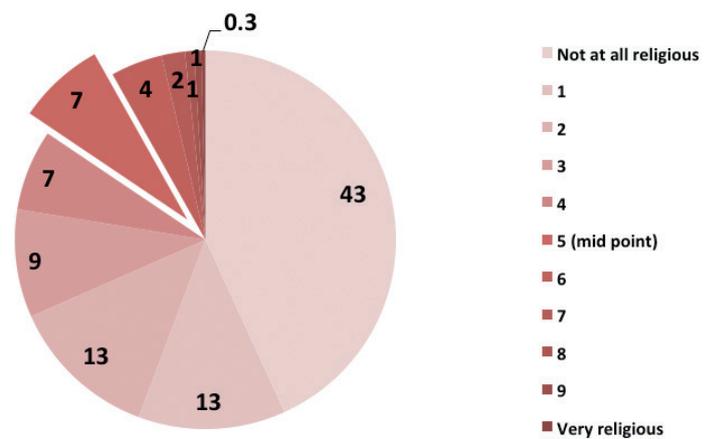


Source: BSA 2008. Weighted data, based on 840 valid cases.

In 2008, the last time the question was asked as part of the BSA, roughly four in ten Nones said that they didn't believe in God, and a little under three in ten that they didn't know whether there was or not, and didn't believe there was any way to find out. While both terms admit of a range of definitions and interpretations, these might fairly be called classic ‘atheist’ and ‘agnostic’ positions, respectively. These two positions therefore represent around two-thirds (i.e., 65%) of Nones. A further 16% opted for denying ‘a personal God’, but affirming ‘a Higher Power of some kind’. Unfortunately, this category, while something of a religion survey classic, is very difficult to interpret – or to guess how others might have interpreted it.

Depending on where one chooses to place ‘I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others’ – it is normally included among the ‘believing’ answers, but it is of course just as much an expression of unbelief as it is of belief in God – this leaves the ‘None believers’ (as opposed to the nonbelievers) at either 11% or 20%. What is clear, however, is that only a very small proportion of Nones admit to having a firm, doubt-free conviction of God's existence.

Fig. 4.2: Self-reported religiosity of current British Nones

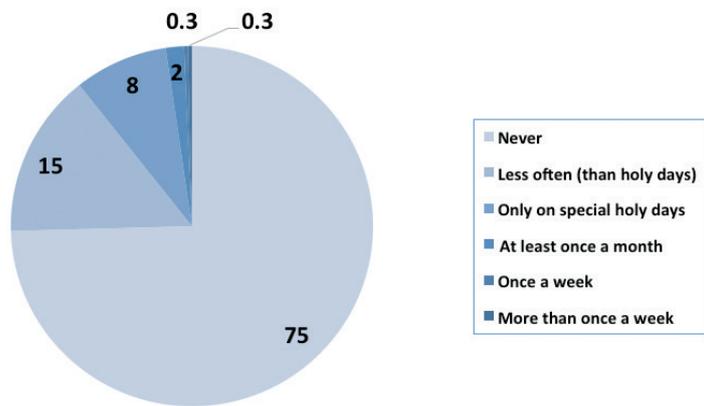


Source: ESS 2014. Weighted data, based on 1160 valid cases. Question asked: ‘Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?’

Moving on to the ESS 2014 data (used throughout the rest of this chapter), we see in fig. 4.2 levels of self-assessed religiosity (‘how religious would you say you are?’) among Nones, on an eleven-point rating scale.<sup>17</sup>

By far the largest segment, at 43%, say that they are ‘Not at all religious’. Interestingly, that leaves almost three in every five Nones affirming some level of personal religiousness above ‘none at all’. For the most part, these are at the lower ends of the scale: fully 85% of all Nones rank themselves below the notional mid-point mark of ‘5’. Only 8%, meanwhile, place themselves in one of the five categories above it, with ever-smaller percentages opting for the higher categories. Only a third of one percent affirm that they are ‘Very religious’.

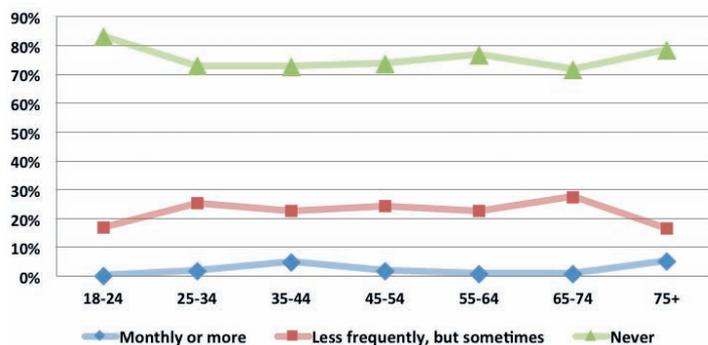
Fig. 4.3: Frequency of attendance at religious services of British Nones



Source: ESS 2014. Weighted data, based on 1160 valid cases. Question asked: 'Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?'

Three quarters of Nones say that, outside of special occasions such as weddings and funerals, they 'Never' now attend religious services. Of the quarter who sometimes do, the great majority attend 'Only on special holy days' (8%) – for most of them, given the prevalence of a Christian upbringing, presumably Christmas and/or Easter – or 'Less often' (15%) even than that. Altogether, around one in every forty Nones attends religious services on a monthly-or-more basis. Only around one in every two hundred attends once a week (or oftener).

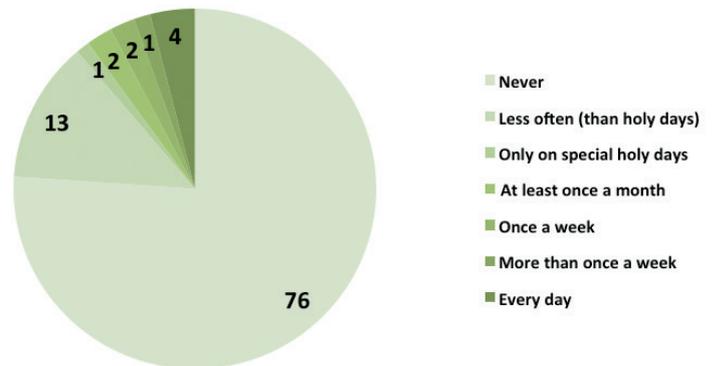
Fig. 4.4: Frequency of attendance at religious services of British Nones, by age group



Source: ESS 2014. Weighted data, based on 1117 valid cases. Question asked: 'Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?'

The above graph breaks down our attendance data by age group. The patterns are fairly consistent across the age groups, although there are a couple of small exceptions worth noting. Never attending is, for example, commonest among 18-24s. There are also slight peaks in frequent (i.e., monthly or more) practice among both the 35-44s (perhaps to do with family and/or schools?), and the over 75s.

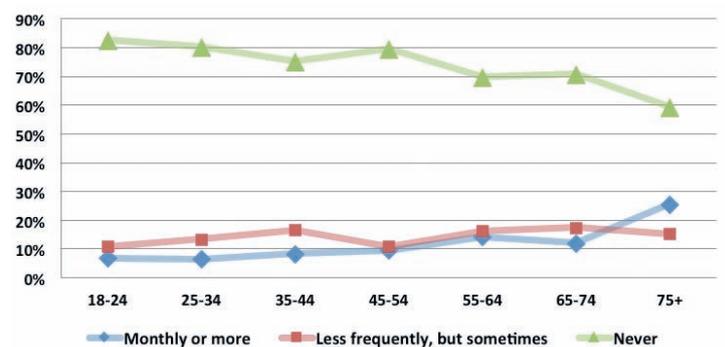
Fig. 4.5: Frequency of prayer among British Nones



Source: ESS 2014. Weighted data, based on 1115 valid cases. Question asked: 'Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray?'

As might be expected, the great majority of Nones say that they never pray. Combined with those who say that they pray less often than on special holy days (that is, rarely), this adds up to around nine out of every ten of the nonreligious. This leaves some 11% who pray with some level of regularity, with – interestingly enough – the largest group among these, at 4%, saying that they pray on a daily basis. Overall, 7% of Nones say that they pray once a week or more.

Fig. 4.6: Frequency of prayer among British Nones, by age group



Source: ESS 2014. Weighted data, based on 1115 valid cases. Question asked: 'Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray?'

In contrast to fig. 4.4, frequency of prayer shows clear trends over our different age categories. Unlike with religious attendance, there appears to be a gradual progression in prayer up the ages: the older the group, the higher levels of frequent prayer, and the lower levels of never praying. This pattern becomes especially sharp in the very oldest category: almost a quarter of over 75s say that they pray at least monthly, and less than 60% say that they never do. Based on these data alone, however, it is not possible to state whether this is an age effect (i.e., people get more prayerful the older they get), or whether it is a cohort effect (e.g., older groups were brought up with higher levels of religiosity, which has stayed with them over the decades).

Fig. 4.7: ‘Religious’, ‘Semi-religious’, and ‘Nonreligious’ Nones in the British population

	Proportion of British Nones as whole	Estimated* numbers in Britain (millions)
<b>Religious Nones</b> [= high religiosity and prays at least monthly]	3.1%	0.8
<b>Semi-religious Nones</b> [= high religiosity or prays at least monthly]	11.5%	2.8
<b>Nonreligious Nones</b>	85.4%	20.7

\*Based on Office for National Statistics, mid-2015 estimate of total 18+ population of 49.9 million.

Source: ESS 2014

As we have seen in the foregoing charts, while the overwhelming majority of Nones exhibit very low levels of religiosity across our various indicators, there nevertheless remain minorities who are clear exceptions to the overall trend. We have seen, for example, that some Nones – albeit in very small numbers – say that they are convinced of God’s existence, admit high levels of personal religiosity, attend religious services regularly, or pray regularly.

Fig. 4.7 represents a (necessarily rough) attempt to quantify this, taking the data presented above on religiosity and prayer.<sup>18</sup> In this schematic ‘Religious Nones’ are people who both rated their own religiousness at 6 or higher, and who say that they pray at least a monthly basis. ‘Semi-religious Nones’ are those who fulfill one, but not both, of those criteria. And ‘Nonreligious Nones’ are those who fit neither.

Clearly, straightforwardly ‘Nonreligious Nones’ make up the largest proportion: 85.4% of all Nones, and therefore equating to around 20.7 million British adults. (Furthermore, a very large proportion of this group say that they both never pray, and are not at all religious: these ‘Ultra-nonreligious Nones’ alone account for 40.3% of all Nones, and thus around 8.3 million British adults).

At the other end of the scale, 3.1% count here as ‘Religious Nones’: a small proportion certainly, but even this amounts to somewhere in the region of 0.8 million British adults. Our ‘Semi-religious Nones’, 11.5% of all Nones, make up a further 2.8 million.

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Among other scholars, the works of Lois Lee, Callum Brown, Steve Bruce, and David Voas stand out here.
- <sup>2</sup> The only exceptions are 1988 and 1992 when, due to funding being diverted elsewhere, the BSA did not run.
- <sup>3</sup> For full sampling, weighting, and other methodological details, please see: NatCen Social Research, *British Social Attitudes 2015 User Guide*, available online at [doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/8116/mrdoc/pdf/8116\\_bsa\\_user\\_guide\\_2015.pdf](http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/8116/mrdoc/pdf/8116_bsa_user_guide_2015.pdf); and ESS, 'Methodological Overview', available online at [www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/) (last visited 19 March 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> Available for free download here: [www.stmarys.ac.uk/benedict-xvi/docs/2016-may-contemporary-catholicism-report.pdf](http://www.stmarys.ac.uk/benedict-xvi/docs/2016-may-contemporary-catholicism-report.pdf) (last visited 19 March 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> This is an interesting question. Recent qualitative research suggests that being 'nonreligious' is, at least for many people, a substantive aspect of their sense of self. That is to say, it is not simply a lack of a certain sort of (religious) identity. See Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- <sup>6</sup> Its coining is traditionally attributed to Glenn M. Vernon, 'The Religious "Nones": A Neglected Category', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 7/2 (1968): 219-29.
- <sup>7</sup> Or, in the words of *The Oxford Dictionary of Atheism*: 'In recent scholarship, a person who was brought up with a religious affiliation, but who now identifies as having no religion (i.e. none). The term, a conscious pun on 'convert', is intended to distinguish people who have become nonreligious via a process of deconversion or disaffiliation from those 'cradle nones' who were raised with no religion' (Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee, *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016]).
- <sup>8</sup> As noted in the *Contemporary Catholicism* report (from which this endnote is largely borrowed), the 'Christian – no denomination' category is an awkward one. For example, there are strong grounds for thinking that it includes both those with only a relatively weak sense of Christian belonging (i.e., they have no specific attachment to any Christian community, but still identify as Christian, perhaps for cultural or national reasons), and often highly committed members of avowedly 'non-denominational' churches. For our purposes here, therefore, it makes little sense to treat 'Christian - no denomination' as a coherent grouping alongside Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, and Baptists. That said, a much more detailed analysis of this category than is possible within the scope of the present work would indeed be very valuable - not least since it includes so large a minority of the British population.  
  
On the problems of catch-all 'no denomination' categories, and an attempt to subdivide similar ones in American datasets, see B. Steensland et al., 'The Measure of American Religion: Toward Improving the State of the Art', *Social Forces* 79/1 (2000), 291-318.
- <sup>9</sup> These are based on the (now obsolete) Government Office Regions. For a useful map, see [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/geography/beginner-s-guide/maps/regions-former-government-office-regions-gors-effective-at-31st-december-2011.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/geography/beginner-s-guide/maps/regions-former-government-office-regions-gors-effective-at-31st-december-2011.pdf) (last visited 20 March 2017).
- <sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Ruth Gledhill, who has helped to crystallize my thinking on this point. On this subject, see Ruth Gledhill, 'Signs of Resurrection', available online at [igor.gold.ac.uk/~rgled001/SignsofResurrection/](http://igor.gold.ac.uk/~rgled001/SignsofResurrection/) (last visited 20 March 2017).
- <sup>11</sup> See endnote 7, above.
- <sup>12</sup> ONS datasets available online at [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/2015-06-25](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/2015-06-25) (last visited 9 February 2017).
- <sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce, *Why are Women More Religious than Men?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- <sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Stephen Bullivant, *Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A Statistical Report Based on Recent British Social Attitudes Survey Data*, Catholic Research Forum Reports 1 (Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2016), 18 n. 11.
- <sup>15</sup> David Voas and Siobhan McAndrew, 'Three Puzzles of Non-Religion in Britain', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27/1 (2012): 29-48.
- <sup>16</sup> For comparison, ESS 2014 gives the proportion of those answering 'No' to the question 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?' as 51.8% of the British population.
- <sup>17</sup> Admittedly, scales such as these pose problems of interpretation: it is difficult to know (or even guess) what people mean in describing themselves as, say, a '4' or a '7' on religiousness.
- <sup>18</sup> These were chosen because the belief in God data were from a different (and much older) dataset, and it was felt that the religious attendance data is complicated by family/school factors (i.e., it is arguably a less accurate measure of personal religiosity than is prayer).

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