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Young, British and searching: rethinking secularization through Gen Z

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ABSTRACT

'Generation Z' is a generational cohort more likely to choose 'no religion' as their preferred self-designation and to seek out their own personal approach to spirituality beyond institutional religion. This article analyses the findings of the British sample of a cross-national survey of 4,889 young people (18–29) from eight countries. It explores the religious identity and ethical views of British young people, including how their views align or diverge from doctrinal or cultural expectations of the three most prominent faith traditions in Britain: Catholicism, Anglicanism and Islam. The study reveals the complexity of young Britons' navigation of faith and spirituality, and indicates that linear secularization narratives do not adequately reflect the reality of changing attitudes towards institutional religion. We argue that more nuanced interpretive frameworks that include the reality of human agency can better account for the diversity of belief and unbelief among Generation Z.

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British young people;
Gen Z; identity; religion;
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1. Introduction: rethinking secularization in Gen Z Britain

A prevailing assumption in much sociological literature, underpinned by significant empirical evidence, is that Generation Z (Gen Z) is more likely than previous generations to identify with 'no religion' and to adopt individualized or eclectic spiritual practices over formal religion (Grzegorz and Szromek 2023; Landová 2022; Manalang 2021; Voas and Crockett 2005; Woodhead 2016). Such findings align with the work of Norris and Inglehart (2014) and Inglehart (2021), who argue that, because of modernization, successive generations are socialized into less religious values, reflecting their rising levels of increased existential security, and evolving cultural norms. In his 2021 study, *Religion's sudden decline*, Inglehart draws on copious empirical evidence from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Values Study data (1981–2020) to argue that secularization—understood as a decline in religious authority and practice—has accelerated. Inglehart's approach emphasizes structural change

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as one of the key determinants of secularization. However, a UK study by McAleer and Barwall-Symmons (2025) found that Christian church attendance among Gen Z has, in some cases, increased, with young adults more likely to attend regularly than all but the over-65s. While we are cautious about the limitations of generational labels, they offer a useful heuristic to examine how a particular cohort engages with religion and spirituality in light of wider cultural shifts. We define Gen Z as those born between the late 1990s and early 2000s (Dimock 2019), which corresponds to young people aged under 30 at the time of this study.

To explore the religious, spiritual, and ethical views of Gen Z in Britain,¹ this article draws on data from a cross-national survey conducted in 2023 by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. The survey data revealed a nuanced picture of non-belief, spirituality, and formal religion in Britain, rather than the linear decline in belief and practice proposed by Inglehart (2021). To better interpret these complexities, we turn to the theoretical framework of critical realism, particularly the work of Archer (2003), which challenges reductionist accounts of cultural change. Archer proposes a stratified model of society where structure, culture, and agency interact dynamically. Individuals exercise reflexivity—what she calls the ‘internal conversation’—as they navigate inherited norms, structures, and belief systems. This framework enables a more nuanced reading of our data that does not overlook the agency of young people in constructing religious, spiritual, and ethical identities.

2. Religious and spiritual identity: between structure, culture and agency

Human identity, including religious and spiritual identity, is a multi-dimensional phenomenon shaped by personal experience, cultural contexts and social frameworks. Jenkins (2008, 5) defines it as ‘a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and members of collectivities.’ Identity formation involves the development of ‘self-understandings’ of who we are in relation to diverse personal and social spaces. Like other forms of identity, religious identity is not always clear-cut. As Bullivant puts it, ‘there are a large number of reasons why people might count themselves as “belonging” to a religious tradition, not all of which map easily onto that tradition’s “ideal”’ (2020, 19). The fact that a person identifies with a particular faith tradition does not necessarily mean they subscribe to or even know the tenets of that faith. Their self-understanding of that identity may be more related to cultural or ethnic considerations rather than religious ones: a sense of belonging is different from believing and behaving (see Day 2011).

In the UK, longitudinal studies such as those by Voas and Crockett (2005) concluded that generational change is the key driver of the decline in religious belief, attendance and affiliation. Yet, other studies have shown that young people, while increasingly identifying as ‘nones’, are also likely to state that they are ‘spiritual but not religious’ (see Madge et al. 2014), suggesting that spiritual questions and ethical concerns remain significant and fundamental to identity formation.

Archer's work (2000, 2003) places personal agency at the heart of the formation of human identity: individuals' 'ultimate concerns'—the values or commitments that they consider most important—are shaped by social and cultural contexts but are not determined by them. Individuals can exercise agency in responding to their contexts, using reflexivity to construct meaning in a volatile world.

These conceptual insights provide the basis for our analysis of the British survey data. This study explores how young people in Britain are navigating the relationship between belief, spirituality and religion. While many young people reject formal affiliation with institutional religion, their responses indicate engagement with deep spiritual and ethical questions, what Archer would call their 'ultimate concerns'. The quantitative data allows us to identify patterns and apparent contradictions in how young people perceive faith, spirituality and key moral issues. This analysis will serve as the foundation for a later stage of qualitative research based on in depth interviews to explore how young people in Britain interpret and express their religious and spiritual identities.

3. Religion in 21st century Britain

As the *British Religion in Numbers* (2024) project demonstrates, there is a substantive stock of quantitative data on views about religions, values and spirituality in the UK, although there are few studies that have interrogated the data in relation to young people or which have specifically sampled young people. The sources range from official and academic surveys to work carried out by think tanks, faith groups such as the Church of England and non-religious groups such as Humanists UK. Two of the most rigorous UK surveys are the ten-yearly census conducted by the *Office for National Statistics* (ONS) and associated bodies² and the annual *British Social Attitudes* (BSA) survey carried out by the *National Centre for Social Research*. We will draw primarily on these sources to contextualise our survey's data as well as work by the Theos think tank, the YouGov polling company and the WVS.

Since 1983, the BSA survey has tracked attitudes on a range of social and political matters including questions about current (a) religious observance, (b) religious affiliation and (c) religious upbringing. The trend is clear for all three religious indicators: Britain is a much less religious country than first surveyed. In 1983, 56% stated that they never attended a religious service; by 2015, this figure had risen to 70%. The proportion who stated they were not raised within any religion rose from 6% in 1991 (when the question was first asked) to 20% in 2015 (Clements 2017). In 1983, two-thirds of Britons identified as Christian; in 2019, this figure had fallen to 38% and 52% stated that they did not belong to any religion (Curtice et al. 2019). By 2021, the BSA survey—as reported by Humanists UK (2021)—showed that 12% of the UK population identified as Anglicans, 7% as Catholics, 18% as other Christians, and 9% identified with other religions; 53% did not identify with any religion (the 'nones'). UK national census data bears out the ongoing decline in religious affiliation (see [Figure 1](#)). Around 46% identify as Christian, approximately 37% report having no religion and about 6.5% identify as Muslim.

3.1. Religious affiliation in the UK from the UK national census

Christian faith and practice, particularly the Anglican tradition³—since the 16th-century Reformation, the largest Christian denomination in the UK—have been on a steady downward track: in the last census conducted in 2021, Christianity lost its position as the declared religious affiliation of the majority of UK citizens. Since 2001, the census carried out in England and Wales has asked a voluntary question about religious affiliation and practice that was answered by 94% in the last census in 2021. Respondents can identify as ‘No religion’, ‘Christian’, ‘Buddhist’, ‘Hindu’, ‘Jewish’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Sikh’, or declare their affiliation to another religious group in their response to ‘any other religion’ (ONS 2024). The results for England and Wales showed that ‘Christian’ remained the most common response to the religion question (46.2%, 27.5 million people), a 13% decrease from 2011 (ONS 2024). However, the fastest growing group was the ‘nones’, those who identify as having no religion. This was the second most common response, increasing by 12% to 37.2% (22.2 million) from 25.2% (14.1 million) in 2011.

Generation Z has the lowest level of religious affiliation of any surveyed generation in the UK. BSA surveys show that between 60% and 70% state that they have no religion. Voas’ analysis (5 February 2023) revealed that ‘just 4% of people in England under the age of 45 regard themselves as belonging to the Church of England.’ The 2021 census (ONS (Office for National Statistics) 2021) data showed that Christians had the oldest average age, 51, compared to a population average of 41. The Muslims were the religious group with the youngest average age of 27, and ‘nones’ had an average age of 32. An earlier study of BSA data (Voas and Crockett 2005) examining the role of period, cohort and age effect on religious change concluded that the decline in religious belief and belonging is generational.

One of the few studies specifically examining young people’s religion and belief was produced in 2020 by Advance HE, using data from over two million higher education students (see Codiroli McMaster 2020). From 2017, the *Higher Education*

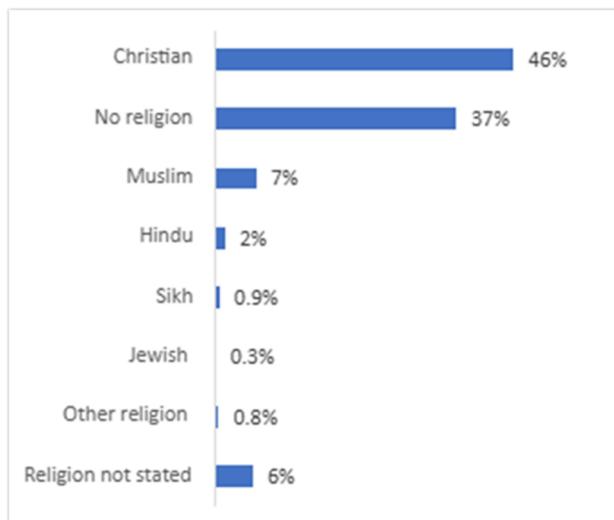


Figure 1. Religious affiliation in the UK. Source: National Census, 2021.

Statistics Agency (HESA) has mandated the collection of data about students' religion and belief and this is now reported by the higher education sector on an annual basis. The study found that of those who responded (approximately 18% did not), 49.8% stated that they had no religion, 32.9% identified as Christian, 8.9% as Muslim and 7% as other religions (HESA 2020, 8).

From these studies, we can draw three conclusions. First, the religious affiliation of Gen Z is the lowest recorded of any British generation. Second, Britain has developed a more pluralistic religious landscape in which, nevertheless, Christianity continues to be the principal religious affiliation. However, third, the age profile of religious affiliation shows that Islam's age profile is younger than that of other religions and Christianity's is the oldest.

4. Sample characteristics and survey design

The survey covered eight countries—Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, Spain, and the United Kingdom—and gathered responses from 4,889 participants aged 18–29, using Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI), administered by the Spanish research firm GAD3. Participants were selected through quota sampling to ensure demographic representation by sex, age, and geography in each country. The survey questionnaire of closed questions (multiple-choice and Likert scales) was developed by a team of cross-national researchers to collect quantitative data examining young people's views on religion, spirituality, key global issues, personal ethics and Catholic teaching.

Our survey is directed at a particular generational group aged between 18 and 29. This group is broadly known as 'Gen Z' (see Dimock, 17 January 2019). There has been some criticism of the use of generational labels (see Cohen 2021), with concerns that they oversimplify and generalise; the categories are not scientifically defined; they emphasise differences rather than similarities; and there may be a bias towards higher socio-economic class and (we would add) western or US perspectives (Dimock 2023). Nevertheless, previous studies have identified the significance of generational cohort—including that of Gen Z—in understanding views on values, spirituality and religion (Manap et al. 2021; Vera-Toscano and Meroni 2021).

As shown in [Table 1](#), the survey gathered the views of 302 men and 301 women sampled across the UK, 62% of whom were single, 20% had a state-recognised partnership (that is, a civil relationship or marriage), and 17% responded that they were in an informal partnership.

The survey first examines views on God, spirituality and religious affiliation. It also seeks to shed light on features of spiritual and/or religious affiliation and their relationship to respondents' views on global ethical and social issues. It explores attitudes towards belief of those who do not have a religious faith, as well as exploring specific areas of faith of those who identify as believers in general and Catholics in particular.

The concepts of religious identity and spirituality are key analytical categories that underlie many of the survey's questions. We ask respondents about the presence of 'spirituality' in their lives (Questions 3 and 4); whether certain 'religious' statements are 'reflective' of them (Question 5); what attributes they associate with

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics.

Gender		Age	
Male	50%	18–23	50%
Female	50%	24–29	50%
Level of Education		Employment Status	
Doctorate	1%	Private Sector worker	33%
Masters	17%	Public Sector worker	22%
Undergraduate	51%	Self-employed	5%
High School	29%	Student	27%
Primary	1%	Unemployed	12%
None	1%	Unpaid domestic worker	0.33%
		Retired/pensioner	0.33%
Marital Status			
Single	62%		
Unmarried partner not officially recognized	17%		
Officially recognised partnership	20%		
Separated/divorced	0.33%		

Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

religion and which images they associate with God (Questions 6 and 7); whether they believe or not in God and whether they identify with a faith tradition and, if so, which one (Questions 10 and 11). Questions 12–15 asked anyone identifying as atheist or agnostic about their reasons for an absence of belief, as well as questions about further aspects of belief and unbelief. Questions 16–22 probed those identifying as believers in God about their faith. Finally, those who identified as Catholic (Roman or Greek)—97 respondents or 15% of the total UK sample—were asked about Catholic doctrine and faith in questions 23–33.

5. Findings: mapping belief, spirituality and moral values in Gen Z Britain

Respondents were asked to state with which faith tradition they most identified. As shown in [Figure 2](#), 28% identified with no religion, 15% identified as Church of England/Anglican,⁴ 15%, as Catholics and 12% as Muslims. The higher percentage of Muslims in our sample, as compared to the 6.5% reported in the 2021 UK census, can be partially explained by demographic trends; Muslims have the youngest age profile of any religious group in the UK, and this will be reflected in a survey centered on young people.

Smaller percentages identified with other faith traditions: just under 2% identify as Hindu, 0.9% as Sikh, 0.5% as Jewish and 0.5% as Buddhist. Combining all Christian affiliations, around 40% identify as Christians compared to 46% in the 2021 national census. One surprising finding is the near parity between Catholics and Anglicans. As the established religion of the United Kingdom and the dominant religion since the Reformation, the Church of England might be expected to command a higher percentage of religious affiliation. The 15% identifying as Catholics in our sample exceeds national estimates, which suggest that Catholics make up between 8% and 9% of the UK population, around 5.7 million people of whom approximately 4.15 million are in England and Wales, 841,000 in Scotland, and 738,000 in Northern Ireland. Our sample was geographically representative and not weighted to nations with large Catholic populations, e.g., Northern Ireland, where

42% of the population identifies as Catholic. The overrepresentation of Catholics in our data is somewhat anomalous.

Due to the small number of respondents who identified as Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, Buddhist or Christian outside the Anglican/Catholic tradition, these groups were excluded from our analysis. The subsequent analysis focusses on respondents who identify as Catholic, Muslim, Anglican or who have no religious affiliation. We examine how this self-designated identity relates to belief in God and attitudes towards a range of socio-political issues.

Where sample sizes permit (i.e., there are above 50 respondents per data subset), we use identification with one of the three main faith traditions as an independent variable to explore differences and similarities in respondents' views on spirituality, belief and global issues.

5.1. Spirituality, faith and belief

The survey began by asking about 'spirituality', a category that has become increasingly salient in research on youth religiosity (see Madge et al. 2014). As shown in Figure 3, a large majority of participants (86%) indicated that spirituality has been at least 'somewhat present' in their lives, while only 12% responded that it had *not* been present at all. There were no differences found between men's and women's responses. When asked to compare their perception of their spirituality now to five years ago, 46% considered it to be more present and 38% less present.

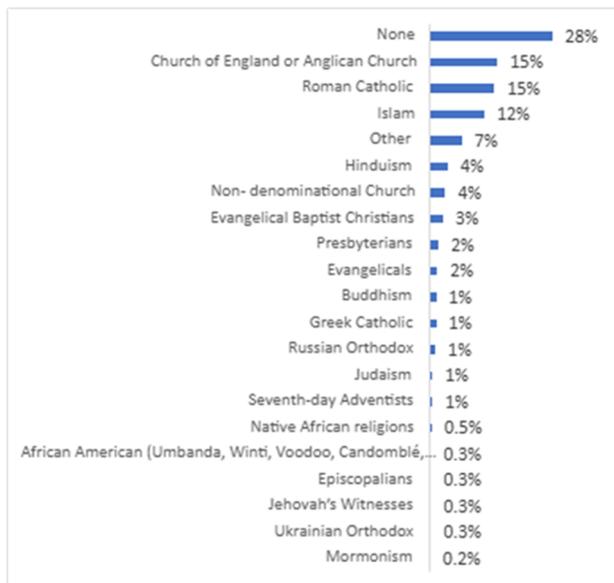


Figure 2. Faith traditions. Q11. Which of the following faith traditions do you most identify with? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

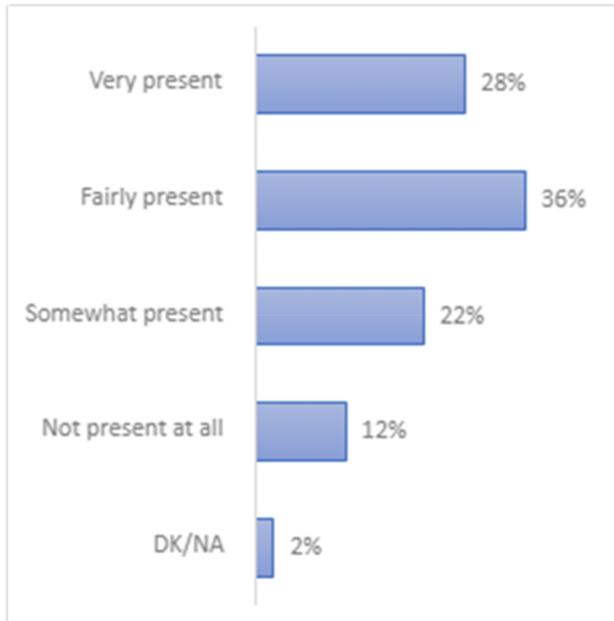


Figure 3. Spirituality. Q3. To what extent do you consider that spirituality has been present in your life? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

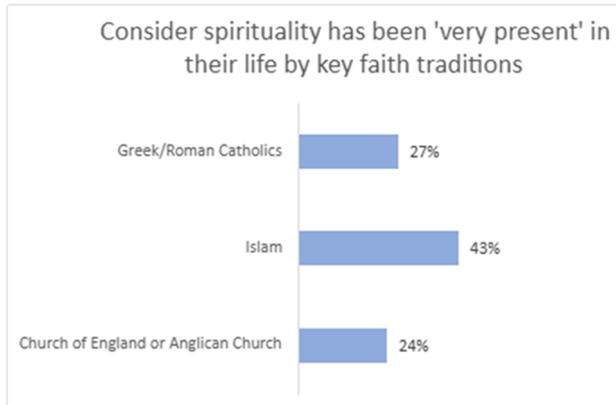


Figure 4. Spirituality by faith traditions. Q3. To what extent do you consider that spirituality has been present in your life? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

As shown in [Figure 4](#), Muslims were most likely to state that spirituality was ‘very present’ in their lives (43%) compared to Catholics (27%) and Anglicans (24%).

Respondents were asked in question 10 to choose the statement that best described their current belief or disbelief in God. Seven options were provided to capture a range of belief positions. Forty-eight per cent (291 respondents) selected the statement ‘I do believe in God’, in line with the 2022 UK *World Values Survey* data, which found that 49% of people believe in God, while 48% do not. Unlike many large-scale surveys, ours offered participants more nuanced response options. For analytical clarity, we interpret responses as follows:

- **Atheism** is represented by those who selected options 5 ('I used to believe in God but I no longer do') and option 6 ('I have never believed in God'), making up 17% of the sample.
- **Agnosticism and uncertainty** are captured by options 2 ('I am searching to believe in God'), option 3 ('I don't think that we can know whether God exists') and option 4 ('I am indifferent about the existence of God'), which together account for 21% of respondents. Option 2 may suggest a positive orientation towards belief, yet it still expresses uncertainty and searching rather than conviction. Young agnostics, as so defined, amount to 21% of the sample.

These combined figures—17% atheists and 21% agnostics—suggest a significant segment of Gen Z respondents who do not affirm belief in God, but they fall below those reported by the 2022 *World Values Survey*. That study found that Gen Z was the age cohort most likely to identify as atheists, with 31% describing themselves in this way (Duffy et al. 2023, 17). This discrepancy may be attributed to the increased response options available in our survey.

5.2. Religious views. Gender and faith tradition

Question 5 presented ten statements grouped around four dimensions:

- **Religious or ethical beliefs:** 'I believe sin exists'; 'Each person's conscience determines what is right and what is wrong'; 'It is not necessary to believe in God to have good values'.
- **Perceptions of religion's value:** 'I think religion is one of the things that parents should pass on to their children'; 'I believe that belonging to a religious community can help one to cope with life's difficulties'.
- **Expectations of religious peoples:** 'I expect a religious person to be exemplary'; 'Religious people forgive more easily than others'; 'I admire those who live according to their religious values' and
- **Religious practice and influence:** 'My religious beliefs influence my daily choices'; 'I often ask God to be with my family, my friends and others I hold dear'.

Figure 5 shows responses to the statements only where there are differences between the genders and faith traditions. Notably, men were more likely to have high expectations of religious people: about 25% of them strongly agreed that religious people should serve as role models and that they should forgive more easily than others. Women were less likely to agree with these strong normative expectations, suggesting more critical or ambivalent attitudes to religious exemplarity.

We also examined responses to these statements by religious affiliation. As shown in Figure 6, there were significant differences between the three main religious groups in the sample, Muslims, Anglicans and Catholics.

Muslim respondents consistently expressed stronger agreement with statements reflecting more traditional or orthodox religious views. This is particularly evident in responses to the statement 'I believe sin exists': 72% strongly agreed as compared to 31% for Catholics and 28% for Anglicans. Similar patterns were observed across other

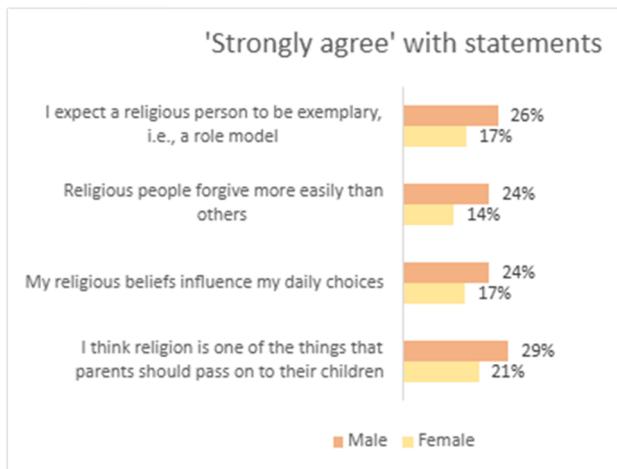


Figure 5. Religious statements by gender. Q5. How much are these religious statements reflective of you? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

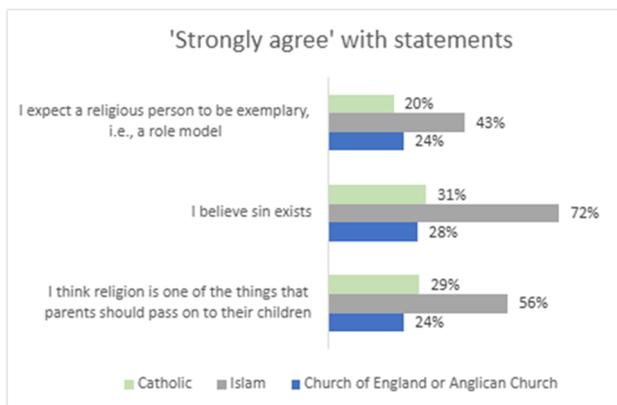


Figure 6. Religious statements by faith traditions. Q5. How much are these religious statements reflective of you? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

belief-related items, indicating a stronger affirmation of core doctrinal beliefs among Muslim participants.

5.3. Religion, attributes and images of God

The survey explored respondents' perceptions of God and religion, asking from a list of nine positive attributes which ones they attributed to religion.

The top three were:

- Forgiveness (80%)
- Kindness (77%)
- Respect for the body/purity (73%).

'Detachment from material goods'(54%) was the lowest-scoring attribute connected to religion.

Participants were also presented with eight statements describing various conceptions of God. The most endorsed image was of God as 'Loving, forgiving, merciful' (70%), followed closely by 'A great mystery' (68%) and 'A universal watcher' (66%). The least endorsed was 'A controlling judge who condemns' (40%). However, these results should be interpreted cautiously. Question 6 only offered positive moral attributes, potentially skewing responses to favourable perceptions of religion. Likewise, question 7 offered a fixed set of options (including 'Don't know') without allowing respondents to articulate their own image of God. This closed format may have constrained the diversity of views expressed by respondents.

5.4. Faith traditions and belief

As noted earlier, 48% of respondents stated that they believe in God. To explore the relationship between *belonging* and *believing*, we cross-tabulated belief in God (from question 10) with respondents' self-identified religious affiliation, focussing on the three most represented faith traditions: Anglicanism, Islam and Catholicism.

Figure 7 reveals that Muslim respondents exhibit the strongest correlation between belief in God and religious affiliation, with 91% declaring they believe in God, compared to 58% of Catholics and 47% of Anglicans. Interestingly, although Anglicans show little difference from the general sample in belief in God, far fewer Anglicans identify as atheists, 6% as compared to 17% in the whole sample, while 45% identify as agnostics compared to 21% overall. This suggests a shift not towards outright rejection of faith but towards more ambiguous, searching forms of religious identity.

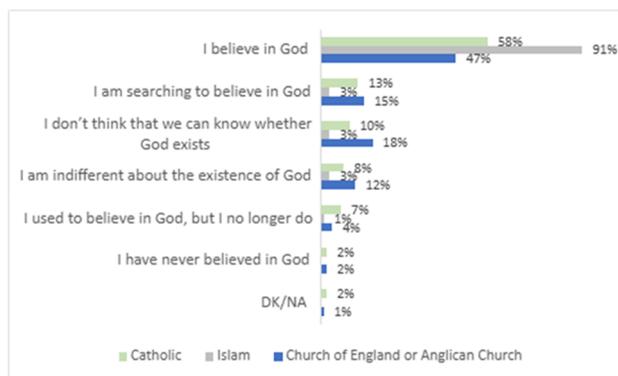


Figure 7. Belief in God by faith tradition. Q10. Regarding your beliefs, from the following options, indicate which ones you most identify with. Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

5.5. Faith traditions and views on socio-ethical issues

Global social issues. Respondents were asked to assess the seriousness of two pressing social issues: political corruption and the environment (see [Table 2](#)).

- **Political corruption** was seen as a major world issue by 90% of the total sample, 85% of Muslims, 87% of Anglicans and 85% of Catholics.
- **Environmental concerns** elicited even greater consensus: 85% of all respondents considered it one of the most serious global issues, with similar agreement from Anglicans (86%), Muslims (85%) and Catholics (80%).

These findings suggest strong alignment among young people, regardless of religious affiliation, about the major macro-level social issues.

Moral issues. Diverging attitudes across faith traditions. In contrast to the general consensus around global political and environmental issues, significant variation emerged regarding ethical questions around sexuality, pornography, contraception, and conscience rights in medical practice.

On the statement that there is no ‘right or wrong way to experience your sexuality’, agreement levels diverged:

- 65% of Anglicans and 60% of Catholics;
- 36% of Muslims;
- 66% of the overall sample supported the statement.

Responses to the statement: ‘Pornography harms relationships’ further illustrate these contrasts.

- 90% of Muslims agreed or strongly agreed;
- 70% of Anglicans and 62% of the general sample agreed or strongly agreed;
- Only 58% of Catholics agreed, the lowest figure of all groups and notably inconsistent with Catholic teaching.

On the statement ‘Using contraceptives alters the quality of intimacy between two people who love each other’, agreement was generally low. But again, Muslims were more likely to affirm it (47%) than Catholics (38%), the overall sample (35%) and Anglicans (32%).

Greater consensus emerged around conscience rights. When asked whether ‘Doctors who refuse to practice abortion or assisted suicide for motives of conscience should not be discriminated against professionally’, 59% of all respondents agreed or agreed strongly. This rose slightly among Muslims (66%), Catholics (64%) and Anglicans (62%).

Four additional socio-ethical issues were explored in question 9 (see [Figure 8](#)), where respondents were given the options of ‘Yes’, ‘No’ and ‘Don’t know’ regarding their support for the death penalty, whether war is ever justified, support for surrogacy

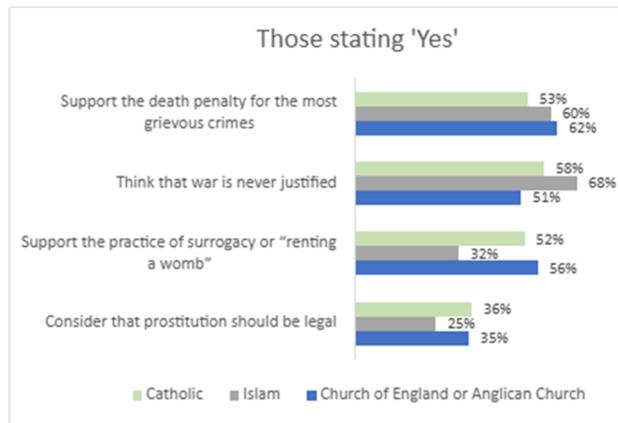


Figure 8. Social issues by faith traditions. Q9. Do you....? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

and the legalisation of prostitution. When cross-tabulated with gender, the following differences emerge:

- **Death penalty:** supported by 56% of men vs. 49% of women.
- **War:** 68% of women believed war is never justified, compared to only 48% of men.
- **Surrogacy:** received more support from women than men.
- **Legalisation of prostitution:** supported by 41% of men and 31% of women.

When cross-tabulated with faith tradition, the data reveal further divergences:

- **Death penalty:** Supported by 62% of Anglicans, 60% of Muslims, and 53% of Catholics.
- **Rejection of war:** Highest among Muslims (68%), followed by Catholics (58%), and lowest among Anglicans (51%).
- **Support for surrogacy:** Endorsed by 56% of Anglicans and the general sample, 51% of Catholics, and just 32% of Muslims.
- **Legalisation of prostitution:** Supported by 36% of Anglicans and Catholics, aligning with the general population, but only 25% of Muslims.

Table 2. Social statements by faith traditions.

Q8a Political corruption is one of the most serious social diseases in the world					
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>DK/NA</i>
Anglican	44%	43%	6%	1%	5%
Catholic	41%	47%	5%	2%	5%
Islam	52%	33%	8%	3%	4%
Q8b There is no right way and no wrong way to experience your sexuality					
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>DK/NA</i>
Anglican	26%	39%	17%	9%	10%
Catholic	20%	34%	27%	10%	9%
Islam	16%	20%	31%	19%	15%

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Q8a Political corruption is one of the most serious social diseases in the world					
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>DK/NA</i>
Q8c Pornography harms relationships					
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>DK/NA</i>
Anglican	19%	44%	15%	19%	3%
Catholic	25%	39%	20%	12%	4%
Islam	59%	31%	3%	3%	5%
Q8d Using contraceptives alters the quality of intimacy between two people who love each other					
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>DK/NA</i>
Anglican	13%	19%	32%	26%	12%
Catholic	15%	22%	33%	17%	12%
Islam	23%	24%	27%	8%	18%
Q8e Doctors who refuse to practice abortion or assisted suicide for motives of conscience should not be discriminated against professionally					
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>DK/NA</i>
Anglican	19%	43%	16%	9%	12%
Catholic	30%	39%	13%	7%	11%
Islam	37%	29%	13%	7%	14%

Q8. To what extent do you agree following social statements. Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

These findings highlight three key trends. First, Muslims are more likely to reject practices inconsistent with Islamic teaching. Second, Catholics and Anglicans show greater alignment with the overall sample. Third, there is a disconnect between professed Catholic identity and Church teaching, corroborated by earlier studies (see, for example, Bullivant, Catherine Knowles Vaughan-Spruce, and Duncan 2019).

5.6. Belief and practice among young UK theists

In this section, we explore attitudes to religious belief and practice of the group who identified most strongly with the statement ‘I believe in God’. This group constitutes 48% of the total sample and provides a lens through which to explore how belief correlates with expressions of spirituality and institutional engagement.

Understandings of Prayer. Participants were asked five questions concerning their attitude to prayer. The first of these offered three distinct conceptions of prayer and asked respondents to rate their agreement with each on a four-point Likert scale. As shown in Figure 9, prayer understood as *conversation with God* received the highest endorsement, with 91% agreement. Prayer understood as *a meditative dialogue with oneself* received wide acceptance with 63% agreement. Only 25% considered that prayer is *an illusionary delusion* with 69% disagreeing with this statement. The proportion who selected ‘Don’t know’ was minimal across the three statements—3%, 4% and 6% respectively.

Prayer Practices. When asked about their general preference for praying alone or with others, 88% responded that their preference was for solitary prayer, while 68% expressed a preference for praying in community (see Figure 10).

Respondents were then asked how they pray when alone, choosing from multiple options (see Figure 11). The most common mode was spontaneous, personal expression, with 43% stating they use their own words. 41% indicated meditating on or reading the Bible or Gospels, 30% drew on formal prayers from their religious

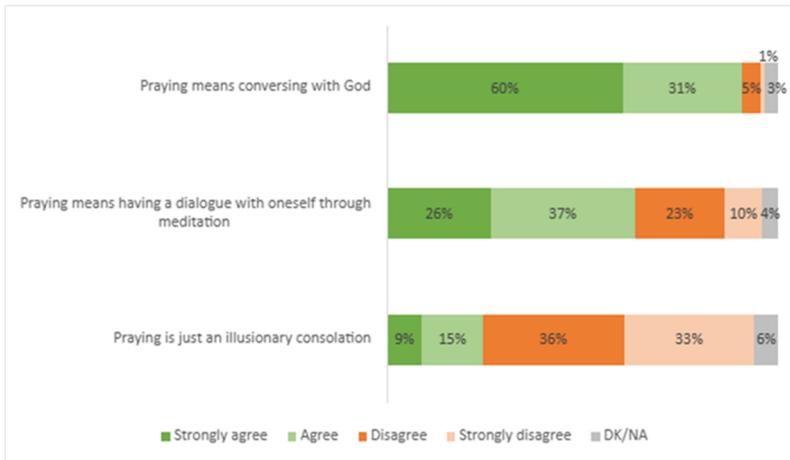


Figure 9. What prayer means. Q16. How much do you agree with the following perspectives about praying? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

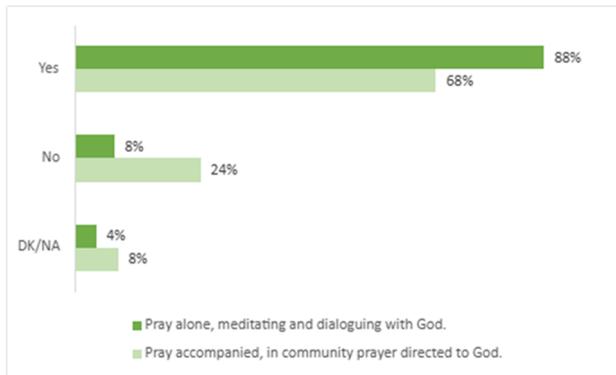


Figure 10. Prayer life. Q17. Sometimes you will pray alone and sometimes with other people, but in general what do you prefer? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

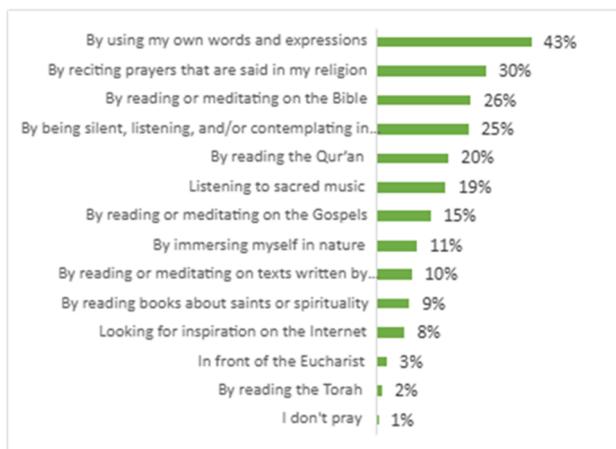


Figure 11. How one prays. Q21. How do you pray on your own? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

tradition, 25% reported engaging in silent contemplation, and 20% read the Qur'an. These responses reflect a diversity of spiritual practices and the presence of both Christian and Muslim traditions among the respondents.

When asked how much they pray, 45% said they pray several times a day, 27% about once a day, and 16% a few times a week (see [Figure 12](#)). Only 8% reported praying a few times a month, and 3% a few times a year. In total, 88% of respondents indicated that they pray at least weekly, suggesting that belief in God is accompanied by regular spiritual engagement.

Respondents were asked 'to whom you turn in prayer (see [Figure 13](#))'. Unsurprisingly, the majority (80%) answered that they turn to God in prayer, followed by 37% who pray to Jesus Christ, and 24% to the Holy Spirit. Only 6% reported praying to the deceased and 5% to Our Lady (a Catholic designation for Mary, the mother of Jesus). These figures suggest a predominantly monotheistic orientation with limited engagement with intercessory prayers to the saints or the dead.

Despite the high levels of regular prayer, attendance at religious services was more varied (see [Figure 14](#)). Fifteen percent of respondents stated that they never attend or no longer attend religious services, while 17% only attend on special occasions. Fourteen percent attend monthly, 43% attend weekly and 11% report daily attendance. These data suggest that regular communal worship is significant for many, while a significant minority express their religiosity in more individual terms.

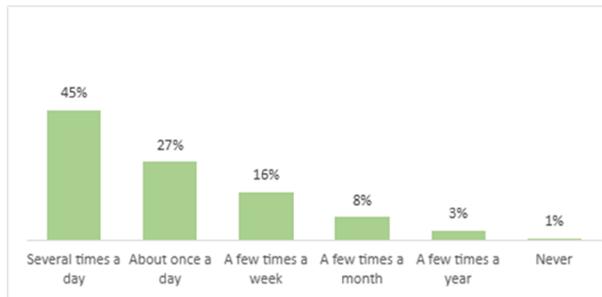


Figure 12. Frequency of prayer. Q18 How often do you pray? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3

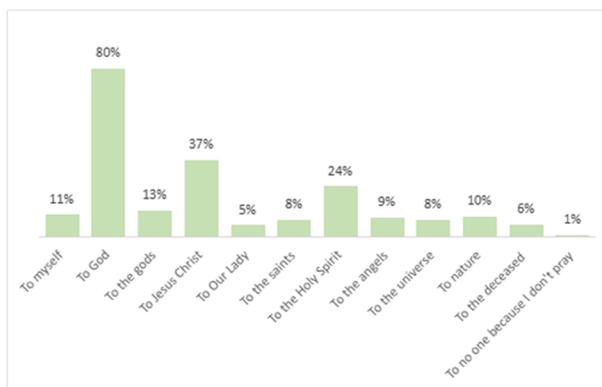


Figure 13. To whom you turn to in prayer. Q20. To whom do you turn in prayer? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

Perceptions of the Church. The respondents were asked to respond to five statements about what the ‘church’ means for them with the question framed from a Christian perspective. Two of the statements indicate negative views: ‘A source of unnecessary obligations’ and ‘An old, backwards entity’, statements with which 56% and 59% respectively disagreed. Notably, 20% responded ‘Don’t know’ or did not think the statement was applicable.

By contrast, 59% agreed that the church is ‘A human and divine institution’, although 18% said they did not know. The most widely agreed statement was that the church is ‘A human community that does good like a volunteer association’. Sixty-eight percent of respondents agreed with this. The least supported statement was that the church is ‘An entity of political power’, with which 60% people disagreed and 20% stated ‘don’t know’ or ‘not applicable’.

These findings (see Figure 15) suggest that while respondents hold generally favourable views towards the church, they are more likely to affirm its service-oriented function rather than its hierarchical one.

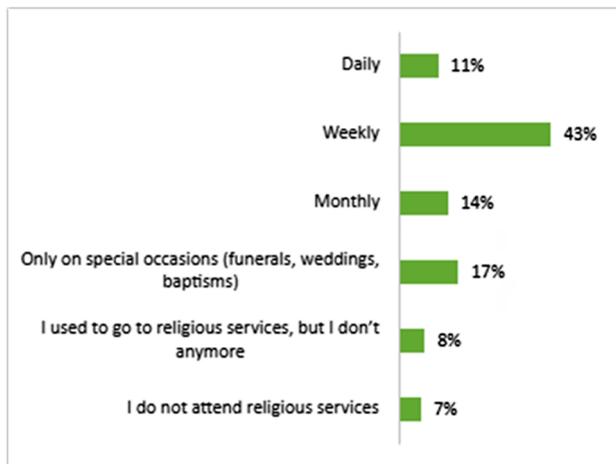


Figure 14. Frequency of attending a religious service/mass. Q19. How often do you attend a religious service/mass? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

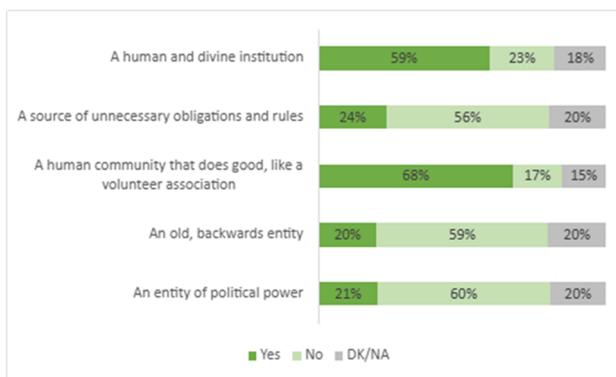


Figure 15. What the church means to you. Q22. What is the Church, predominately for you? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

5.7. Non-theism: belief and unbelief

This section explores answers from respondents who identified with agnostic or atheistic perspectives (265 in total), probing their reasons for an absence of belief, their views on morality and meaning without religion, and their relation to practices such as prayer.

Reasons for non-belief. Respondents were asked to select the main reasons—up to six—for their absence of belief (see Figure 16). The most frequently cited reason was ‘the existence of suffering’ (27%), followed by the belief that God is ‘a substitute of what we can’t explain or understand,’ a form of ‘psychological refuge’ (22%), suggesting a perception of religion as a psychological or epistemological crutch. The least frequently chosen was the ‘poor example of believers,’ chosen by 15% of respondents.

Belief statements and moral identity without God. In question 14, respondents were presented with four statements and were asked to rate the extent to which each reflected their views, using a five-point scale (1=‘most closely reflects my thinking’ and 5= ‘least closely’) (see Figure 17). The statement that resonated most strongly was ‘I don’t need God to be a good person,’ with 68% of respondents considering it strongly expressed their beliefs.

Other statements received more nuanced responses:

- 48% agreed, to some degree, with ‘Although I am an atheist, I believe there is life after death,’ pointing to the persistence of supernatural beliefs among non-theists.
- 40% agreed that ‘I believe, although I am an atheist, that a believer copes better with suffering and death.’
- 60% agreed that: ‘I am happy to be an atheist and depend solely on myself,’ affirming a degree of contentment with their worldview.

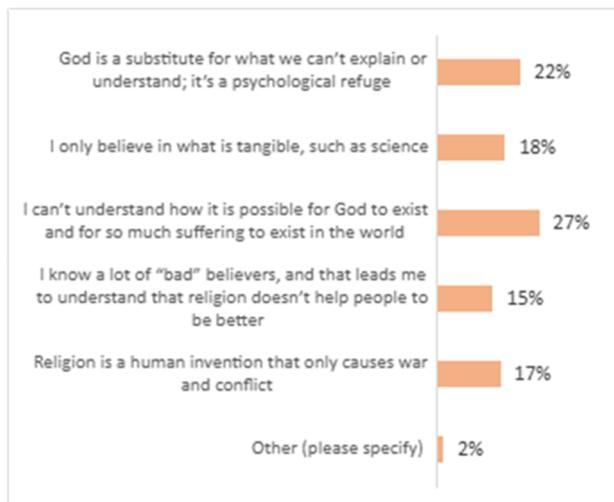


Figure 16. Main reasons for belief or not in God. Q13. What are the main reasons for your position? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

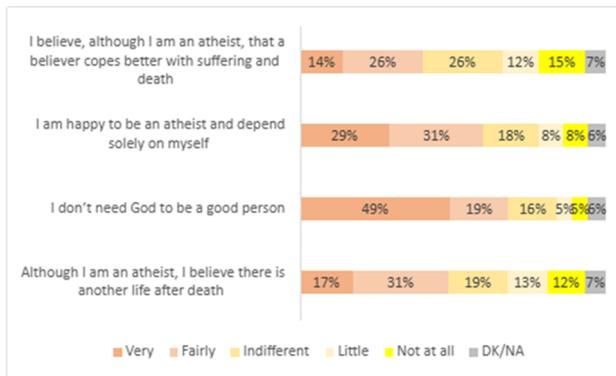


Figure 17. Extent of statement reflecting belief/thinking. Q14. How much do these statements reflect your belief/thinking. Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.



Figure 18. Prayer. Q15. In any case, have you ever.... Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

Non-believers and prayer. Respondents were asked whether they have asked believers for prayer or prayed themselves (see Figure 18). A substantial majority (74%) of respondents stated that they have never asked for prayers. Around 60% stated that they have never prayed because of world problems or for their own happiness. However, 53% stated that they had prayed when in profound need.

5.8. Prayer

These data represent a complex relationship between unbelief and spiritual practice. While many respondents reject formal belief in God, not all exclude prayer from their repertoire of responses to crisis. The findings resonate with recent large-scale studies, notably the *World Values Survey* (WSV) and the *Explaining atheism* project (Queen's University Belfast 2024), which examine belief and unbelief across global contexts. The WSV, encompassing over 120 countries, found that 16% of the British population pray daily, while 63% pray rarely or never (Duffy et al. 2023, 32), with only China and South Korea reporting lower rates.

The *Explaining atheism* study, which surveyed 25,000 people across six countries (Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, the UK, and the US), found that a lack of religious socialisation is the main predictor for ‘nontheism’. In other words, parental upbringing and societal expectations are key drivers of atheism.

The persistence of supernatural beliefs among self-declared non-theists is not an anomaly. Data from both the WSV and *Explaining atheism* shows that belief in life after death remains relatively high among younger non-believers.

- From our sample, 48% of non-theists expressed belief in the afterlife.
- Similarly, Duffy et al. (2023) found that 51% of Gen Z and 53% of Millennials in the UK believe in life after death compared with only 35% of Baby Boomers.

Forty-two percent of the general population believe in a heaven, roughly the same as Gen Z, who are, however, more likely to believe in hell than older generations, with 32% holding this belief compared with 18% of Baby Boomers and 24% of the pre-war generation. The seeming paradox of non-believers holding supernatural beliefs such as faith in the afterlife is borne out by the results of the *Explaining atheism* project, which also uses results from the *British Social Attitudes Survey* and the WSV.

6. Young Catholics: doctrine, community and sacramental practice

This section presents findings from questions directed exclusively to respondents who self-identified as Catholic. As already mentioned, the Catholic subsample—comprising 98 or 16% of the total UK sample—is small and therefore, offers a tentative snapshot of selected aspects of young Catholics’ belief and practice. Data with fewer than 20 responses have been excluded. The findings should be interpreted with caution and offered as indicative rather than conclusive.

Authentic ecclesial communities: criteria and priorities. Respondents were asked to choose up to three out of five characteristics as to what makes for an authentic ecclesial community (see Figure 19). The most frequently chosen attribute was ‘charity’, defined as ‘the community serves those most in need’ (60%). This was followed by ‘The close friendships through which people get to know and help each other’ (51%). An equal proportion (28%) valued ‘the vibrancy of activities for all ages’ and ‘fidelity to the teaching of the church’ as key markers of an authentic ecclesial community.

These findings suggest that, for many young Catholics, a lived experience of community takes precedence over doctrinal or hierarchical markers of ecclesial authenticity.

Biblical interpretation and authority. Participants were presented with two statements regarding the status of the Bible and asked to indicate their agreement (see Figure 20). A majority (73%) agreed with the statement that ‘The Bible is a sacred text containing truths revealed by God’. However, 56% also agreed that it ‘contains human wisdom but not divine revelation’. This apparent inconsistency may reflect different understandings of ‘revelation’.

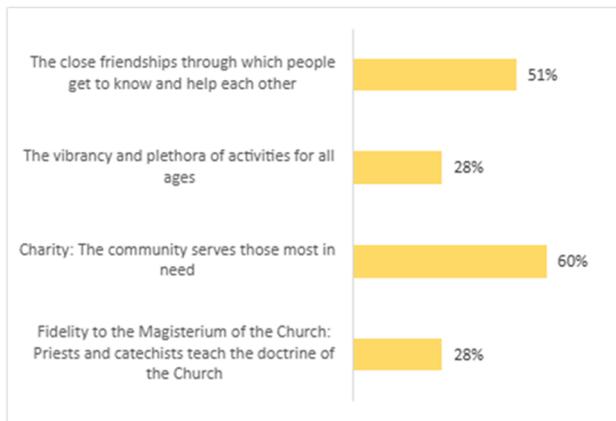


Figure 19. What makes for an authentic ecclesial community. Q27. What aspects make for an authentic ecclesial community? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

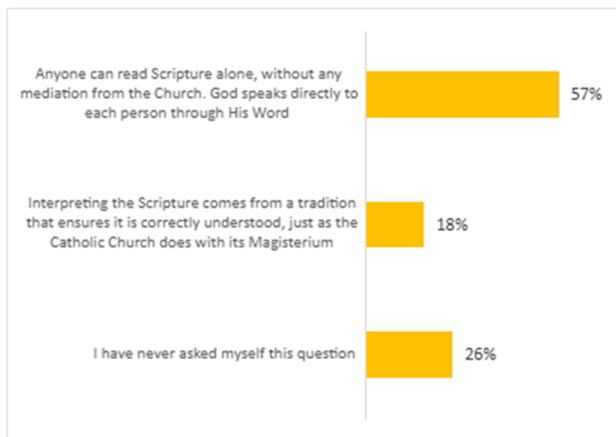


Figure 20. Reading the Bible. Q24. Regarding the Bible, choose the statement you most agree with from the following choices: Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

Respondents were also asked to select the one statement that best described their view of biblical interpretation. The majority (56%) agreed that: 'Anyone can read Scripture alone without any mediation from the Church. God speaks directly to each person through His Word'. Only 18% agreed with the statement setting out the traditional Catholic position that the church plays a central role in interpreting the Bible. Twenty-six per cent stated that they had never asked themselves the question about who has the authority to interpret the Bible.

These responses indicate a significant emphasis on personal interpretive authority rather than on an acceptance of the Catholic Church's authority to interpret Scripture.

Sacramental knowledge and belief. Respondents were asked to evaluate a series of statements regarding core Catholic teaching on the sacraments (see [Figure 21](#)). Agreement was highest with statements expressing the traditional nature of confirmation (64%) and baptism (63%). However, there was more uncertainty about other

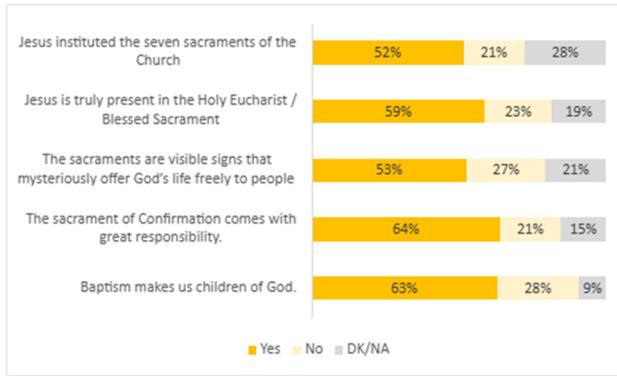


Figure 21. Catholic doctrine in relation to the sacraments. Q25. Regarding Catholic doctrine, indicate whether you agree with the following statements: Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

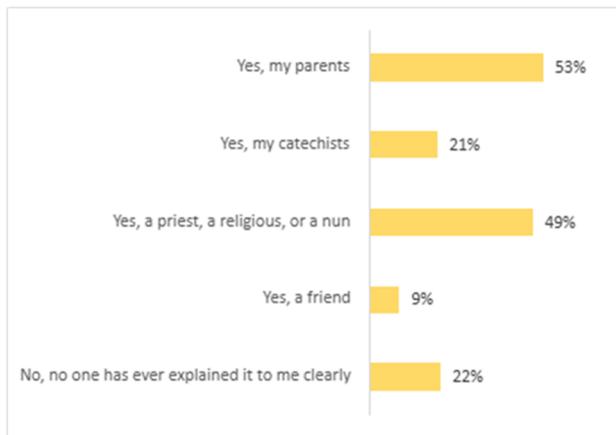


Figure 22. Explanation of what happens during mass: Q29. Has anyone ever explained to you, clearly and comprehensibly, what happens during Mass? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

sacramental teaching 49% disagreed with or were not sure that ‘Jesus instituted the seven sacraments’, and 48% expressed disagreement or were uncertain that the sacraments are visible signs of God’s life in the world. Fifty-nine percent agreed with the traditional Catholic doctrine that ‘Jesus is truly present’ in the Eucharist.

When asked about whether anyone had explained to them the significance of the Mass (see Figure 22), 78% responded affirmatively. The most cited sources were parents (53%), followed by priests or religious (49%), catechists (21%) and friends (9%).

Despite this exposure to explanations about the significance of the Mass, a substantial proportion of respondents (66%) agreed or strongly agreed that they ‘do not need to attend Mass to be a good Christian.’ In addition, 47% disagreed with the statement that ‘I cannot live without the Eucharist’ and a further 18% selected ‘Don’t know’ or ‘not applicable (see Figure 23)’. These responses suggest that young British Catholics have a weak sense of the need for Mass attendance and of the sacramental centrality of the Eucharist in Catholic teaching.

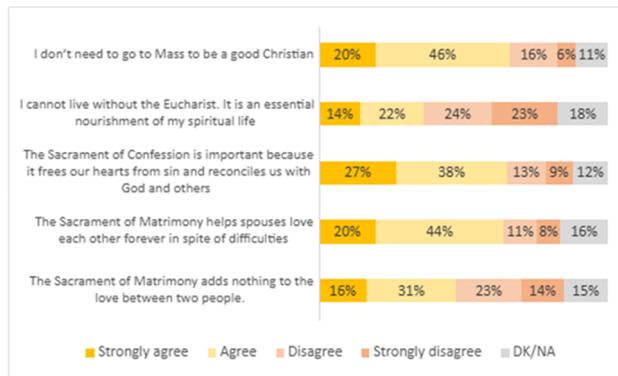


Figure 23. Sacrament statements: Q26. How much do you agree or identify with the following statements? Source: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross/GAD3.

Views on matrimony and confession. Sixty-six percent agreed that ‘The Sacrament of Matrimony helps spouses love each other forever despite the difficulties’, yet nearly half (47%) also agreed with the statement that Matrimony ‘adds nothing to the love between two people’. When asked whether they plan to marry in the Church, 62% of the 77 respondents who answered the question said they did.

Views on the Sacrament of Confession revealed further ambivalence. Forty-seven percent disagreed with the statement that ‘it frees our heart from sin and reconciles us with God and others’, and 18% responded that they did not know or it was not applicable to them. When asked which of five statements best described their relationship with Confession, the most chosen was ‘I wish I would go more often’ (32%), followed by ‘Yes, it’s fundamental for me’ (21%).

This snapshot of young Catholics’ views on church, doctrine and practice shows they are often at variance with traditional Church teaching about its authority and the importance of sacramental life. For example, 75% of respondents did not recognise the Church’s teaching on confession either because they disagreed with it, or they did not see that it had anything to do with them; 66% believe it is not necessary to attend Mass to be a good Christian. This doctrinal misalignment echoes the moral and metaphysical dealignment of Anglicans and Catholics identified earlier in the article.

7. Beyond linear secularization: a critical realist perspective

This overview of the main findings regarding young Britons’ views of faith, spirituality, global issues and Catholic doctrine and practice contextualizes them in relation to wider demographic studies of belief in Britain. It provides confirmation of several of the findings of those studies. To give some examples:

- Those who identify as Muslims are much more likely to ascribe to spiritual and moral beliefs associated with their religious affiliation, unlike the two Christian groups who are more aligned with the views of the general population on questions such as belief in the existence of God and attitudes

towards pornography and sexuality. Muslims consider the former to be more harmful to relationships and the latter not a matter of simple choice. Young Christians' lack of alignment with their churches' teaching is in keeping with research that suggests that traditional teaching on marriage and LGBT issues is not only *not* accepted by young Christians but is a reason given by Catholics in Britain and the US for ceasing to practice or to be a member of the church (see Bullivant 2020, 242).

- A substantial majority of survey respondents (86%)—both men and women—profess spirituality's presence in their lives. However, less than half (48%) believe in God and 28% do not identify with any faith tradition. One immediate question is what respondents believe 'spirituality' means. The survey results do not allow us to answer this question explicitly. However, like the school-age children in Madge's study (2014), it is apparent that they consider it to be different to 'religion'.
- The survey's findings on beliefs in the afterlife and the recourse to prayer *in extremis* also support research findings from the *Explaining atheism* project and WSV study that show the absence of traditional religious beliefs is compatible with supernatural ones. The survey results support the contention outlined in the work of Woodhead (2016, 2017) and Duffy et al. (2023) that Britain is a country where religious belief and belief in God are on the wane and the proportion of 'nones' rises with each generational group.
- The findings that 42% of Catholics do not believe in God or that only 27% consider that spirituality has been very present in their lives indicate that self-declared Catholic identity for young Britons may indicate a cultural sense of belonging rather than believing a specific set of doctrines (see Bullivant 2020).

On the face of it, these findings are further evidence of the process of secularization that, according to Inglehart (2021), is accelerating in high-income societies, driven by modernization and rising existential security. He argues that as societies become wealthier, safer and more educated, the psychological and material needs traditionally fulfilled by religion are met by secular means. However, a deeper engagement with the data using the critical theory lens, as developed by Margaret Archer, suggests a more nuanced and dynamic account of young people's religiosity.

Archer's critical realist theory of social change provides a framework that resists linear accounts of social, and in this case, religious change. For Archer, structural and cultural factors constrain and enable change, but it is human agency that plays a decisive role. Her emphasis on reflexivity, the inner conversation and ultimate concerns enables us to interpret religiosity or spirituality not simply as responses to structural circumstances but also as meaningful self-positioning by young people.

This theoretical lens can help us explain some of the tensions in the data. For example, young Catholics' responses to what constitutes an 'authentic church community' indicate a yearning for 'bonding' and relational belonging. Rather than seeing the church in institutional terms, the respondents emphasized the church as a community of love, service and close friendship. This aligns with Saroglou's (2020) four basic dimensions of religiosity (bonding, belonging, believing and behaving) and suggests the importance of meaningful social relationships in young people's

religious and spiritual lives. A perceived lack of community by those who identify as or have identified as Catholics was one of the findings of a study of the English Catholic diocese of Portsmouth (Bullivant, Catherine Knowles Vaughan-Spruce, and Duncan 2019). Archer's work would encourage us to think about how these data could suggest a rearticulation of the role of religion rather than a rejection of religion itself through a process of active and reflective engagement.

Furthermore, contrary to Inglehart's claim that declining religiosity results from a greater sense of 'existential security', the current geopolitical context may suggest the opposite. Today's young people are faced with multiple sources of existential *insecurity*, including the climate emergency and volatile geopolitical conditions. It could be the case that these circumstances encourage a yearning for community and meaning. Archer's approach allows for these developments because it recognizes that people respond differently to structural conditions depending on their own concerns, commitments, and identities.

As we have seen, many non-theists do not rule out the spiritual or the supernatural from their belief systems: 48% believe that there is life after death and 53% have prayed at times of profound need. These responses challenge the assumption that the absence of theistic belief implies the absence of transcendence or spiritual imaginings. From a critical realist perspective, these views represent 'ultimate concerns', existential commitments with which we navigate and understand the world independently of institutional affiliations.

In conclusion, the data suggest a more variegated and reflexively constructed landscape than a narrative of linear secularization can account for. Archer's critical realist focus allows us to understand young people's views on religion, spirituality and global issues not as inevitable responses to structural change, but as the outcome of an ongoing, dynamic dialogue between structure, culture and agency. It helps us understand too that searching for meaning, value and purpose persists even in secular times.

Notes

1. We use the terms 'Britain' and the 'United Kingdom' (UK) interchangeably to refer to the political entity known officially as 'the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'.
2. Census data is collected every ten years by three different bodies for the constituent parts of the UK. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is responsible for collecting and disseminating census data for England and Wales. The National Records of Scotland (NRS) is responsible for the census in Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) is responsible for the census in Northern Ireland.
3. The Church of England is the founding state church of the Anglican Communion. In Scotland, its counterpart is the Scottish Episcopal Church and in Ireland, the Church of Ireland. All three churches belong to the Anglican Communion which has around 85 million members across the world.
4. For brevity's sake, we will use 'Anglican' to refer to this group.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Karen Sanders**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – original draft; **Susanne Gilbert**: Data curation, Formal

analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing; **Sara Spear:** Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

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