

Question Bank Commentary: Religion

Researching Religion by Peter Brierley

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The doyen religious sociologist, Durkheim, usefully defined Religion in terms of affiliation, practice and belief. This article follows these three aspects of Religion and seeks to show how each has been, and can be, measured or assessed. Before that is done however it may be helpful to briefly describe the various broad religious groupings frequently used in research or other publications.

1) Religious Groups

There are many different religions. The most numerous groups in the United Kingdom are Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Jews, in that order, followed by a large number of smaller entities^[1]. Because the first group is large, the remainder are sometimes simply grouped as "Non-Christian Religions".

The Christian group is often divided into two (theological) categories, Trinitarian and Non-Trinitarian. Trinitarian churches are those which "accept the historic formulary of the Godhead as the three eternal persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, in one unchanging essence^[2]". These are the great majority, and come in 10 broad groups: Anglicans (nearly all either the Church of England, Church in Wales, Scottish Episcopal Church or the Church in Ireland), Baptists, Roman Catholics, Independent churches, Methodists, New Churches (previously called House Churches), Orthodox (including Greek and Russian), Pentecostal (including Assemblies of God, Elim and many black groups), United Reformed Church, and finally Others (the remaining smaller denominations like the Salvation Army, Religious Society of Friends, etc.). In 1998 there were 247 different Christian churches in the UK^[3], often called denominations to differentiate national groups from local congregations.

The Non-Trinitarian churches include the Christadelphians, Christian Scientists (officially called the Church of Christ, Scientist), Church of Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), Spiritualists, Swedenborgian New Church, Unification Church (Moonies), Unitarian (and Free Christian) Churches, etc.^[4].

The Non-Christian Religions include not only the main religions mentioned above, but smaller ones like the Bahá'ís, Buddhists, Jains, and Zoroastrians. They also include the many New Religious Movements, statistics of some of which are available^[5].

Addresses for nearly all of these denominations, non-Trinitarian churches and other religions are given in the UK Christian Handbook^[6], so that researchers can contact them directly if necessary. Membership statistics, the number of local churches or meeting places, and the number of ministers or full-time leaders for each are also given in Religious Trends^[7]. These effectively are population figures allowing researchers to draw an accurate sampling frame, and for the results to be weighted as required.

2) Affiliation: Community

"Affiliation" is to do with "belonging" but belonging means different things to different people. Currently there are two broad measures of looking at religious belonging - community or membership. Both can be researched.

The Christian community has been defined as "all those who would positively identify with belonging to a church even if they may only attend irregularly, or were just baptised as a child^[8]". If we substitute mosque or temple for church, and where necessary an alternative rite for baptism, a similar definition would be acceptable for most if not all religions other than Christianity. Another definition is "those who belong to a particular denomination, however loosely. If Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox or Presbyterian, they will usually approximate to the number baptised in that country^[9]". The Methodists keep a "Community Roll" for each church.

In the Northern Ireland Population Census, a question on religion has to be asked according to the 1920 Union Act. In 1991 this was worded as "Please state the Religion, Religious Denomination or Body to which the person belongs. The general term 'Protestant' should not be used alone and the denomination should be given as precisely as possible. If none, write NONE."^[10], and the official report of the findings treated the religious community as the total number who wrote in the box indicating their "religious allegiance^[11]" or preference. In 1981 the wording was the same, but the last four words "If none ..." were omitted^[12].

Some equate community to "adherents^[13]". The broad thrust of these definitions is clear — all those in a particular country or other geographical area who would name themselves as Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.

If a question on religion is included in the 2001 Population Census for England and Wales its wording will be "What is your religion?" with the answers simply broken down by "None/ Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)/ Buddhist/ Hindu/ Muslim/ Sikh/ Jewish/ Any other religion, please write below^[14]". The purpose of the question is primarily to determine the size of religious communities by type and geographical area, as well as having that information broken down by the other census characteristics.

The British Social Attitudes survey uses the wording, "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?", and if the answer is YES a list then follows of which "No religion" and "Christian - no denomination" are two categories^[15].

In Britain a person going into hospital or prison is usually asked their religion. Many people simply reply "C of E" (Church of England), or "Methodist" or "RC" (Roman Catholic) even if they have no current connection with that particular Christian church. The religious community figure represents the totality of all such people. In Religious Trends^[16] the Christian percentage is given as 64% of the entire population in 2000, and the total religious percentage as 71%, percentages which have dropped from 85% and 86% respectively in 1910. The Christian percentage is available for every country in the world in the World Churches Handbook^[17].

3) Affiliation: Membership

The second measure of affiliation is membership. This naturally means those who belong, who are members. In the Christian church unfortunately most denominations define membership differently! Thus in a Baptist church, membership is usually limited to those baptised as adults. In an Anglican church, members are often taken as those on the Electoral Roll (not to be confused with the Local authority Electoral Roll). In some Pentecostal churches, membership is confined to those who are baptised, born again, speak in tongues, and give evidence of living an active Christian life over at least six months. The Roman Catholics however define their members as the "baptised" which is equated above to church community. In Nigeria if you wish to join the New Life Church, members are those giving an acceptable answer to the question, "When did you last pray for a miracle?"

This problem of multiple definition probably relates more to Christianity than other religions, but even so it is not unique to it. Ethnic variation is sometimes a variable which helps to distinguish one group from another.

Membership therefore, although widely collected in Christian churches, is but a heterogeneous collection of disparate numbers given the same appellation but not the same meaning. The variety of meaning may also be seen in the ages of those counted as members: Anglicans are those 16 and over, Baptists 14 and over, etc.

The value of membership figures is that they are frequently available over time, sometimes for many decades, and occasionally, even centuries^[18]. They have usually been collected using the same definition within a particular denomination and therefore the trends in the figures may be judged as accurate.

It has been suggested that denominations which have the strictest membership criteria were likely to be those which grow fastest. There was some truth of this amongst the black Pentecostal denominations in the UK in the 1980s when the New Testament Church of God and the Church of Cherubim and Seraphim for example recorded attendance five times as great as their membership^[19]. This has been confirmed by two studies in America, one in the 1970s amongst Conservative churches, and the other in the 1990s amongst Lutheran churches. "Churches that reflect solid quality and quantity growth are those that are clear to declare specific tenets of belief"^[20].

It should be noted that membership and attendance are not the same nor are they necessarily causally linked! The Baptist Union in Scotland had a special outreach programme in the mid 1980s. In their Report they said, "During 1985 there was a marked increase in church membership (7.8 persons per church against 4.8 in 1982) and a total of 1,149 first commitments. It was disturbing to note that of these only 50% were recorded as being baptised, and only 33% as joining the church."^[21]

In the United Kingdom, religious membership has been decreasing. In 1900 church membership was 33% of the population and religious membership 34%, but by 2000 it had dropped to 12% and 17% respectively^[22]. These figures were obtained by writing to the individual Christian denominations asking for the number of their members. Most of the larger churches publish their own Yearbooks at regular intervals, usually annually, and these invariably give membership details.

4) Practice: Attendance

One way of measuring Durkheim's "practice" is to assess attendance at religious services or meetings. Researching religious attendance is conceptually much easier than community - either people are there on a Sunday (for Christians) or Friday (for Muslims) or not!

Counting those present on a particular day therefore gives a uniformity to the numbers. In Christian terms, this gives a homogeneous way of measuring between the many denominations. Attendance figures however are not always or universally collected by the different denominations, and even when regularly counted, will often be counted on different Sundays.

Large scale measurements of church attendance in Great Britain are few (none has been attempted as yet in Northern Ireland). The first count of attendance was in 1851 as part of the Census of Population of England and Wales. It was a count of religious worship, but the only non-Christian worshippers identified were the Jews, although several non-Trinitarian groups are also listed^[23]. Depending on how the figures are taken, the percentage attending church on that Census Sunday was 39% but this included those who went two or three times. If the same percentage of "twicers" which were counted in 1903 applied in 1851 (and it could have been more then), then this figure would reduce to 24%.

A major large scale study of London^[24] was undertaken by the Daily News between November 1902 and November 1903. This sought to count everyone entering every place of worship in a specific Borough of London for every service, counting a different Borough each week. It was therefore only a Christian survey. Excluding twicers, the percentage of the population who attended church in London was 19% each Sunday.

A Mass-Observation survey in 1948/49 found that 15% of the population attended church^[25]. The English Church Census of 1979 found that 12% of the population attended; the 1989 one that 10% did; and the 1998 survey that 7.5% did. The gentle slope of decline over the last 150 years has thus started to accelerate. All three counts excluded those who attended twice on a Sunday. The 1989 figure of 10% compares with 25% in Australia^[26] and 42% in the United States^[27].

There have been seven large-scale surveys of church attendance in Great Britain in the last quarter of the 20th century: three have focussed on England (1979^[28], 1989^[29] and 1998^[30]), two on Wales (1982^[31] and 1995^[32]), and two on Scotland (1984 and 1994^[33]). Because the results of this set of surveys allow very detailed sampling frames to be constructed it may be helpful to give the various parameters of the way the number of churchgoers may be accessed using these studies:

Feature		England			Wales		Scotland	
		1979	1989	1998	1982	1995	1984	1994
Geography	County/area	-	-	[intended ^[34]	-		-	-
	Local Authority District		^[35]					
	Region							
				-				
Denomination		-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Denomination by Geography	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age of churchgoers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age by Denomination	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age by Geography	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Churchmanship		-	-				-
Churchmanship by Geography, Age and Denomination		-	-				-
Size of church		-	-	-			-
Size by Geography		-					-
Church environment by Geography and Churchmanship		-					-
Year of foundation		-	-				-
Year by Geography, Denomination and Churchmanship		-					-
Third World support, by Geography, Denomination and Churchmanship		-					
Frequency of attendance, by Geography			-				
Ethnicity of attenders, by Geography			-				
Fringe attenders			-				
Midweek attendance			-				
Youth worship services			-				
Healing services			-				
Church change 1998 to 2010			-				

Churchmanship is the type of belief system such as Anglo-Catholic, Broad, Catholic, Charismatic, Evangelical, Liberal, Low church, Orthodox, Radical, Reformed). Church environment was broken down into city centre, inner city, council estate, suburban, town centre, rural commuter and other rural. The year of foundation is the year a particular congregation began.

Third World Support asked churches what kind of community aid they preferred to support out of project activities, specific geographical area, named communities, named individuals, administered through local churches, evangelism/ missionary work, other or no support.

Frequency of attendance was broken down by those going twice weekly, once weekly, fortnightly, monthly, quarterly and twice a year. Ethnicity followed the 1991 Population Census categories. Fringe attendance were those who came to church premises during the week but not to a Sunday service.

Copies of the questionnaires used for all these studies are in the volumes mentioned in the relevant endnotes. The last topic in the above list may be of interest. We were asked by one sponsor to ascertain whether a church was likely to survive till 2010. Such a direct question could hardly be asked! Instead it was put in the form "By 2010 do you expect your church to have ... Grown significantly/ Grown a little/ Remained static/ Declined/ Closed" and answered without any apparent problems.

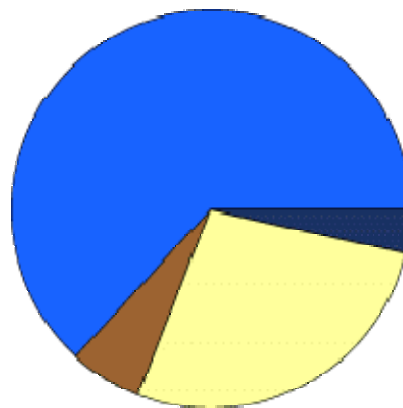
Asking if a person attends church directly can lead to bias in that the respondent tries to give answers which they think the interviewer wants. In such surveys the percentage saying they attend church can be twice as high as the number who actually attend! It is better to ask, as in the E-MORI form, what activities a respondent undertakes with a given frequency and provide a comprehensive list of 20 or 30 items, of which churchgoing is one.

Alternatively one can ask, "Did you do any of the following last weekend ...?" and list a number of items, of which going to church is not included. Then ask, "Did you do anything else not listed here?" and frequently if a person went to church they will then say so, but not if they did not.

5) Practice: Attendance Frequency

Whilst attendance is a variable readily understood, the 1998 English study has shown it is not as straight forward as might be expected. This survey showed that what it means to go to church has changed. On a monthly basis the percentage of the population attending church sometime during the month is 11.1%, as illustrated in the pie-chart below, more than in 1989. The chart reflects an important cultural change already in process - church attendance may be midweek rather than on Sunday.

Church attendance over a month, 1998



KEY	
■	Weekly Sunday attendance 67%
■	Weekly midweek attendance 5%
■	Monthly or fortnightly Sunday attendance 24%
■	Monthly youth attendance 4%

This has implications for counting Christian churchgoers, and for those of other faiths also. It suggests that what should be counted are the number of people (including children and young people) attending worship services whether on Sunday or midweek, averaged over a month. If all denominations did this, we would then have national statistics, comparable to each other, useful to respondents (always important in getting a good response), which would be easy to collect (important for accuracy!). Since many funerals and weddings take place in a church or other religious building, we need to distinguish also between these types of service and normal worship services.

A further implication is that it is also important to distinguish between the number of attenders and the number of attendances. The numbers are not the same! The English Church Attendance Survey used the question "Please estimate the average number on a typical Saturday/Sunday in this church. Count any adults or children who attend more than one service only once."

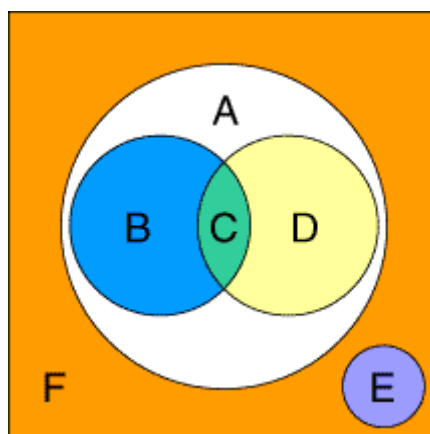
For frequency the question was worded "We appreciate that it is difficult, but it would be a great help if you could estimate the approximate numbers of your total adult congregation who attend Saturday/Sunday services on a weekly, fortnightly, monthly or less frequent basis". The form gave the following break points: Twice weekly, weekly, fortnightly, monthly, quarterly, twice a year, visitors/first attendance. A copy of the form was separately supplied which could be photocopied and distributed to individual members of the congregation. 41% of respondents used this form, and thus gave an accurate count. There was no significant difference however between these 41% accurate counts and the 59% estimates.

The British Social Attitudes Survey uses the wording "Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals and baptisms, how often nowadays do you attend services or meetings connected with your religion?"^[36] to obtain frequency. Its break points are as above though without quarterly, but including annually, "less often" and "never or practically never".

These frequencies may be too many for the non-Christian religions. One survey of Mosque attendance used just three categories - Festival attendance, daily and Friday attendance^[37].

The three categories described above may be illustrated as shown below, where the outside square represents the whole population. It is not drawn to scale. Regular attendance would mean at least monthly, midweek or on Sunday.

Community, Membership, Attendance and the Population



The different spaces represent the following:	
A	Those who call themselves Christian but who are not members or attenders of any church on a regular basis (they may go at Christmas or Easter).
B	Those who are regular church attenders but who are not, or who are not yet, members.
C	Those who are both regular attenders and members of their church.
D	Those who are not regular attenders but who remain members of their church.

E	Those who are not Christian but who are members of another faith community, like the Muslims or Hindus, or who belong to one of the non-Trinitarian churches, like the Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons.
F	Those who are those not in any faith community and who may therefore be described as non-religious.

6) Practice: In other Ways

There are many other ways of measuring the behavioural manifestation of a person's religiosity other than attendance at services and the frequency of such. For example, how often do (religious) people read the Bible or Koran? How often do (religious) people pray? What do they pray for? For how long do they pray? Does a person's religious faith affect the ethics by which they conduct their personal life? Does it affect the principles by which they work? Does it impinge on how they treat their family? Or live with others? Or view their neighbour? Or give to charity?

Many surveys have been undertaken which ask such questions. The very large majority use normal quota or other sampling methods and typically will get answers from 1,000 or fewer people. They are reported in the religious press, in the annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) volume, in the biannual Religious Trends, in specialist studies (a number of which are listed in each issue of Religious Trends), or in normal academic journals. Sometimes the actual questionnaire used is given (as in the BSA report); other times it is necessary to contact the original researcher.

The techniques of researching (and designing questionnaires for) these kinds of social behaviour, attitudes, and motives are little different whether the subject is religion or any other dimension. For those interested in historical studies in such areas, this author knows three printed sources: for BSA^[38], for Gallup surveys^[39], and generally for religious studies^[40].

7) Belief

Belief has been regularly and frequently measured in numerous surveys, social and otherwise. Although it may be questioned what someone means when they say that they believe in God the actual basic statistics resulting from such questions, as well as the wording used in such questions, are fairly common place. They require little attention other than that which is generally available in questionnaire design.

The results of questions on belief are given in the volumes mentioned in the last two paragraphs of the previous section. A further major work on belief (and other topics)^[41] and church going gives data not only in positive response to the question, "Do you believe in God?", but negative also, and this summarised across the last half of the 20th century.

8) Researching Religion

Why then research this important subject? It is a key topic, essential for understanding current society. For some people it is part of their traditional, historical and cultural background even though they may be moving away from it (though whether this thus creates a secular society is debatable). For others it is something they are turning towards. Religion is not an optional extra; it is a vital component of life, and measuring it in all its diversity therefore an ever urgent challenge.

"Facts are the fingers of God. To know the facts ... is the necessary condition of intelligent interest. Knowledge does not always kindle zeal, but zeal is 'according to

knowledge' and will not exist without it." This was penned by the American Presbyterian minister, A T Pierson, who had wide religious interests, in 1886. It is still true well over a century later!

9) Notes

1. *Religious Trends* No 2, 2000/2001 edition, edited by Peter Brierley, HarperCollins *Religious and Christian Research*, London, 1999, Table 8.17 and Figure 10.7.3.
2. See, for example, "Criteria for inclusion" in the *UK Christian Handbook*, 2000/2001 millennium edition, edited by Heather Wraight, HarperCollins *Religious and Christian Research*, London, 1999, Page 4.
3. Op cit. (Item 1), Table 8.18.2.
4. A more detailed list is given in op cit. (Item 1), Pages 10.2-4.
5. Op cit. (Item 1), Pages 10.9, 10.
6. Op cit. (Item 2). Non-Trinitarian and Non-Christian Religions are given in Section X, Page 526.
7. Op cit. (Item 1).
8. *Austrian Christian Handbook*, edited by Mary Lawson, MARC Europe, London, 1991, Page 15.
9. *World Churches Handbook*, edited by Peter Brierley, Christian Research and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, London, 1997, Page 10.
10. Religion Report of the Northern Ireland Census 1991, HMSO, Belfast, 1993, Page 250.
11. *Irish Christian Handbook* 1995/96 edition, edited by Peter Brierley, Christian Research, London, 1994, Page 21.
12. Religion Report of the Northern Ireland Census 1981, HMSO, Belfast, 1984, Page 148.
13. Such as Patrick Johnstone in *Operation World*, OM Publishing, Carlisle, United Kingdom, 1993.
14. Briefing paper for the 2001 Census: Religious Affiliation Group, Professor Leslie Francis, 17th March 1999.
15. *British Social Attitudes*, the 16th Report, "Who shares New Labour values?", 1999/2000 edition, edited by Roger Jowell et al, National Centre for Social Research, London and Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, 1999, Page 328.
16. Op cit. (Item 1), Table 2.7.
17. Op cit. (Item 9).

18. See, for example, *Churches and Churchgoers*, Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley, Oxford University Press, 1977.
19. *UK Christian Handbook* 1987/88 edition, edited by David Longley and Peter Brierley, MARC Europe, London, 1986, Table 9a, Page 135, Footnote 2.
20. Article *Ask the Church Doctor* by Dr Kent R Hunter in *Strategies for Today's Leader*, Volume XXXIII Number 2, Fall 1996, Page 13.
21. *Scotreach Programme Report*, Baptist Union of Scotland, 1988, Page 7.
22. Op cit. (Item 1), Table 8.17.
23. Mann, Horace, *Religious Worship in England and Wales*, Census of Great Britain 1851, George Routledge & Co., London, 1854, Page 106.
24. Mudie-Smith, Richard, *The Religious Life of London*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1904, London.
25. Report of Mass-Observation survey in 1949, published originally in *British Weekly*, Jan/Feb 1949, and also in Winter, 1952, edition of *Vision*, Volume III, Number 1, Journal of the Free Church of England, Page 1. Original report in the Mass-Observation Archive in the University of Sussex, Brighton.
26. *Winds of Change*, The National Church Life Survey, Peter Kaldor and others, Lancer, New South Wales, Australia, 1994, Page 263.
27. *Casting the Net*, the Unchurched Population, George Barna, Barna Research Group, Los Angeles, California, United States, 1995, Page 3.
28. Undertaken by the Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism, the English Church Census was reported in *Prospects for the Eighties*, Volume 1, Bible Society, London, 1980, Volume 2, Bible Society and MARC Europe, London, 1983.
29. The 1989 English Church Census was reported in *Prospects for the Nineties* and '*Christian*' *England*, Peter Brierley, MARC Europe, London, 1991.
30. The 1998 English Church Attendance Survey was reported in op cit. (Item 1 and *The Tide is Running Out*, Peter Brierley, Christian Research, London, 2000.
31. Undertaken for Wales for Christ, the Welsh Church Census was reported in *Prospects for Wales*, Peter Brierley and Byron Evans, Bible Society and MARC Europe, London, 1983.
32. Undertaken by the Bible Society, Cytûn and Evangelical Alliance, the Welsh Churches Survey was reported in *Challenge to Change*, John Gallacher, Bible Society, Swindon, 1997.
33. The Scottish Church Censuses for 1984 and 1994 were reported in *Prospects for Scotland* and *Prospects for Scotland 2000* respectively, both by Peter Brierley and Fergus MacDonald, National Bible Society of Scotland, Edinburgh, and MARC Europe, London (1984) and Christian Research, London (1994), 1985 and 1995 respectively.

34. In *Religious Trends* No 3, HarperCollins *Religious* and Christian Research, London, probably 2001. In the interim, please contact Christian Research on ✉ admin@christian-research.org.uk
35. *English Church Attendance District by District*, Challenge 2000 and Christian Research, London, 1995.
36. Op cit. (Item 15), Page 329.
37. Op cit. (Item 19), Page 150.
38. *British Social Attitudes*, Cumulative Sourcebook: the first six surveys, Gower, Aldershot and Social and Community Planning research, London, 1992.
39. Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain, 1937-75, edited by George Gallup Jnr., Random House, New York.
40. *Reviews of UK Statistical Sources: Religion*, Lynda Barley, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1987.
41. *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*, Robin Gill, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.