

Campaigning for Being Human

Richy Thompson gives some figures and discusses campaigns that Humanists UK are currently engaged in.

Humanists UK, the organisation for whom I work, campaign on a wide range of issues, from an end to state funding for faith schools, to legal recognition for assisted dying, to removal of bishops from the House of Lords. Many of these goals seem quite far away, but at the same time the UK population is becoming less and less religious. This talk will explore where these countervailing trends might be going, and what it all means for the future of 'being human'.

Some demographics

Society is changing (see figure 1 on facing page.). The latest British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) gives 53% of the population as belonging to no religion, 15% as Anglican, 9% as Catholic and 4% as Muslim. The proportion of the population that is Catholic or of non-Catholic/Anglican Christian faith has remained fairly constant over the last 33 years, with declines in religiosity amongst the native population being cancelled out by immigration. Meanwhile the proportion of the population that is of non-Christian faith has grown, albeit only to a still quite small proportion, from about 2% to about 6% of the population.

The Church of England, however, has collapsed (see figure 2 on facing page). It has declined from about 40% the year BSAS started, 1983 (coincidentally the year before the Sea of Faith was formed), to 15% today. The non-religious population, conversely, has capitalised, growing from 31% to 53%.

If you break the figures down by age, you find that every generation is less religious than the previous one. While just 24% of the over-75s are of no religion, that jumps to 63% amongst 18-24s. The proportion who are Anglicans runs from 38% amongst the over-75s to just 4.5%

amongst those aged 18-24. The Catholic figures are fairly consistent across age ranges, whereas for Muslims the proportion runs from 0.3% amongst the over-75s to 6% amongst 18-24 year olds.

In other words: in our lifetimes we are seeing a total collapse of the Church of England in our society, with its adherents moving to no religion. This is the largest single demographic shift going on in the UK today, much bigger in absolute terms than anything related to ethnicity or age. And research shows that this happens because for every non-religious person who becomes religious, there are 26 who go in the other direction.

And the collapse of Anglicanism leads to bizarre situations like that, for the first time, in 2015, there are now more children doing collective worship every day in state-funded Church of England schools, than there are Anglicans on the pews on any given week. This is a staggering state of affairs, and while support is presently riding high within Government for Church schools, it cannot be a sustainable picture (see figure 3 on facing page).

What is happening

I believe that, at least since it was created, we have been remodelling our society along the lines of the harm principle, a principle created by John Stuart Mill, in *On Liberty* (1859):

The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

This appears to have occurred through a series of revolutions in our social laws. If you look back at social progress over the 20th century, you can see

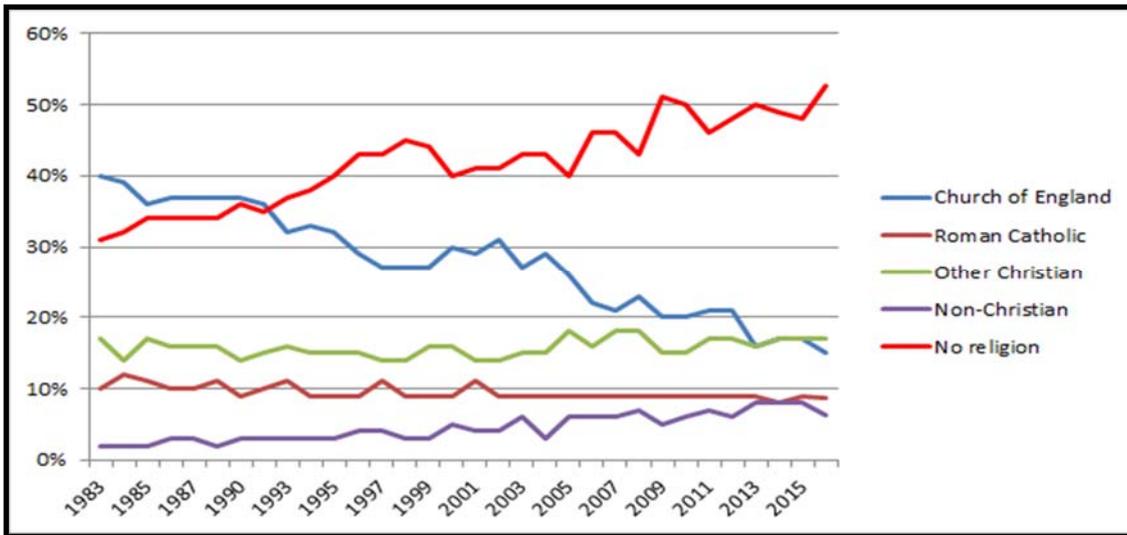


Figure 1. Five-year average British Social Attitudes Survey responses to question about religious belonging.

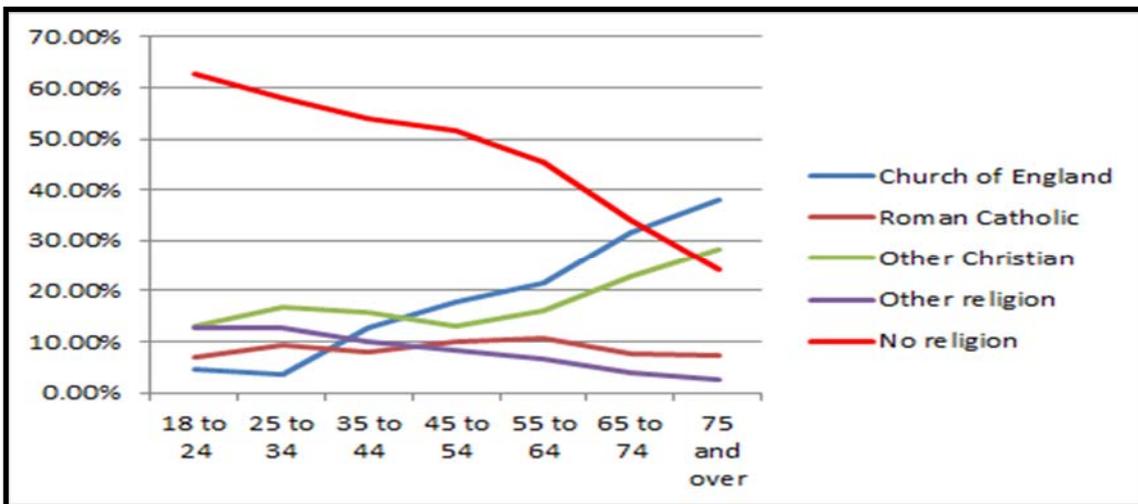


Figure 2. BSAS religious belonging by age.

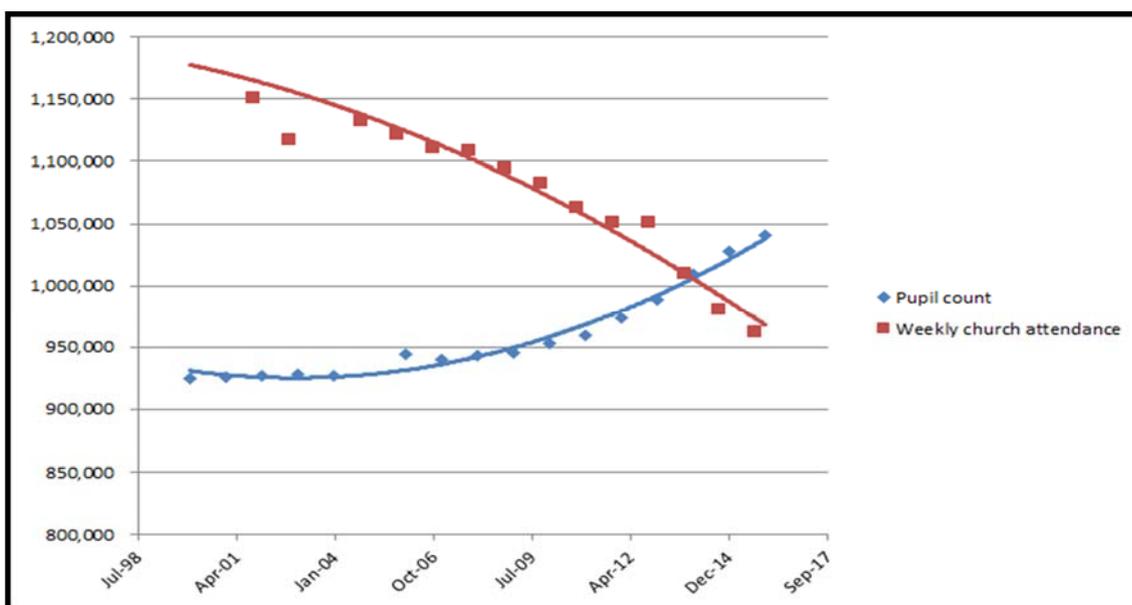


Figure 3. No. of pupils in Church of England state schools, versus average all-ages weekly attendance at Church of England churches.

these things go in fits and starts. Humanists UK is in the early stages of planning an event for later this year called *Recapturing the Spirit of '67*, celebrating fifty years since a number of landmark reforms like the legalisation of abortion, the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and the legalisation of the pill. 1967 was shortly followed by the first law on race relations, and followed by law bringing about general availability of divorce.

Another such year, I think, was 1998. It saw the Human Rights Act, the Good Friday Agreement, devolution, and the minimum wage. It was shortly followed by the removal of the hereditary peers from the House of Lords, the Freedom of Information Act, the end of section 28 and the equalisation of the age of consent, and equality laws on sexual orientation and religion or belief for the first time.

What are the equivalent debates today, and when might we next see such a revolution?

Ethical debates today

Many of the equivalent debates today are amongst those that Humanists UK work on. I would identify:

- Assisted dying
- Abortion (still)
- Relationships and sex education
- Marriage laws
- Segregation in schools

On **assisted dying**, two legal cases are now under way, seeking to change the law. In 2012-15, a previous case was brought by Tony Nicklinson, who had locked-in syndrome. After he died, his case was taken over by Humanists UK patrons Jane Nicklinson, Tony's wife, and Paul Lamb, who is severely physically disabled following a road accident. Both Tony and Paul were, or are in Paul's case, in constant pain, and so both wanted the right to end their lives. They took a case to try to ensure that people who are terminally ill or incurably suffering can die at a time and manner of their choosing, provided they are of sound mind and have a settled wish to do so. They argued that the lack of such a right meant their human right to private life was infringed.

Unfortunately, however, their case was unsuccessful, as the Supreme Court ruled in 2014 that such a significant ethical issue should be one that Parliament first of all has a chance to decide upon.

In 2015 Parliament refused to make such a decision by rejecting a private member's bill brought on the matter by Rob Marris MP. As a result, the issue has turned back to the courts, and there are two cases before us, both taken by Humanists UK members. First, Noel Conway, who has motor neurone disease, is arguing that those who are terminally ill and have six months or fewer to live, should have such a right to die. And second, 'Omid T', who has multiple system atrophy, is looking to take a case for those who are not terminally ill but incurably suffering. Noel had his case heard in the High Court in late July, which Humanists UK intervened in, and so we are currently awaiting a verdict in his claim before proceeding to Omid's. It seems probable that regardless of the outcome, both cases will make their way to the Supreme Court.

Parliament, it seems, has no attitude to address assisted dying, following the 2015 defeat. But that is not true when it comes to **abortion**. In June, the Supreme Court ruled in the so-called 'A and B' case that women from Northern Ireland are not being discriminated against by the NHS in England because the NHS doesn't offer them free access to abortion services, much as it does for women who are from Britain. Although this decision meant the UK Government had successfully defended the status quo, it led to political uproar, with Stella Creasy MP tabling an amendment to the Queen's Speech, looking to extend such free provision. With the Government fearing it was facing defeat, it decided to reverse its position, and extend free provision after all. The Scottish and Welsh Governments quickly followed suit. This has probably been the most significant development in access to abortion services for Irish women ever. Humanists UK intervened in the case and lobbied extensively for the amendment.

It is not the end of the matter, however, because it doesn't address the question of Northern Ireland women getting access to abortion facilities at home. There are currently

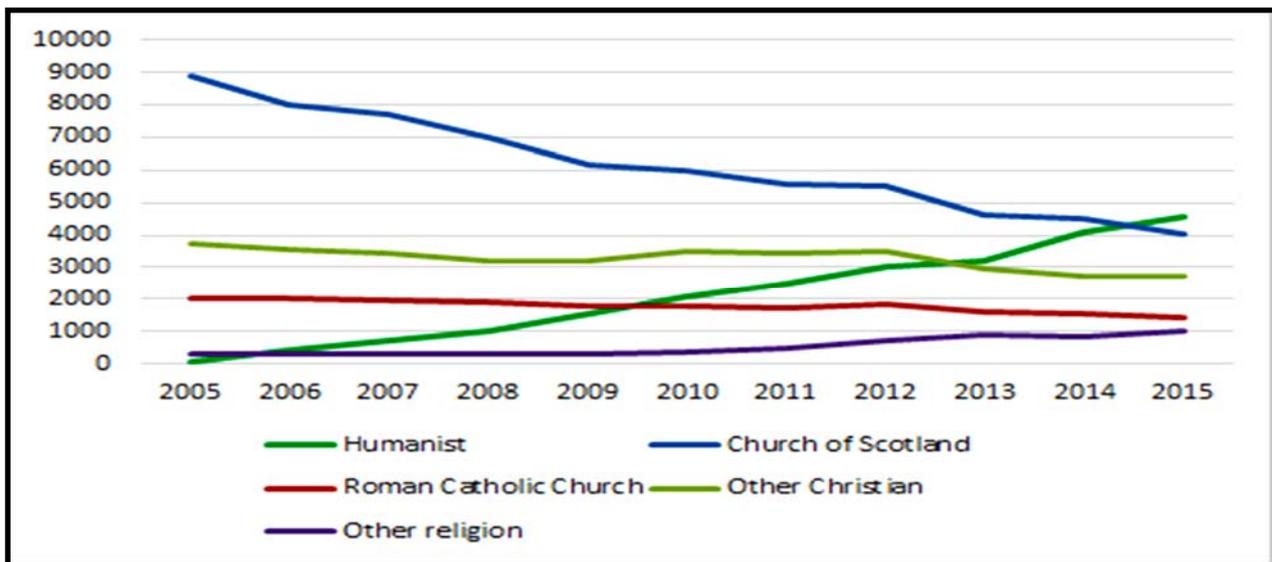


Figure 4. Humanist marriages in Scotland, by religion or belief.

two cases proceeding on this question, which Humanists UK is also intervening in. The first, called the ‘Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission’ case, seeks to enable women to be able to access an abortion when they have become pregnant due to sexual crime (specifically, rape and incest), or where there is a fatal foetal abnormality. The case was won in the High Court, but overturned in July in the Court of Appeal. It will now be heard by the Supreme Court in October.

The second, called ‘JR76’, is due before the Belfast High Court the same month, and focuses on a mother being prosecuted for procuring abortion pills for her daughter. The grounds at stake are whether abortion should be legal after consensual sex involving a minor, and whether a prosecution can be brought where it is only possible to do so through a breach of doctor-patient confidentiality. Cases of the nature of these two, seeking to extend the range of circumstances in which abortion is legal in Northern Ireland, have not occurred in the past, and reflect a more confident and organised pro-choice movement.

Turning to **relationships and sex education**, in the past, it has not been the case that the subject has been compulsory in UK schools. But earlier this year, following pressure from backbench MPs, the Government in England committed to just that, bringing forth an amendment in April

to its own Children and Social Work Act to bring about the change. This, again, is significant progress, after seven years of prevarication or opposition on the matter. A consultation on guidance to go alongside it is due in the autumn. However, concerns remain around the fact that the content of the curriculum still won’t be compulsory, so some schools – particularly religious schools – may ignore the guidance.

At present, **humanist marriages** are not legally recognised in the UK, except in Scotland (see figure 4 above). Humanist marriages are bespoke, non-religious marriages that are fully personalised to the deepest-held beliefs and wishes of the couple involved, and conducted by a humanist celebrant who shares the couple’s beliefs. Currently, in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, a couple wishing to have a humanist wedding ceremony must also have a separate civil registration in order to get legal recognition for their marriage.

In 2005 the Scottish Registrar General extended such recognition after concluding that for human rights reasons, existing law must be reinterpreted to do just that. Since then humanist marriages have exploded in number, from 82 in the first year to over 4,500 in 2015. Meanwhile Church of Scotland marriages have collapsed, from around 9,000 to about 4,000. In other words, it is clear there is a demand for them.

In England and Wales, the Government gave itself the power to extend legal recognition to humanist marriages as part of the 2013 Same-Sex Marriage Act, but chose not to do so, and has been prevaricating on the question since. Meanwhile, this year, a couple in Northern Ireland, supported by Humanists UK, decided to take a legal case to secure recognition for their humanist marriage there. They took the case on human rights grounds, arguing they are being discriminated against because of their humanist beliefs. The case proceeded at breakneck speed, so as to be heard before the couple's wedding date. From getting permission for a hearing in the High Court to being heard took just 19 days. Another 14 days later, the decision was handed down that the couple had won their case, meaning humanist marriages gained legal recognition. However, that same day the decision was appealed, meaning that the couple were back in the Court of Appeal nine days later. By this point it was three days before the couple's scheduled marriage, so the judges decided to find a loophole to enable this couple to have their legal humanist wedding ceremony, while staying the wider decision until a further hearing in September. In other words, one legal humanist wedding has now happened in Northern Ireland – but whether there are any more remains to be seen!

Not everything, however, is progressing in the right direction. This is particularly true when it comes to **'faith' schools**. In late 2016, the UK Government announced it wants to lift the cap on admissions to all new English state religious schools, which has existed since 2007. The cap has said that at least half of places at such schools must be open to all, regardless of religion and belief. It has had a clear impact on increasing religious, ethnic, and social diversity within schools. However, it has been opposed by the Catholic Education Service, who claim that the cap breaks canon law, in spite of ample evidence that other Catholic schools in other countries have no problem with similarly open admissions. The Government consulted on the lifting of the cap last year, but has yet to make a firm decision to do it.

Similarly, progress has been slow in tackling illegal religious schools. Humanists UK has been working in particular with ex-Charedi Jewish men from Stamford Hill in Hackney, who in spite of

being third or fourth generation Londoners, spoke no English until leaving their communities as young men. This is because after boys have their *bar mitzvah* at the age of 13, they are confined to illegal *yeshivas*, which don't even meet the minimum standards for a private school; they are crammed 50 to a room, and study nothing but the Talmud and the Torah, from 8 am to 10 pm. In spite of widespread awareness of this issue – Humanists UK has a list of about 25 of these schools – the authorities have still failed to shut them down. Ofsted now says that it has insufficient powers to effectively do so. The Government consulted on giving Ofsted more powers in this area of out-of-school settings in early 2016, but things stalled in the face of opposition from the Church of England, who had spurious concerns about the regulation of Sunday Schools.

Particularly in education, religious groups are extremely powerful. The Church of England is the ninth biggest charitable foundation in the world, but on top of that it runs a quarter of all state schools. The Catholic Church runs another ten percent. This makes issues around discrimination in education, in particular, very hard to tackle.

Where to from here?

Given all the above, it seems we might be going through a revolution in social rules right now. But the demographic trends outlined at the start surely must mean another one is coming. Education is the hardest to get at, but this, too, must eventually be recognised as an area needing reform, as we continue to reassemble society along the lines of what John Stuart Mill wanted to see.

That is the future of being human in the UK, at least, and of Humanism. On all of these things, it is a matter of when, not if. Our job as campaigners is to make sure that change happens as smoothly and as quickly as possible.

Richy Thompson is Director of Public Affairs and Policy, Humanists UK