

# ‘I’m not religious, but...’

Denise Cush engages with the changing religious landscape in Britain.

In a lecture given at the British Academy in January 2016, Professor Linda Woodhead made the startling claim that as of December 2015, the majority of people in Britain now identify as ‘non-religious’ (Woodhead, 2016a). The claim was based on YouGov surveys in which 46% of respondents ticked ‘no religion’ and if ‘none stated’ were added to this, 50% was reached. With younger age groups, the proportion is larger, for example 60% of 18-24 year olds identified as having ‘no religion’. It is always sensible to be wary of statistics, but *British Social Attitudes* surveys in recent years have revealed a similar picture.

This appears to be a rapid change over the last 15 years since the time of the first national census (2001) to include a question on religion. Then, the surprise was the large number of people who identified as ‘Christian’ (71%) with ‘none’ being 16%. Ten years later, in the 2011 census, 59% identified as ‘Christian’, and 25% as ‘none’. Has the number of ‘non-religious’ people really doubled in the last four years? If so, why, and what does this signify?

There is obviously a difference between a census and a survey sample, and it often depends on how exactly questions are put, but whatever the exact figures, it is clear that, especially for younger people, as Professor Woodhead put it, ‘no religion is the new religion’.

This article looks at some trends in the changing religious landscape of Britain, including the increase of the ‘nones’, and suggests some explanations and possible responses of interest to readers of *Sofia* and those working in education. It draws upon the work of sociologists of religion such as Davie, Heelas and

Weller as well as Woodhead, research with young people such as that of Savage and Collins-Mayo and religious education research from such as Blaylock, Jackson, and Wallis, as well as my own research, particularly with young Pagans.

## The increased public visibility of ‘religion’

Many have commented on the way in which religion is increasingly present and discussed in the public realm. So much so that the current situation has been labelled as ‘post-secular’ (after Habermas), although this is not a term that the present writer is happy with, as it suggests that once-upon-a-time everyone was ‘religious’, then religion went away leaving a ‘secular’ society, and now religion is back again. The fact that in 2015 there was a Commission on religion and belief



in public life (CORAB 2015) is the latest evidence for this new interest, as is the inclusion of ‘mutual respect between those of different faiths and beliefs’ in the list of so-called ‘British Values’ identified by the Department for Education for inculcation in schools (DfE 2014). The Council of Europe included the importance of learning about religions in schools for the first time in 2002, and brought out recommendations in 2008 (Jackson, 2014). Important world events which contributed to this new awareness of the impact of religion might include 9/11 2001, the break up of the Soviet Union in 1989, and the Iranian revolution in 1979. Religion seems to be constantly in the news (not usually for positive reasons). The Equality Act 2010 included ‘religion or belief’ as one of the protected characteristics, and ‘religion’ seems to

have replaced 'ethnicity' in identity politics, for example Muslim/Hindu/Sikh rather than 'Asian'.

This high level of interest in 'religion' has coincided with the decreased practice of religion, creating a situation where, according to sociologists such as Davie and Dinham (see Dinham and Francis 2015), there is a general lack of 'religious literacy' just when it is needed, leading to a poor quality of public debate.

## Increasing diversity

Although still in small numbers compared to 'Christians' and 'nones', religions other than Christianity are increasing year on year. For example, in the 2001 census Muslims made up 2.8% of the population, in 2011 the figure was 4.8%. Among university students the figure is 9% Muslim (Weller, 2011). Awareness of major traditions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism as well as Islam has been increased by religious education in community schools, which has been increasingly 'multifaith' since 1969, acknowledged in law in the 1988 Education Reform Act. Awareness of diversity internal to traditions is also growing, both from controversies between liberals and conservatives in Christianity and other traditions hitting the headlines, and from acknowledgement of internal diversity by religious education teachers who experienced the disjunction between textbook religion and lived religion in their classrooms (see Jackson, 1997) and by academics in Study of Religions.

## The loss of Christian monopoly

The influence of Christian churches and Christian influence on British cultural heritage should not be underestimated and both are still very important. However, as argued by Guest *et al.* (2012), Christianity has lost its monopoly. 'C of E' is no longer the default position. Woodhead's surveys (2016a) show that whereas 95% of people brought up as 'no religion' stay that way, only 40% of those brought up as Christian do. The chain of inheritance is becoming broken. Sociologist David Voas (2010) points out that even quite devout parents tend to think that they should not impose their views on their children, which may in part explain this. Another point made by Linda Woodhead is that in Britain the main churches seem to have become more conservative (more 'religious?') just when society in general is becoming more liberal, on issues such as gay marriage and assisted dying, and so are more out of step with the general public than the more liberal protestant churches in Scandinavian countries.

## 'Patchwork religiosity'

There also seems to have been an increase in people who draw upon multiple traditions for their personal spiritual development, a tendency called 'patchwork religiosity' by Lähnemann (2008). Some of these may come from mixed faith families (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2011), others chose their own mix, and are actually 'existentially interfaith' (Nesbitt, 2011). Research by student Lindsay Horler at Bath Spa University, attempting to discover the religious makeup of the student body, revealed great reluctance on the part of young people to identify with any of the 'boxes' into which religions are separated, but rather a significant number held a fluid position influenced by a variety of religious and non-religious worldviews. Other people find that a deep immersion in another faith enhances their original tradition – this is called 'transformation through encounter' by Tess Ward (2015).

As well as individuals drawing upon a variety of traditions, new hybrids are forming. One example would be the Forest Church movement. Although Bruce Stanley (2013) would reject the label 'hybrid', for the good reason that the movement is not about syncretism but about reconnecting with nature from within 'the Christ tradition', nevertheless some Forest Church groups draw upon Wicca, Druidry and other forms of Paganism in constructing their ceremonies.

## The 'nones'

Further research on those who identify as 'non-religious' reveals that the 'nones' are not necessarily atheists, especially of the vocal 'new atheist' tendency, and not necessarily anti-religion or even identifying with Humanism. Professor Woodhead's survey in 2013 revealed that 41% identified as atheist, 17% as theist, 11% preferred to say they were spiritual, and 25% engage in some form of spiritual practice in private. Interestingly, 100% were liberal on moral and



social issues, and 0% would look to religious leaders for guidance (2016b, 2016a). Simeon Wallis (2014) interviewed 23 secondary school students who ticked the 'no religion' box, and found that only 7/23 would call themselves atheist.

It seems that 'no-religion' covers many different perspectives, but what 'nones' seem to have in common is a dislike of the label 'religious', and a rejection of external authorities and religious institutions. Wallis's teenagers seemed to reject 'religion' because they thought of it as primarily about metaphysical truth claims, organisations, and acceptance of a whole 'package' of beliefs and values followed in strict obedience.

## A 'Spiritual Revolution'?

Research by Weller et al (2011) on religious identities of university students and staff revealed some interesting trends. Christians remained the largest group, a large minority at 44% students and 47% staff. 'No religion' was the second largest group at 31% students and 36% staff. Everything else is in single figures, but nonetheless significant. For students, the third largest group was Muslim (9%), then 'Spiritual' (5%). Other religions were mostly around 2%, with Pagans a slightly larger 2% than Buddhists, Hindus, or Jewish students. Among staff, the third largest group were 'Spiritual' at 4.5%, with Muslims fourth at 3%, Hindus fifth at 2% and other religions, including Pagans, at around 1%.

Heelas and Woodhead (2002, 2005) over a decade ago suggested that there is in progress a 'spiritual revolution' in which people are turning from 'religion' (defined as organised, objective truth, a deity 'out there') to 'spirituality' (defined as more personal, the divine within). This is part of a 'subjective turn' where the self is seen as the authority, where what matters is individual experience and personal feelings. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) engaged in fieldwork in the town of Kendall to see if there was empirical evidence for this claim, and found that both the 'religious' (in the sense of active churchgoers) and the 'spiritual' (those who attended things like meditation groups) were actually small minorities, but that whereas the former were declining the latter were growing. They wondered what the situation would be in 2035.

## Paganism as indicative of a changing religiosity

I became interested in studying contemporary Paganism in the 1980s, initially because of the presence of Pagan students at university and Pagan

children in schools, and the controversy over whether Halloween should be celebrated in schools. My continued exploration, particularly with 'teenage witches' and young Pagans (Cush 2007, 2010) as well as with adult Pagans (Cush ed. 2015; Cush, 2016) has led to an interest in Paganism not just in its own right, but as an example of a new way of being religious, which has similarities with Heelas and Woodhead's 'spiritual revolution'.

By contemporary Paganism, I mean a variety of groups and individuals united by seeing nature as sacred. The Pagan Federation defines a Pagan as one who follows a 'polytheistic or pantheistic nature-based religion'. My summary below applies more to Wiccans, Druids and followers of Goddess spirituality rather than Heathens, who are often trying to reconstruct ancient forms of paganism, and are thus more like traditional understandings of 'religion'.

Although there are some groups with leaders, contemporary Pagans mostly see the individual as the authority in religion. There is a tendency to be eclectic, drawing upon several traditions. I have heard several Pagans refer to 'karma', for example. Pagans are anti-dogmatic, and not very interested in systematic doctrines; rather, beliefs, values and identity are expressed in ritual/ceremony, story, poetry, and music. Ethics tend to the liberal, with the oft-quoted 'Wiccan Rede': 'an it harm none, do what thou wilt', which is not that different from St Augustine's 'love and do what thou wilt'. Where there are groups, these tend towards the network rather than 'organised religion' and the Goddess Temple in Glastonbury is one exception to the rule that sacred places tend not to be buildings. There are feminist and 'queer' influences, and women, and those who identify as LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex or queer), report feeling much more welcome than in the mainstream religious traditions. The divine, however conceived (deities, spirits, the Goddess, the life-force behind all things, that with which we are all one), is immanent in nature rather than transcendent. Most interesting for SOF is





the way that Pagan rituals, deities and stories may be adopted or invented to suit current purposes. Most Pagans are not concerned if some of their traditions are proved by historians to be of recent coinage. I puzzled over a new goddess, Nolava, in Glastonbury, until I worked out that this spelt Avalon backwards, and was a new way of referring to the spirit of the locality. The SOF Network retrospectively understands religious traditions as human creations, but contemporary Paganism seems to exemplify a *conscious* creation of religion by the creative human imagination.

## What about young people?

A survey of some recent research on young people and religion (taken mostly from Blaylock, Cush, Savage & Collins-Mayo, Wallis, and several authors in the Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion edited volume) revealed the following themes:

Young people who do identify with a named religious tradition consider it to be an important part of their identity, particularly if they are or perceive themselves to be a minority, such as young Muslims, Hindus, Pagans and Christians. Those whose parents or grandparents came from another country often seek to distinguish between what is merely 'cultural' from their family background from a purer version of the religion which can then either be enculturated into or used to critique what is seen as mainstream culture. One advantage that connection to a tradition provides is a vocabulary with which to talk about religious and spiritual matters.

The majority of non-aligned young people tend to be tolerant of religious diversity, respecting the rights of others to their beliefs. This is part of a commitment to individual choice. They tend to dislike the label 'religious', and associate 'religion' with organisations, authority and metaphysical truth claims. They may be indifferent to 'religion' but it does not mean that they are not deeply committed to their own values. Meanings tend to be located in family, friends, music and shared culture. They may not have an overarching worldview, either religious or secular, and on the whole are not on a spiritual quest. Savage and Collins-Mayo coined the term 'happy midi-narrative' to describe an approach to life which aims for happiness, for others as well as self, but which is somewhat lacking in resources if happiness is not forthcoming, with a tendency to blame themselves. Some answer questions about identity by rejecting the whole idea of a fixed identity. Compared for example with young Pagans, the non-aligned may lack a vocabulary with which to discuss religious and spiritual matters.

## Commentary

It seems that for many, and particularly young people, the term 'religion' has negative associations. It tends to be defined as propositional belief, blamed for wars, conflicts and illiberal stances. Linda Woodhead uses the phrase 'a toxic brand' (2016b). For many people, even if they are tolerant of the beliefs of others, 'religion is something that other people do' (Andrew Brown, 2016). According to Woodhead and Brown, the Church of England and other mainstream churches have widened the gap between themselves and the majority of people by becoming 'more religious' and alienating people by adhering to conservative moral and social values.

However, the move away from 'religion' is not altogether towards atheism or humanism. Those who identify as non-religious have a variety of beliefs and values, including even a minority who are theist. Some are putting together their own mix of 'personal religion' (Jackson, 2014), even if they do not want to call it 'religion', drawing upon a variety of sources. A significant minority would employ the label 'spiritual' to describe this position. The communications revolution has made a wealth of information available, and decades of interfaith dialogue have made some aware of the valuable resources in other peoples' traditions. Although some religious education in schools has reinforced the idea that 'religion' is about truth claims and something that other people do (which we respect but do not take seriously as an option for ourselves), elsewhere religious education has given young people a good grasp of the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews and the opportunity to reflect on the relevance of the issues raised to developing their own perspectives and enhancing their own lives.

## Possible Responses

It may be that we need a replacement term for 'religion' given the negative associations of the word, or perhaps to 'reclaim' the word with a new understanding. Certainly it would help if it is understood that 'religion' is not centrally, or not only, about metaphysical truth claims, and can have valuable insights to share even if, as SOF might contend, it is a creation of the human imagination rather than 'literally' true. We need to recognise the importance of both the 'nones' and the new personal religiosity, both of which may well appreciate some of what SOF has to say about religion. For those remaining within Christian churches or other mainstream traditions, it is important that liberal as well as conservative viewpoints are heard if they want to connect with the majority of British people. If, as

commonly in SOF, religious and non-religious traditions are viewed as treasure chests of wisdom-resources, valuable even to those who do not subscribe to the metaphysical truth claims or want to identify with the labels, it is important that 'religious literacy' and the necessary vocabulary to discuss religious and spiritual matters is not lost along with religious identification. Religious education should focus on helping young people develop 'purposeful living' whether within or outwith religious traditions, as well as familiarising students with the vocabulary required to discuss religious matters. It should not be about reified 'religions' and learning about other people, or about debating issues in European

philosophy of religion, but become something wider that is about 'us' as well as 'them', practical living as well as ideas. Dave Francis has termed this wider quest for wisdom and good lives 'Sophology' (2013).

Finally, perhaps we should follow the example of some contemporary Pagans, and not just understand religions of the past as human creations, but become actively engaged in consciously creating the 'religion' of the future.

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