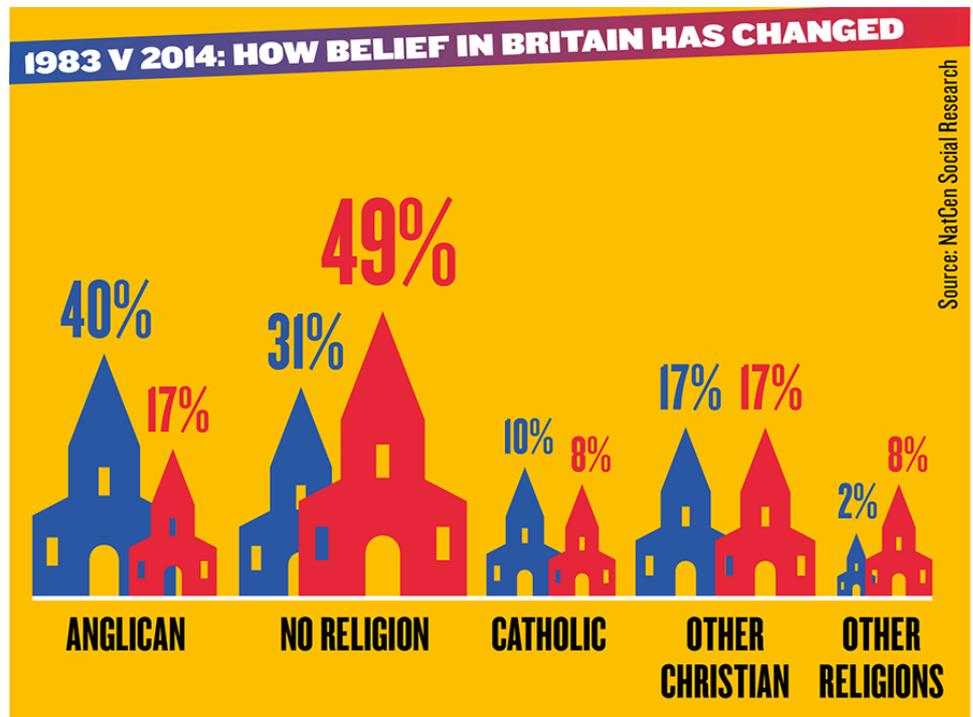


Religion under threat as UK loses belief

A new study says there are more non-believers than Christians in England and Wales for the first time. The pattern is similar elsewhere in the West – so will established religions die out?



Faiths in flux: Britons' religious beliefs have altered significantly since 1983.

'We don't do God.'

The words of **Alistair Campbell** have gone down in political folklore. His boss, Tony Blair, then UK prime minister, had strong religious convictions, and Campbell worried that British people would respond unfavourably to them.

His concern appears well founded. Yesterday a study revealed that almost half the population of England and Wales had no religion in 2014. For the first time, that figure was higher than the proportion of Christians.

For every person becoming an Anglican, 12 others give up their faith; for every new Catholic, 10 old ones leave. 'Churches need to take this data very seriously,' said Stephen Bullivant, one of the study's authors.

The trends, which are also reflected in **Scotland**, appear set to continue. Half of English and Welsh Christians are over 55; only 25% of Britons aged 18-24 believe in a god.

Britain is officially a Christian country – the **Queen** is the head of the Anglican church and

defender of the faith. This heritage can be dated back to the **second century**. Christianity dominated life in medieval times after the Normans built **stone churches**. The 16th and 17th centuries saw widespread conflict as the Anglican and Scottish churches were created.

One **psychologist** says the average country will turn secular – officially unaffiliated from religion – by 2041 as a result of increasing wealth. In Western nations, the spread of rational thought, church scandals, immigrants' beliefs and changing social attitudes have all been linked to the decline of Christianity. Even in the USA – where over **70%** of people are Christian – non-belief is on the rise.

This week 62% of Britons told a survey there was 'no place in UK politics for religious influence of any kind'. More of them now engage in spiritual experiences which are not part of church doctrine, such as mindfulness meditation. But is the decline of organised religion inevitable?

you may welcome the idea that they should be celebrated and promoted by the state. But if you think the state should not promote any particular faith, you may see established religions as a threat.

Q: But isn't religion irrelevant these days?

A: It may sometimes seem so in Western liberal

Losing faith

Yes, say some. Religions are irrational, resistant to material and scientific progress and incompatible with modern values. Those in charge of them have enjoyed unearned power for too long; given the chance, people will look elsewhere for their spiritual needs. And whatever you believe, secularism is tolerant and liberal – the state does not take sides over your private beliefs.

No, respond others. Religions give us a sense of wonder and touch on questions which are far more significant than our day-to-day material concerns. They bring people together and instil social order. Britain's laws and traditions are still largely based on Christianity – even sworn atheists celebrate Christmas and believe in principles such as the sanctity of life. Religion is here to stay.

societies which have become less religious. But faith has guided people's actions for millennia and continues as a major force in people's lives today. In 2011, a Pew survey found that 68% of people around the world were religious – and the proportion of non-believers is expected to shrink in coming decades.

Q & A

Q: I haven't really thought about religion. Do people's beliefs affect me?

A: Our beliefs inform our actions, so yes. If you believe, for example, that certain religions promote a desirable moral code of conduct,

YOU DECIDE

1. Do you welcome the decline of religion?
2. Is the end of organised religion inevitable?

ACTIVITIES

1. Work in groups of four. You are creating a constitution for your own new country. Would your country have a state religion? Discuss and draw up a list of reasons why it should or should not, and what it could be.
2. Choose one of the world's major religions. Prepare a one-page fact file on it, explaining how it began and where it is now practised. Would you like to see it gain more followers? Why?

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Rational thought will render religion irrelevant.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Alistair Campbell – Tony Blair's communications director (1997-2003).

Scotland – A survey last month found that 52% of people there were not religious. But in Northern Ireland only 7% of people said they belonged to a non-Christian religion or no religion in the 2011 census.

Queen – The monarch must still be a practising **Stone churches** – These buildings were very

Anglican. A law banning the British monarch from marrying a Catholic was only removed in 2011.

Second century – There is evidence that Roman merchants spread stories of both Jesus and pagan gods in the late second century. But Christian worship was not tolerated in the Roman empire until 313 and Christianity did not spread widely until the pope sent a mission to Kent in 596.

significant: they acted as schools, market places and entertainment venues, as well as houses of worship.

Psychologist – Biopsychologist Dr Nigel Barber, who blogs on the journal *Psychology Today*.

70% – According to a Pew survey conducted in 2014. In another US poll this year, 51% said they would be less likely to vote for a presidential candidate who was an atheist.

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