Faith that won’t fit the mould

On the face of it, the findings of the 2011 census concerning religious affiliation make gloomy reading for the Churches. But headlines about the decline in Christianity mask an altogether more subtle and intriguing reality.

Some church circles rejoiced when in 2001 the census found that 72 per cent of the population identified themselves as Christian. This week’s announcement that the figure for England and Wales fell to 59 per cent in the 2011 census, while the “no religion” category rose from 15 per cent to 25 per cent, has given secular groups the chance to thumb their noses.

Christians used the 2001 results as grounds for claiming that Britain was still a Christian country; humanists cite the latest findings as proof that it is rapidly becoming secular. Both reactions contain a grain of truth, but go well beyond the evidence. A larger body of recent research on religion in Britain offers a more intriguing picture of what is really going on.

The census is a poor guide because it asks a single question about identity and offers a limited range of answers. In England and Wales, the options are “no religion”, “Christian”, “Buddhist”, “Hindu”, “Jewish”, “Muslim”, “Sikh” and “any other religion”. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, there are also boxes for different Christian denominations. The categories are contentious. Some groups complain that they are not represented and lobby for change. Many people who answer feel they would like to tick more than one box but are not allowed to do so. Others are not sure, but do not have the option of saying so.

The census assumes that religious identity is simple and unitary, though dramatic cultural changes make that assumption increasingly problematic. At about the same time as the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 – and for linked reasons – religion in Europe began to change. In particular, a small number of homogeneous, “confessional” identities began to dissolve into a much greater variety, and a sharp separation between the religious and secular identity began to be smudged.

The census still works with simple, unitary categories of religion. If forced, most of us can squeeze ourselves into one of these boxes. But if asked what we really mean, we display a heterogeneity which simplistic readings of the census ignore.

Take the Christian category. Abby Day’s face-to-face investigations, reported in her book Believing in Belonging (2011), and the Foundation for Reason and Science’s larger survey of those who ticked Christian in the 2001 census, discover anything but uniformity. The largest sub-group is that of “moral Christians”, who admire Christian ethics and aspire to live by them. Then there are “faithful Christians”, who do orthodox things like go to church and read the Bible.

Next are “cradle Christians”, who tick the box because they were baptised and brought up Christian. Finally, there are “ethnic Christians”, who say they are Christian because they are British – and, in some cases, because they want to differentiate themselves from other groups, particularly Muslims. At least 12 per cent of the census Christians do not consider themselves religious at all, only 54 per cent believe in a personal God and the vast majority rarely go to church.

Those who tick “no religion” are equally diverse. The word “religion” has become toxic, suggesting empty ritual and dogmatism, so it is no surprise that more people now call themselves spiritual than religious. But ticking “no religion” on the census does not necessarily mean secular. A recent report on three surveys by the think tank Theos found that the “nones” fell into at least three categories: the nonattenders, who never go to a place of worship, the atheists and the non-religious. The nonattenders were pretty religious, with 44 per cent believing in a soul and 35 per cent in God or a higher power. Among the non- religious, 34 per cent believed in life after death and 10 per cent believed that God designed the world. The atheists were the most secular, yet 23 per cent of them believed in a soul. The report concluded that only 9 per cent of British people were consistently non-religious.

Most people no longer identify with the labels of religious affiliation. As recently as the 1970s, being Catholic or Protestant shaped beliefs, values and behaviours, as well as social networks, leisure activities, marriage choices and political affiliations. That is no longer the case. Religion, like secularity, has become a matter of choice. We do not obey authority as we once did, and we no longer take our religious identities “off the shelf”. We explore for ourselves and assemble spiritual packages we find meaningful. To that extent, it is true we are no longer religious in the sense we once were. The decline in the numbers ticking “Christian is largely accounted for by a halving of the number of nominal Anglicans since the early 1980s, a fact attested to by British Social Attitudes surveys. But there has been no triumph of secularism. Faith schools are more popular than ever, religious sites, pilgrimages and practices are revived and religion is more openly integrated into public life. Although atheism has been vocal, the numbers belonging to secular organisations remain tiny – an estimated 28,000 in the British Humanist Association, compared with 57,000 who reported themselves to be “Pagan” in the 2011 census.

We seem to be witnessing the end of an era of confessional religious identities which began

as far back as the Reformation. These days, however, few of us fit comfortably into the simple categories that political and religious authorities support. I admit that I am typical. Born and raised by default in the Church of England, I am influenced by a period of Catholic schooling, by being brought up near Glastonbury, a major centre of alternative spirituality, and by various secular commitments to scientific enquiry and social equality.

Like many of my colleagues, I used to teach from textbooks which divided the religious

world into Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, humanists and so on. Now we investigate religion as it is actually practised in a particular place.

We could take the 2001 finding that “Christian” stood at 72 per cent as a sign that religion was still important – but only if we admitted that it was often a rather secularized form of religion. We can take the 2011 rise in “no religion” to be a sign that we have become more secular – but only if we admit that the secular has become more mixed up with the spiritual. The fact is that the old categories of the census have an attenuated connection to real life: they make a good media story, but they should not distract our attention from more interesting developments.

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