

Post-religious Britain?: The faith of the faithless

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contents

Executive Summary	5
Methodology Note	8
Introduction	9
chapter 1 – Socio-demographics: Who are the “Nevers” and the “Atheists”?	11
chapter 2 – What do “Nevers” and “Atheists” believe about Christianity?	16
chapter 3 – How spiritual are “Nevers” and “Atheists”?	24
chapter 4 – Conclusion	32

executive summary

- This research report draws on data from three sources: a 2012 ComRes/ Theos study primarily exploring the public's attitude to English cathedrals; a 2008 ComRes/ Theos Darwin study (primarily exploring the public's attitude to evolution and religious belief); and the 2008 wave of the British Social Attitudes survey.
- The objective was to get a better understanding of "non-religiosity" in British society, specifically to ask the question of what those people who clearly put themselves outside any formal religious system look like socio-demographically and what their beliefs are (both in terms of Christianity and 'spirituality').
- The term "non religiosity" is used tentatively as it covers a range of categories, which, whilst overlapping, are not-coterminous. "Non-religiosity" can be used to mean calling oneself non-religious, or not believing in God, or never attending a place of worship, or some combination of these three. The data analysed here show that while there are similarities between these groups, they are by no means identical in their spiritual beliefs and behaviour.
- In this report, three particular terms are used:
 - ♦ "Nevers" are those who answered "never" in response to the question "How often do you participate in a religious service as a worshipper?"
 - ♦ "Atheists" are those who answered "I don't believe in God" in response to the question "Which of the following statements comes closest to expressing what you currently believe about God?"
 - ♦ "Non-religious" are those who answered "No religion" in response to the question "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?"
- ✦ Not every research study drawn on in this report contains analysis of all three groups (generally speaking, the ComRes/ Theos Cathedral survey looks at "Nevers" and "Atheists" and the ComRes/ Darwin and BSA studies look at

the “Non-religious”). The report indicates which data sources are being used when.

- In the studies drawn on for this report, “Nevers” comprise approximately 47% of the population, “Atheists” around 24%, and the “Non-religious” around 44%. (It is worth noting that the first ComRes/ Theos study surveyed English adults; the second UK adults, including Northern Ireland; and the BSA 2008 wave studied British adults).
- With these caveats in place, the research shows that **socio-demographically** the “typical” non-religious person is more likely than the population in general to be male, younger, and white. They are slightly better educated and better off than the population as a whole.
- There are differences to this picture according to the different categories of non-religiosity. For example, atheists are more likely to be male, whereas people who never participate in a religious service (“Nevers”) are not. Similarly, atheists are particularly likely to be white, whereas “Nevers” are only slightly more likely to be white.
- The data also show that among “Nevers” and atheists, there are still traces, sometimes even strong traces, of Christian belief and behaviour. For example:
 - ♦ 31% of “Nevers” identify themselves as **Christians**, as do 11% of “Atheists”;
 - ♦ 35% of “Nevers” express a **belief in God or a Higher Power**;
 - ♦ 8% of atheists **participate in a religious service** as a worshipper once a year or more, with around half of them doing so once a month or more.
- Analysing the data according to **spiritual beliefs**, we found that:
 - ♦ Around a third of people who belong to no-religion (28-34% depending on survey), over a quarter of “Nevers” (28%), and 15% of atheists said that they believed in **life after death**;
 - ♦ One in five “Nevers” (21%) said they believed in **angels** compared with 7% of **atheists**;
 - ♦ Just over a quarter (26%) of the general population said they believed in **reincarnation**, whilst just over a fifth (22%) of “Nevers” agreed, and one in seven atheists (14%);

- ♦ More than two in five “Nevers” (44%) believed in a **human soul**, as do almost a quarter (23%) of atheists;
 - ♦ 16% of people who say they have ‘no religion’ considered themselves to be very or moderately spiritual;
 - ♦ A quarter (24%) of the non-religious believed in heaven and 15% in hell;
 - ♦ A fifth (20%) of non-religious people believed in the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors, compared to 23% of the total sample.
- Overall, the proportion of people who are consistently non-religious – i.e. who don’t believe in God, never attend a place of worship, call themselves non-religious, and don’t believe life after death, the soul, angels, etc – is very low at 9%.
 - In conclusion, this research shows that many of those people who deliberately place themselves outside the boundary of any formal religious belief or adherence – by calling themselves an atheist, or saying that they belong to no religion, or never participating in a religious service as a worshipper – have some Christian and/ or spiritual beliefs and, on occasion, even practices. Being non-religious does not mean being faithless or even non-spiritual.
 - More research is needed into this group to confirm and add detail to this picture. However, the data analysed for this report suggest that whatever the trends in affiliation to formalised religion in Britain, we are not a post-religious, still less a post-spiritual, society, and that even those ‘beyond the fringe’ – who do not call themselves religious, attend religious services or believe in religious teachings – still have vestiges (and sometimes more than that) of religious and spiritual faith.

methodology note

Theos Cathedrals poll: ComRes interviewed 1,749 English adults online from 10th to 12th August 2012. Data were weighted to be demographically representative of all English adults aged 18+. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Theos Darwin poll: ComRes interviewed 2,060 UK adults between 14th October and 21st November 2008. The data were weighted to be demographically representative of all UK adults. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

British Social Attitudes Survey: 2,229 interviews self-completion and CAPI, multi-stage stratified random sample. Data from National Centre for Social Research, British Social Attitudes Survey, 2008 [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], March 2010. SN: 6390, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6390-1>

introduction

The 2012 report from Theos and The Grubb Institute, *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals*, examined public opinion on the role and future of Church of England cathedrals. This report drew on a number of research surveys, one being a study of 1,749 English adults conducted by ComRes in August 2012.

The data from this survey revealed findings that were worth exploring in greater detail than was possible in the *Spiritual Capital* report, specifically relating to the shape and beliefs of people who might be termed ‘non-religious’ – i.e. people who never attend a place of worship and/or do not believe in God. Other research suggests that this is a growing group within the UK population but it is one that has, as yet, been under-researched and whose beliefs are not well known.

“Beliefs” is a deliberately chosen word here as just because an individual never attends a place of worship or is a confirmed atheist, it does not mean that they have no spiritual beliefs or even commitments. Put another way, it is quite wrong to assume that the English (or British) population falls into two categories: those who are committed religious believers and those who are wholly secularised. The reality is that there are many shades of gray between these two poles. This short research report hopes to shed some light on those shades.

It does so primarily by analysing the original dataset according to two particular criteria: the attendance pattern and professed belief of respondents. Specifically, this report has examined the ComRes / Theos Cathedral data set according to whether people “Never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper (with “Never” here meaning never: this category comprises people who did not even tick the “less than once a year” option) and whether they were an atheist (people who answered “I don’t believe in God”). We have called these two groups “Nevers” and “Atheists”.

According to this survey, “Nevers” comprise 47% of the English population whereas “Atheists” comprise 24%. There is, of course, considerable overlap between the two. To be precise, 43% of “Nevers” are Atheists, whilst 86% of Atheists never attend a religious service as a worshipper. As one would expect, therefore, the two groups exhibit some

similarities. However, there are differences (not least in the overall size of each group) and these underline the basic hypothesis of this report that the non-religious category is as varied and interesting as the religious one.

Although the ComRes/ Theos Cathedral data set among English adults provides the basic source for this report, the study does integrate several other data sources, in particular from the British Social Attitudes data set and from a 2009 study (which focused on evolution and theistic belief) that was also commissioned by Theos and conducted by ComRes, this time among UK adults. Neither of these data sets is strictly comparable, as their data is analysed according to different criteria. Hence, both these data sources are used primarily for supplementary and illustrative purposes.

The report is divided into three main chapters. The first examines what the “Nevers” and “Atheists” look like socio-economically – are they essentially the same sex, age, ethnicity, etc. as the overall English population or do they exhibit particular characteristics? The second looks at what they believe about Christianity – does never attending a religious service or being an atheist mean they are completely alienated from Christian beliefs? Finally, the third looks at what might be generally called their spiritual beliefs – do they have any or are they confirmed and coherent in their ‘secular’ commitments? The report then concludes with a short conclusion.

Post-religious Britain? is only a short report and it is hoped that it will serve primarily as a stimulus for further research and analysis into non-religiosity in the UK.

Nick Spencer and Holly Weldin

London, 2012

socio-demographics: who are the “nevers” and the “atheists”?

What are the socio-demographic characteristics of non-religiosity in England? Are atheists and people who “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper typical of the population as a whole or are they marked out as different in any particular way?

Looking, first, at **gender**, and comparing the percentage of female and male adults in the total sample (i.e. national population) against those in the “Never” and Atheist categories, we can see that women and men were evenly represented among the “Nevers”. By contrast, those who do not believe in God were notably more likely to be male (59% vs. 49% of total sample).

Those who do not believe in God were notably more likely to be male.

Gender	Total sample	Never	Atheist
Male	49%	49%	59%
Female	51%	51%	41%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417

Looking at **age** breakdown, the results showed that both “Nevers” and “Atheists” were less likely to be in the 65 and over group (15% Nevers and 16% Atheists vs. 20% of the total sample). However, differences by age remained largely within the margin of error and were not significant.

Age	Total sample	Never	Atheist
18-24	12%	13%	14%
25-34	17%	17%	15%
35-44	19%	22%	21%
45-54	17%	19%	18%
55-64	15%	16%	16%
65+	20%	15%	16%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417

Analysis by **education** showed few notable characteristics. “Nevers” were slightly more likely to have had a low terminal level of education and slightly less likely to have finished their education at 19-24 (broadly, at tertiary level). However this difference was within the margin of error.

Age finished full time education	Total sample	Never	Atheist
Under 16	36%	40%	35%
17-18	19%	18%	18%
19-24	28%	25%	28%
25-34	6%	5%	7%
35+	1%	1%	1%
Still in full time education	5%	5%	6%
Never had any full time education	1%	1%	1%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417

“Nevers” are more likely to be white than the population as a whole, and Atheists are much more likely to be white.

Looking at the groups by **ethnicity** was more interesting. The results showed that “Nevers” were more likely to be white than the population as a whole, and Atheists are much more likely to be white. Put another way, whereas the non-white proportion of the English population is around 10%, the non-white proportion of the Never population is 5% and the non-white proportion of the Atheist population is 2%. This is the largest demographic difference between the groups.

Ethnicity	Total sample	Never	Atheist
White	89%	94%	97%
Mixed	1%	5%	1%
Asian	4%	1%	-
Black	3%	1%	-
Other	1%	1%	1%
Net: Non-White	10%	5%	2%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417

Looking at where respondents lived showed that atheists were slightly more likely to live in rural areas than the overall population (although again the difference is small) and that there was no real difference between “Nevers” and the total sample.

Environment they live in	Total sample	Never	Atheist
Urban	77%	78%	74%
Rural	23%	22%	26%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417

Analysing **employment**, the data showed that again there was little difference between “Nevers” and the total sample, but that atheists were slightly more likely to be working than the national population. However, this was within the margin of error.

Working status	Total sample	Never	Atheist
Working	57%	58%	61%
Not working	43%	42%	39%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417

Looking at income, the data collected for the respondents’ annual household income (before tax) showed no real difference between “Nevers” or atheists and the total adult population.

Combined annual income for household, prior to tax deductions	Total sample	Never	Atheist
Up to £7,000	4%	4%	3%
£7,001 to £14,000	14%	15%	18%
£14,001 to £21,000	15%	15%	13%
£21,001 to £28,000	14%	14%	14%
£28,001 to £34,000	12%	12%	12%
£34,001 to £48,000	16%	15%	16%
£48,001 to £83,000	14%	14%	14%
£83,000 or more	2%	1%	2%
Prefer not to say	10%	9%	9%

Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417

data from other sources

How do these data compare with those from other sources? When, in 2008, British Social Attitudes asked British respondents about their belief in God (offering them five options: “absolutely sure you believe in God”, “somewhat sure”, “not quite sure”, “not at all sure”, or “sure you do not believe in God”), it found that confirmed atheism (“sure you do not believe in God”) was a distinctly male phenomenon (28% of men vs. 15% of women).

Age	Total sample	Atheists
15-24	12%	14%
25-34	17%	20%
35-44	20%	24%
45-54	17%	18%
55-64	15%	15%
65-74	11%	5%
75 and over	8%	4%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: “About belief in God. Are you absolutely sure you believe in God, somewhat sure, not quite sure, not at all sure, or are you sure you do not believe in God?”

Atheists are educated to a slightly higher level than the population on average.

Data by terminal level of education suggested that atheists are educated to a slightly higher level than the population on average.

Terminal level of education	Total sample	Atheists
15 or under	25%	22%
16	28%	29%
17	8%	6%
18	10%	11%
19 or over	25%	29%
Still at school/university	4%	3%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: “About belief in God. Are you absolutely sure you believe in God, somewhat sure, not quite sure, not at all sure, or are you sure you do not believe in God?”

This finding was confirmed by analysis according to **highest level of qualification**, in which there was a clear trend towards atheists being better educated than the population as a whole.

Highest level of education	Total sample	Atheists
Degree	21%	27%
Higher education below degree or prof. qual.	11%	10%
A-level or equivalent	17%	16%
O-level/GCSE A-C or equivalent	19%	22%
CSE/GCSE D-G or equivalent	7%	7%
No qualifications	24%	18%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: “About belief in God. Are you absolutely sure you believe in God, somewhat sure, not quite sure, not at all sure, or are you sure you do not believe in God?”

When analysed by **income** it appeared as if atheists are slightly richer than the population as a whole.

Atheists are slightly richer than the population as a whole.

Income	Total sample	Atheists
Less than £4,000	2%	3%
£4,000 - £5,999	4%	2%
£6,000 - £9,999	10%	7%
£10,000 - £14,999	12%	10%
£15,000 - £19,999	9%	7%
£20,000 - £28,999	14%	14%
£29,000 - £34,999	14%	16%
£35,000 or more	35%	41%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: “About belief in God. Are you absolutely sure you believe in God, somewhat sure, not quite sure, not at all sure, or are you sure you do not believe in God?”

socio-demographics: summary

From the above analysis, the ComRes/ Theos data set and the BSA 2008 data correlate well. The findings suggest that atheism in England, and Britain, is more of a male phenomenon; younger than the national average, overwhelmingly white, slightly better educated, and in a slightly higher income bracket and class. Never attending a religious service as a worshipper shows some similar trends (e.g. younger, more likely to be white) but these trends are much weaker.

what do “nevers” and “atheists” believe about christianity?

Having explored the socio-demographic shape of the “Atheists” and “Nevers” in England, (and comparing it with some British data), we turn to look at what they believe with regard to Christianity. Is it the case that calling yourself an atheist or never attending a place of worship means that you entirely reject Christian beliefs and practices?

Respondents in the ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study were asked, which, if any, **religion** they belonged to. Nationally (in England), over a third (39%) labelled themselves Church of England, 9% Roman Catholic, 7% from other Christian denominations.

A minority of atheists (11%) also answered that they would consider themselves Christian.

In comparison with this, 31% of the respondents who said they never participated in a religious service as a worshipper also said that they would identify themselves as a Christian (the majority identifying with the Anglican denomination). By comparison, a minority of atheists (11%) also answered that they would consider themselves Christian.

Religion	Total sample	Never	Atheist
Christian – Church of England	39%	25%	9%
Christian – Roman Catholic	9%	4%	1%
Catholic - Other	7%	3%	1%
Net Christian	56%	31%	11%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417) Question: Which, if any, religion do you belong to?

The ComRes survey looked at belief in God, asking people which of six graduated statements they agreed with (from which results the analysis of Atheists is made possible).

From the total English population, one in five (19%) were certain in their theistic belief, with almost as many (17%) agreeing that while they had doubts, they felt that they did

believe in God. By comparison 18% of the total sample were agnostic (“I don’t know whether there is a God”) and 24% (as already noted) atheists.

Looking at the same statements among the never-attenders, we found that the church non-attendeers were almost twice as likely to be atheist than the total population (24% vs. 43%). There was also a significant number of “Nevers” who said they didn’t know whether there is a God (22%).

Interestingly, however, 15% of “Nevers” said they believed in a Higher Power of some kind (15%), 5% believed in God some of the time, 8% said “While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God”, and 7% were convinced theists. Thus, in sum, 35% of “Nevers” expressed some kind of theistic belief.

35% of “Nevers” expressed some kind of theistic belief.

Belief in God	Total sample	Never
I know God exists and I have no doubts about it	19%	7%
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God	17%	8%
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others	9%	5%
I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind	14%	15%
I don’t know whether there is a God	18%	22%
I don’t believe in God	24%	43%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417) Question: Which of the following statements comes closest to expressing what you currently believe about God?

We also examined people’s belief in **Jesus’ resurrection** from the dead, simply exploring whether they did or did not believe in this (giving them a Don’t Know if they preferred that option). (The different ways to understand and interpret this question have long been recognised and are very difficult to address in quantitative surveys.)

While nearly a third (31%) of the population claimed to believe in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead (with 25% saying they didn’t know) this figure was, not surprisingly, low among Atheists, with only 4% saying they did, and 90% saying they didn’t. The “Nevers”, by comparison, were more believing: while 24% responded that they didn’t know, 13% of the never-attenders the never-attenders claimed that they did believe in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead	Total sample	Never	Atheist
I do believe in this	31%	13%	4%
I do not believe in this	44%	63%	90%
Don't know	25%	24%	7%

Source: ComRes/Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; "never" participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don't believe in God (atheists) n=417) Question: For each of the following, please select whether you do or do not believe in it – Jesus' resurrection from the dead

Respondents were also asked whether they **participate in a religious service as a worshipper** at all. It is important to note that this question did not specify Christian religious services and so will include data from respondents who attended services of other religions. However, as attendance at a service is closer to a formal religious association than are the spiritual beliefs analysed in the next section, it is worth exploring these findings at this point.

Around 8% of atheists participate in a religious service as a worshipper once a year or more.

This question (regarding religious attendance) went to form the analysis of the "Nevers" in this report, and so is useable only to analyse Atheists' opinions here. Cumulatively, these data show that around 8% of atheists participate in a religious service as a worshipper once a year or more, with nearly half of these doing so once a month or more.

Participation in a religious service as a worshipper	Total sample	Atheist
More than once a week	5%	1%
About once a week	6%	1%
A few times a month	3%	1%
About once a month	2%	1%
A few times a year	13%	2%
About once a year	7%	3%
Less than once a year	18%	7%
Never	47%	86%

Source: ComRes/Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; "never" participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don't believe in God (atheists) n=417) Question: How often do you participate in a religious service as a worshipper?

data from other sources

The ComRes/Darwin research carried out in 2008 surveyed the UK’s public opinion on questions relating to science, and in particular evolution. However, some of the questions from this survey are relevant to the subject of this report.

It is worth noting that the data from the ComRes/Theos Darwin report cannot readily be analysed by belief in God or attendance at a religious service. However, the findings can be cross-tabulated by self-designated religiosity (i.e. whether someone called themselves religious or not), which introduces a third category “non-religious” alongside the two (“Nevers” and “Atheists”) we have been examining in the report so far.

This question (“What is your religion?”) when asked in 2008 returned a figure of 27% belonging to no religion. This is a greater proportion of the total sample than atheists (24%) and less than ‘Nevers’ (47%), which we have been analysing from the ComRes/Theos Cathedral study.

The respondents of the Darwin survey were asked **how often they attended a religious service** or meeting (apart from for special occasions, e.g. weddings). The figure returned here, 45%, corresponded closely with that from the the ComRes/Theos Cathedral report (47%).

In contrast to this, just over a fifth of the non-religious group claimed that they attended a religious service or meeting once a year or more, with half of this group doing so several times a year or more.

Attend a religious service or meeting	Total sample	No Religion
Never	45%	78%
Once a year	13%	12%
Several times a year	15%	7%
About once a month	6%	1%
Several times a month	4%	1%
Once a week	10%	1%
Several times a week	4%	*
Every day	3%	*
Refused	1%	*

Source: ComRes/Theos Darwin research. Base: all UK adults n=2,061; no religion n=576. Question: Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals and baptisms, roughly how often nowadays do you attend a religious service or meeting?

The ComRes/Darwin research also asked the respondents **how often they prayed**, offering them a graduated list to choose from. Overall, 60% of people said that they prayed once a year or more often, compared to 18% of the “non-religious”, of whom a third prayed once a week or more.

Practising prayer	Total sample	No Religion
Never	39%	81%
Once a year	5%	6%
Several times a year	8%	4%
About once a month	4%	1%
Several times a month	4%	2%
Once a week	5%	1%
Several times a week	7%	*
Every day	21%	3%
Several times a day	6%	1%
Refused	2%	1%

Source: ComRes/Theos Darwin research. Base: all UK adults n=2,060; no religion n=576. Question: Roughly how often do you pray?

Overall, 60% of people said that they prayed once a year or more often, compared to 18% of the “non-religious”, and of those a third prayed once a week or more.

Another interesting point of reference from the ComRes/Darwin report is the respondents’ **belief in the Bible**. Slightly more than a third (38%) of the total UK population read the Bible once a year or more, with one fifth (18%) doing so once a month or more, and 12% doing so once a week or more. Among the respondents who self-designated themselves as not belonging to a religion, 17% said they read the Bible once a year or more, with 4% claiming to read it once a month or more.

Read the Bible	Total sample	No Religion
Never	61%	82%
Once a year	10%	7%
Several times a year	10%	6%
About once a month	4%	1%
Several times a month	3%	2%

Once a week	3%	*
Several times a week	3%	1%
Every day	5%	*
Several times a day	1%	*
Refused	1%	*

Source: ComRes/Theos Darwin research. Base: all UK adults n=2,061; no religion n=576. Question: Roughly how often do you read the Bible?

When it came to **attitudes to the Bible**, over a third (37%) of the total sample answered that they believed the Bible to be a useful book of guidance but not the Word of God, while just over a quarter claimed it was the divinely inspired Word of God (26%). Nearly one fifth (19%) of the total sample considered the Bible to be a beautiful piece of literature but otherwise irrelevant to us today, whilst one in ten (11%) thought it was “an irrelevant and dangerous collection of ancient myths”.

Slightly under three quarters of the non-religious respondents identified some positive aspect of the Bible (72%), whereas just less than a fifth answered that the Bible is irrelevant and a dangerous collection of myths (20%).

By comparison, a third of people who do not belong to any religion also answered that they believed that the Bible is a useful book of guidance in our lives but not the Word of God (34%). Nearly a third of the group claimed that the Bible is beautiful literature but irrelevant to us today (31%), and a small minority believed that the Bible actually was the Word of God (7%). As such, slightly under three quarters of the non-religious respondents identified some positive aspect of the Bible (72%), whereas just less than a fifth answered that the Bible is irrelevant and a dangerous collection of myths (20%).

View of the Bible	Total sample	No Religion
The divinely inspired Word of God	26%	7%
A useful book of guidance and advice for our lives but not the Word of God	37%	34%
Beautiful literature but otherwise irrelevant to us today	19%	31%
An irrelevant and dangerous collection of ancient myths	11%	20%
Refused	7%	8%

Source: ComRes/Theos Darwin research. Base: all UK adults n=2,061; no religion n=576. Question: Which one of the following statements comes closest to your view of the Bible?

Finally, although not explicitly related to Christianity, the question of how people regard the status of humans in comparison with other living species is of clear importance and relevance within Christian doctrine.

A plurality of the total UK population answered that they thought that human beings have unique value and significance (40%): two fifths thought that this was because humans are uniquely different from other living things (40%), and slightly more than two fifths (43%) thought that this was because humans are particularly complex and this sets them apart. By contrast, 14% of the total sample thought that “human beings are just another species of animal and have no unique value or significance.”

The non-religious were more likely to believe that humans are just another species of animal with no particular significance, with just were under a quarter holding this view (23%).

In comparison with this, just over a quarter of those who do not belong to any religion believed that humans are uniquely different from other living things, giving them a unique value and significance (29%), and close to half thought that it is their complex nature that makes human beings uniquely significant (46%). The non-religious were more likely to believe that humans are just another species of animal with no particular significance, with just were under a quarter holding this view (23%).

Beliefs about human beings and other living beings	Total sample	No Religion
Human beings are just another species of animal and have no unique value or significance	14%	23%
Human beings are like other animals but are particularly complex and this complexity gives humans value and significance	43%	46%
Human beings are uniquely different from other living things and so have a unique value and significance	40%	29%
Don't know	3%	2%

Source: ComRes/Thesos Darwin research. Base: all UK adults n=2,061; no religion n=576. Question: Which one of the following statements best describes your opinion of the relationship between human beings and other living things?

christianity: summary

The data in this chapter show that among people who never participate in a religious service as a worshipper (“Nevers”), Atheists, and those that self-identify as not belonging

to any religion, there are still traces, and often strong traces, of Christian belief and behaviour. In summary:

- 31% of “Nevers” (people who never participate in a religious service as a worshipper) identified themselves as belonging to a Christian faith, as did 11% of Atheists.
- 35% of “Nevers” expressed some kind of belief in God,
- 4% of Atheists believed in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, as did 13% of “Nevers”.
- 8% of atheists participated in a religious service as a worshipper once a year or more, with around half of those doing so once a month or more

A similar conclusion can be drawn of a third group, the self-designated “non-religious”. Of these, data from the 2008/09 study showed that:

- Just over a fifth (22%) of the “no religion” group attended a religious service or meeting once a year or more, with half of those doing so several times a year or more.
- 18% of the “non-religious” prayed once a year or more, of those around a third prayed once a week or more.
- 7% of the non-religious believed that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God, whereas a third said it is a useful book of guidance in our lives but not the Word of God (34%).

how spiritual are “nevers” and “atheists”?

The previous chapter examined the Christian beliefs, attitudes and practices of the ‘non-religious’ from separate studies conducted in England, Britain, and the UK. Spiritual beliefs are, however, distinct from Christian ones, despite there being some overlap. As an increasing body of social research is testifying, just because people no longer adhere to Christian religious doctrine or practices, that does not mean they no longer hold to more informal or amorphous ones. The question here is does this trend apply to the non-religious as well as to those people not examined in this report who sit somewhere between the religious and the non-religious, who have been variously termed the “spiritually engaged” or the “fuzzy faithful”.

Among the atheists, 15% said they believed in life after death.

Respondents were asked a range of questions in the ComRes/ Theos Cathedrals survey pertaining to various spiritual beliefs that are explored in this chapter.

Concerning **life after death**, a significant proportion of the total population of adults in England answered that they did believe in life after death (41%), and 25% said they didn’t know. A third answered that they did not believe in it (34%). By comparison, over a quarter (28%) of those who never participate in a religious service as a worshipper said that they believed in life after death, with 47% not believing, and the same number, 25%, not knowing. Among the atheists, 15% said they believed in life after death and 74% did not, and 11% said they didn’t know.

Life after death	Total sample	Never	Atheist
I do believe in this	41%	28%	15%
I do not believe in this	34%	47%	74%
Don’t know	25%	25%	11%

Source: ComRes/Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417). Question: For each of the following, please select whether you do or do not believe in it: Life after death

The same question was asked concerning belief in **angels**. Just over a third (35%) of the population claimed to believe in angels, smaller than the proportion of those who did not (45%). One in five (20%) said they did not know. By contrast one in five “Nevers” (21%) said they believed in angels, with 59% saying they did not. Atheists were more sceptical, with only 7% believing and 86% not.

Angels	Total sample	Never	Atheist
I do believe in this	35%	21%	7%
I do not believe in this	45%	59%	86%
Don't know	20%	19%	7%

Source: ComRes/Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don't believe in God (atheists) n=417). Question: For each of the following, please select whether you do or do not believe in it: Angels

We examined the respondents’ beliefs about God, exploring whether they did or did not believe in **God as a universal life force** (again, giving them a “Don’t Know” option). Two fifths of the total population answered that they did believe in God as a universal life force (40%), with slightly fewer answering that they did not (37%). A little under a quarter of all adults answered ‘Don’t Know’ (23%).

One in five “Nevers” (20%) said they believed in God is a universal life force.

By contrast, one in five “Nevers” (20%) said they believed in God as a universal life force, compared to nearly three fifths (58%) who did not. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of atheists answered that they did not believe God to be a universal life force (90%), although a small percentage (5%) did believe in this. Whether this indicates that they are not an atheist in the traditional sense of the term, or that they are not sure about their atheism, or that atheism is compatible with a God so conceived as a universal life force is unclear and likely to differ from one respondent to another.

God as a universal life force	Total sample	Never	Atheist
I do believe in this	40%	20%	5%
I do not believe in this	37%	58%	90%
Don't know	23%	22%	5%

Source: ComRes/Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don't believe in God (atheists) n=417). Question: For each of the following, please select whether you do or do not believe in it: God as a universal life force

The research also asked people whether they believed in the idea of **reincarnation** or not, with attitudes here being among the most interesting of those tested. Just over a quarter (26%) of the general population as did one in seven atheists said they did believe in reincarnation, whilst just over a fifth (22%) of “Nevers” agreed, and one in seven atheists (14%). “Nevers” were as unsure of their opinion as the general population (26% vs. 27%), whereas fewer atheists (11%) said they didn’t know.

Reincarnation	Total sample	Never	Atheist
I do believe in this	26%	22%	14%
I do not believe in this	47%	52%	74%
Don't know	27%	26%	11%

Source: ComRes/Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417). Question: For each of the following, please select whether you do or do not believe in it: Reincarnation

Finally, with this research, respondents were asked whether they believed in a human **soul**. This option reported the highest levels of belief. Of the total sample, a majority (60%) said that they did believe in a human soul, and the remaining two fifths answered “I do not believe” and “Don’t Know” (20% and 20% respectively).

Almost a quarter of atheists claimed that they did believe in a human soul.

“Nevers” also responded relatively favourably to this question, with a plurality (44%) believing in a human soul, and nearly a third (32%) not believing. Notably almost a quarter of atheists claimed that they did believe in a human soul (23%), with 55% denying the idea of a human soul and a quarter answering “Don’t Know” (22%).

Human soul	Total sample	Never	Atheist
I do believe in a human soul	60%	44%	23%
I do not believe in a human soul	20%	32%	55%
Don't Know	20%	24%	22%

Source: ComRes/Theos Cathedral study. Base: All English adults n=1,749; “never” participate in a religious service as a worshipper n=824; don’t believe in God (atheists) n=417). Question: For each of the following, please select whether you do or do not believe in it: The existence of the human soul

data from other sources

Similar belief questions were asked in the ComRes/Darwin 2008 study of UK adults, and these are worth comparing, bearing in mind the different categories for analysis.

In one question the respondents were asked about their views on **God in relation to the universe**. The results showed that the majority of people with no religion thought that God “is an invention of human minds and has nothing to do with the creation of the universe”. However, a significant minority disagreed: 7% took the pantheistic view that God and the universe are the same, 7% believed God is an impersonal force, 5% believed that God designed the universe but has no further involvement while, most interestingly, one in ten said that they thought “God designed and created the universe and remains involved with it”.

View about the universe	Total sample	No Religion
God designed and created the universe and remains involved with it	34%	10%
God designed and created the universe but has no further involvement with it	8%	5%
God is like an impersonal power or force within the universe	11%	7%
God and the universe are really the same	9%	7%
God is an invention of human minds and has nothing to do with the creation of the universe	31%	60%
Don't know	7%	12%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Darwin research. Base: all UK adults n=2,061; no religion n=576. Question: Which one of the following statements comes closest to your view about the universe?

As with the ComRes/Theos Cathedral report, the ComRes/Theos Darwin survey asked the respondents about their belief in **life after death**. In the former study among English adults, a significant proportion of the total population had answered that they did believe in life after death (41%) and this was true, only more so, within the ComRes/Theos Darwin research among UK adults. Here, just over half of the total sample answered that they did believe in life after death (53%). Likewise, a similar proportion of the total sample claimed that they did not believe in life after death (34% in the Cathedrals study vs. 37% in the Darwin study).

By comparison, over a quarter of UK adults with no religion in the ComRes/ Darwin study said that they believed in life after death (28%), which is the same as the percentage

of the English “Nevers” who claimed that they believed in life after death (28%) in the ComRes Cathedral study.

Life after death	Total sample	No Religion
Yes	53%	28%
No	37%	63%
Don't know	11%	9%

Source: ComRes/ Theos Darwin research. Base: all UK adults n=2,061; no religion n=576. Question Do you believe in the following? – Life after death

Although the British Social Attitudes survey does not tend to focus on spiritual questions, it did ask people in 2008 whether they considered themselves to be “very spiritual, moderately spiritual, slightly spiritual, or not spiritual at all,” and also which of a variety of spiritual issues they believed in.

These data cannot readily be analysed by belief in God or attendance at a religious service. However, in the manner of the ComRes/ Theos Darwin research, they can be cross-tabulated by self-designated religiosity (i.e. whether someone called themselves religious or not.) This question (“Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?”) when asked in 2008 BSA survey returned a figure of 44%. This places it on a rough numerical par with the “Nevers” that we have been analysing from the ComRes/ Theos Cathedral study. The clear message of this research report, however, is that not all non-religious groups are the same – “nevers” being different to atheists who are different to non-religious people. Therefore, as before, these data need to be read alongside each other and in the context of the other findings.

With regard to the first question, about people’s self-designation concerning **spirituality**, the 2008 data showed that 8% of the total population deemed themselves very spiritual. This compared to 4% of the “no religion” group who considered themselves very spiritual. The difference between groups was more pronounced among those who judged themselves ‘moderately spiritual’ (27% vs. 12%).

	Total sample	No Religion
Very spiritual	8%	4%
Moderately spiritual	27%	12%
Slightly spiritual	25%	19%
Not spiritual at all	41%	66%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: Do you consider yourself very spiritual, moderately spiritual, slightly spiritual, or not spiritual at all?

BSA also asked a number of other questions in 2008 relating to people’s spiritual beliefs, with particular regard to life after death, heaven, hell, the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors, and Nirvana.

Looking, first, at **life after death**, we can see that half (52%) of the total population believed in this with some degree of conviction, compared with a third (34%) of the no religion group. Approximately the same number (36%) of the non-religious was confident in its rejection of life after death.

Life after death	Total sample	No Religion
Yes, definitely	22%	11%
Yes, probably	30%	23%
No probably not	26%	30%
No definitely not	22%	36%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: Do you believe in Life after death?

The difference between the non-religious and the total sample was slightly more pronounced when it came to belief in heaven. A quarter (24%) of non-religious believed in this in some way, compared to nearly a half (48%) of the total sample. Nearly a half of all non-religious people were certain in their rejection of heaven.

A fifth (20%) of non-religious people believed in the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors, compared to 23% of the total population.

Heaven	Total sample	No Religion
Yes, definitely	20%	7%
Yes, probably	28%	17%
No probably not	26%	30%
No definitely not	26%	46%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: Do you believe in Heaven?

Hell was rather less popular than heaven. A third (32%) of the population believed in hell, compared to 15% of the non-religious (and here only 3% were certain of it). By far the majority (67% of total sample, 85% of non-religious) did not believe in hell.

Hell	Total sample	No Religion
Yes, definitely	13%	3%
Yes, probably	19%	12%
No probably not	33%	33%
No definitely not	34%	52%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: Do you believe in Hell?

Two issues that the Theos surveys did not touch upon were the **supernatural powers of deceased ancestors** and Nirvana. When it came to the first of these there was much more similarity in results between the non-religious and the overall sample. A fifth (20%) of non-religious people believed in the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors, compared to 23% of the total population. Conversely, 49% of the non-religious were sure about their rejection of the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors, compared with 45% of the total sample.

The supernatural powers of deceased ancestors	Total sample	No Religion
Yes, definitely	6%	4%
Yes, probably	17%	16%
No probably not	33%	31%
No definitely not	45%	49%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: Do you believe in the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors?

Finally, on the subject of **Nirvana** (left undefined by the BSA questionnaire), there was, again, some similarity between the non-religious and the overall population. One in ten of the non-religious believed in Nirvana compared to 15% of the total sample. By contrast, 55% of the non-religious were confirmed in their rejection of it compared with 48% of the total sample.

Nirvana	Total sample	No Religion
Yes, definitely	3%	1%
Yes, probably	12%	9%
No probably not	37%	35%
No definitely not	48%	55%

Source: BSA 2008. Base: All British adults n=2,229. Question: Do you believe in the Nirvana?

spirituality: summary

The data within this chapter confirm the general findings from chapter 2 – namely that being out of the Christian fold does not entail the rejection of all spiritual beliefs. Indeed, given that the respondents analysed in this chapter and throughout this report are not part of the “fuzzy faithful” middle ground, but rather made up of confirmed atheists, self-designated non-religious people, and those who never attend a religious service, it is striking how many of them do have spiritual beliefs of one kind or another.

Of course in some instances these are very low, such as the 7% of English atheists who believed in angels or the 5% who believed in God as a universal life force in the ComRes/Theos Cathedrals survey. In others, however, the figures were not only high but hardly different from the overall population. So, for example, more than two in five ‘Nevers’ in England (44%) believed in a human soul, as did almost a quarter (23%) of English atheists, whilst a remarkable fifth (20%) of non-religious people in Britain definitely or probably believed in the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors, compared to 23% of the total sample.

The data analysed in this report suggest that non-religiosity is a complex phenomenon – perhaps as complex as religiosity. While there are certainly those who are consistent in their rejection of all forms of religious and spiritual belief, affiliation and practice – people who are atheists, non-religious, never participate in a religious service, don't believe in resurrection, angels, the soul, life after death, the power of ancestors, etc – analysis shows they comprise around 9% of the population.

Non-religiosity is a complex phenomenon – perhaps as complex as religiosity.

In contrast cut “to them”, a significant minority of the “non-religious” (using the term broadly rather than narrowly of those who do not attend a religious service), the precise numbers of which will differ from one area to another, hold certain beliefs that can justifiably be called spiritual or even religious.

One might call these relics or vestiges of a Christian culture, were it not for the facts that a) many may have no necessary connection with Christianity (such as life after death or the human soul) and b) such beliefs do not appear to be limited to older respondents, i.e. those who grew within that Christian culture. Unfortunately, sub-sample sizes are too low to allow for a statistically-robust analysis of this, but it is nonetheless clear that younger people are as amenable to spiritual beliefs as older ones are.

There is no intended polemic within these findings: atheist apologists will not doubt point towards the fact that the British Social attitudes survey finds that atheists tend to be, on average, better educated and better off than the population as a whole; religious apologists, by contrast, will draw attention to the fact that a sizeable minority of non-religious people profess some form of belief in a range of spiritual ideas.

Using this data as ammunition in an on-going conflict is, therefore, somewhat counterproductive. Rather, it is hoped the findings analysed here will shed some light on an area of British society that has hitherto been ignored, and prompt further research into non-religiosity in Britain.

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Post-religious Britain?: The faith of the faithless

Nick Spencer & Holly Weldin

Post-religious Britain? looks at what people of no religious faith believe, arguing that this group is much more interesting and complex than has long been thought.

Using data from three recent sources, the report focuses specifically on three groups – atheists, people who never attend a religious service, and people who place themselves in the ‘no religion’ category – showing that although each shares certain socio-demographic characteristics, these groups are not identical to one another.

In spite of their rejection of religiosity, either in belief, behaviour or identity (or some combination of all three), research shows that many of the “faithless” still demonstrate patterns of religious and spiritual belief and behaviour that one would not normally expect.

For example, over a third of people who never attend a religious service express a belief in God or a Higher Power, nearly a quarter of atheists believe in a human soul, and around a fifth of non-religious people believe in the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors.

Post-religious Britain? concludes by arguing that the traditional division of people into religious and non-religious camps is unsustainable, that 21st century Britain is marked by religious and spiritual pluralism rather than by secularism, and that more research is needed into the faith of the faithless.

Nick Spencer is Research Director at Theos. Holly Weldin has recently completed post-graduate work in political ethics at King’s College, London.