

# The Spirit of Things Unseen:

belief in post-religious Britain



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# **The Spirit of Things Unseen:**

belief in post-religious Britain



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# executive summary

- For all that formalised religious belief and institutionalised religious belonging has declined over recent decades, the British have not become a nation of atheists or materialists. On the contrary, a spiritual current runs as, if not more, powerfully through the nation than it once did.
- Over three-quarters of all adults (77%) and three fifths (61%) of non-religious people believe that “there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means.”
- A majority of people (59%) are believers in the existence of some kind of spiritual being, 30% believe in God “as a universal life force”, 30% in spirits, 25% in angels, and 12% in “a higher spiritual being that can’t be called God.”
  - This figure is lower among the non-religious but is still 34%, meaning that over a third of the non-religious believe in the existence of some kind of spiritual being.
- Nearly two in five people believe in the existence of a soul (39%), 32% in life after death, 26% in heaven, 16% in reincarnation, 13% in hell, and 13% in the power of deceased ancestors. In total, over half the British public (54%) holds at least one of these spiritual beliefs.
- By comparison, only 13% of adults – and only 25% of the non-religious – agree with the statement “humans are purely material beings with no spiritual element”.
- More than half of people – 52% – think spiritual forces have some influence either on earth, in influencing people’s thoughts, events in the human world, or events in the natural world.
  - While 62% of people who call themselves Christians think that spiritual forces have some influence on either people’s thoughts, events in the human world, or events in the natural world, over a third (35%) of non-religious people also do.
- A sixth (17%) of people said that prayer works “in the sense that it can bring about change for the people or situation you are praying for”, a view most

likely to be found among elderly respondents (23% of those aged 65+) and religious minorities.

- 36% of people who say they belong to no religion claim that prayer does not work, compared to 6% of people who identified themselves with a religious group.
- The most popular view on prayer, held by 51% of people, is that “prayer works, in the sense that it makes you feel more at peace”.
- Two in five people (38%) think prayer could heal people, compared with 50% who think it cannot.
  - 53% of religious people think prayer could heal people, compared with only 12% of the non-religious.
- A sixth (17%) of people think that “miracles are the result of God or a higher power intervening in nature”, whereas nearly a third (30%) take the opposite view, namely that “miracles don’t exist – they are simply examples of coincidence or luck”.
  - The most popular view is, as with prayer, the middle way, in which 42% of people said that “miracles are unusual events that we cannot yet explain through science.”
- Remarkably, a sixth, or 16%, of people say that they or someone they knew had “experienced what [they] would call a miracle”, with younger respondents being consistently more likely to say this than older ones.
  - Even 8% of the non-religious claim that they, or someone they knew, had experienced a miracle.
- Nearly a quarter (23%) of people say they have had their tarot cards read, whilst 17% have had their star sign read, and 12% have had a reflexology session.
  - Smaller numbers had experienced more esoteric spiritual experiences, such as having a reiki session (8%), having their aura read (6%), or healing with crystals (5%).
  - Women are considerably more likely than men to undergo these experiences (51% vs. 26%).
  - Interestingly, while 39% of the overall population admits to having undergone at least one of these experiences, so do 38% of the non-religious (compared to 40% of the religious). When it comes to these more obviously non-religious spiritual activities, there appears to be no difference according to whether someone is religious or not.



- 11% of people said they had “visited a spiritual or faith healer, or a religious leader who specialises in praying for the sick”.
  - There was no notable difference in the figure across sub-groups for this issue, except among the non-religious, where the figure is 4%.
- 13% of people say they prayed “daily or more often”, 8% say they prayed a few times a week and 34% said they prayed occasionally. Nearly a half, or 45%, of people say they never prayed.
  - The majority (81%) of the non-religious say they never prayed, and only 3% said they prayed a few times a week or more often.
- Overall, spiritual beliefs are not the preserve of the elderly, who might be more inclined towards them on account of having grown up in a more religious culture. Such beliefs are to be found across the age ranges.
- Moreover, spiritual beliefs are clearly not the preserve of the ‘religious’ but are to be found across religious and non-religious groups, although those who consider themselves to belong to a religious group are more likely to hold such beliefs and practices.

ComRes interviewed 2,036 adults from Great Britain online between 4th and 5th September 2013. Data were weighted to be representative of all adults aged 18+ in Great Britain. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

# introduction

The decline of “religion” is well-charted in contemporary British life. According to the 2011 Census, 68% of people in England and Wales consider themselves as belonging to a religious group, a decline of 12% on the previous census. This figure was broadly confirmed by our research in which 60% said they were of a particular religion (the overwhelming majority considering themselves Christian).

*Trends in religious education, and in particular the decline of Sunday Schools, have meant that far fewer people in Britain even know the basics of the Christian story, let alone those of other religions.*

In a similar fashion, there has been a simultaneous decline in formal or doctrinal religious beliefs, whether that is belief in the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, or even in a personal God. Trends in religious education, and in particular the decline of Sunday Schools, have meant that far fewer people in Britain even know the basics of the Christian story, let alone those of other religions.

Some secularists have concluded from these trends that over recent decades Britain has become more secular, or more sceptical, or more rational, but the picture is actually very different – more complex and more interesting – than that.

In 2012, drawing on data from an England-wide survey, Theos published a short research report entitled *The Faith of the Faithless*. This found, among other things, that 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. Overall, it discovered that 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 in life after death, the soul, angels, etc. – was very low, at about 9%. In spite of people's rejection of religiosity, *The Faith of the Faithless* concluded, research shows that many of the “faithless” still demonstrate patterns of spiritual belief and behaviour that one would not otherwise expect. It is a similar story in America where 38% of people who call themselves atheist or agnostic claim to believe in a God or a Higher Power.<sup>1</sup>

On the back of this work, the independent production company, CTVC, commissioned Theos and the research company ComRes to conduct new research into spiritual Britain, to mark the launch of its new podcast venture, *Things Unseen*, which aims to engage both people of defined faith and those who place themselves outside formal religion. *The Spirit of Things Unseen* explores what exactly are the spiritual beliefs of the nation, who holds them, and how far they translate into people's actual lives. This report analyses and charts the findings, and ends with a short conclusion of where we are spiritually as a nation.

## 1.1 technical details

ComRes interviewed 2,036 adults from GB online between 4th and 5th September 2013. Data were weighted to be representative of all adults aged 18+ in GB. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

## introduction references

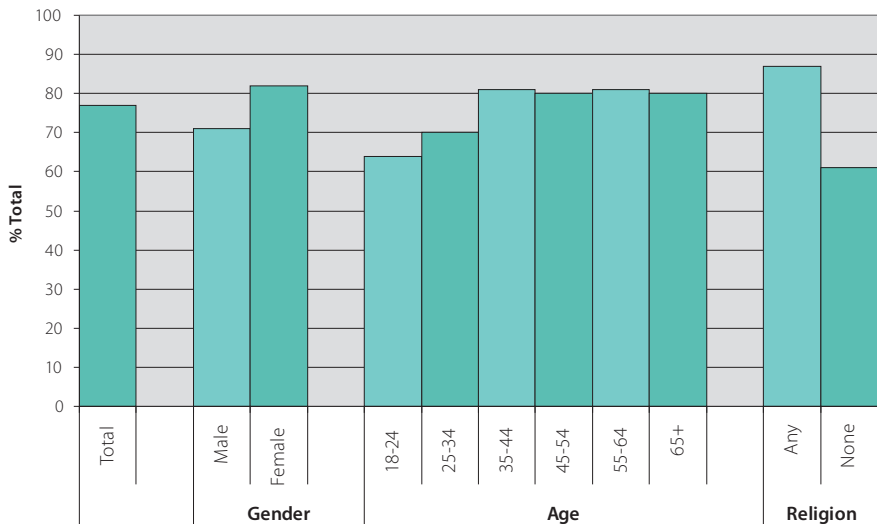
1. See Pew Forum, Religion and the Unaffiliated, 2012: [http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/?utm\\_content=buffer178f3&utm\\_source=buffer&utm\\_medium=twitter&utm\\_campaign=Buffer#belief-in-god](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/?utm_content=buffer178f3&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Buffer#belief-in-god)

## more things in heaven and earth

For all that formalised religious belief and institutionalised religious belonging has declined over recent decades, the British have not become a nation of atheists or materialists. On the contrary, a spiritual current runs as, if not more, powerfully through the nation than it once did.

For example, an overwhelming majority of people – 77% – believe that “there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means”. Only 18% disagree. Those who consider themselves to be a member of a religious group are more likely to agree with this (87%), but so do the majority (61%) of those who are not religious.

**Figure 1. Do you agree that there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means? (Total sample)**



Base (all): 2,036. Males: 999; Females: 1037. Aged 18-24: 232; aged 25-34: 317; aged 35-44: 330; aged 45-54: 373; aged 55-64: 316; aged 65+: 468. Any religion: 1,221; No religion: 721.

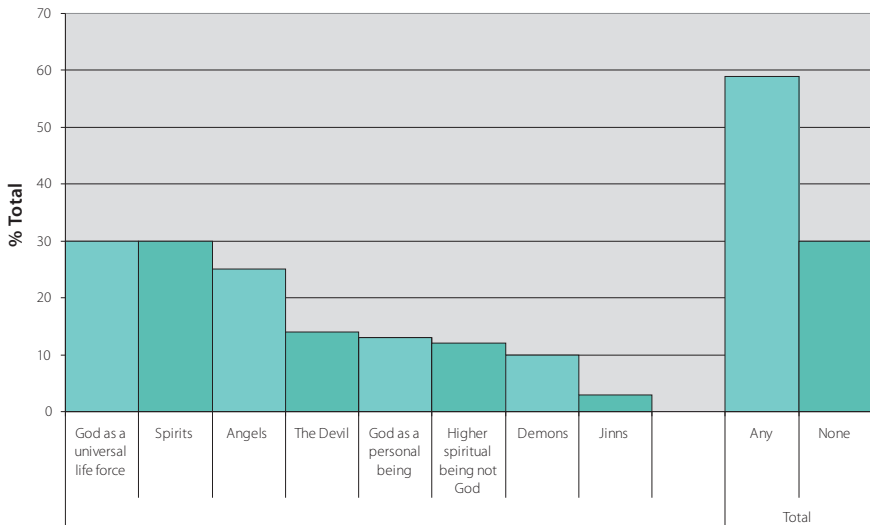
These data alone underline how not being religious does not necessarily mean being rationalistic or sceptical in your outlook, a finding that was strongly supported by some of the more specific questions we asked people.

## 2.1 spiritual beings

When asked about various different kinds of spiritual beings, the majority of people (59%) are believers (meaning that they believe in at least one spiritual being), compared to 30% who are sceptics.

Thus, although only 13% of people believe in “God as a personal being”, 30% believe in God “as a universal life force”, 30% in spirits, 25% in angels, and 12% in “a higher spiritual being that can’t be called God.”

**Figure 2: Which of the following do you believe in? (Total sample)**



Base (all): 2,036

Women are more likely than men to hold these beliefs (68% compared to 49%), but there was no significant difference according to social class or age. Indeed, if anything, younger people (aged 25-34) were slightly more likely to hold these beliefs than older ones (aged 45-64).

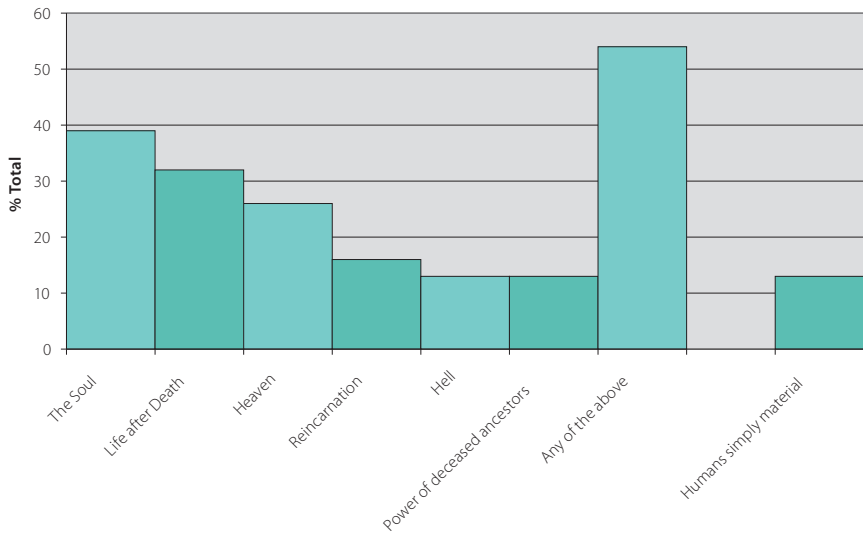
Again, as one would expect, such beliefs were more common among the religious (75% agreeing), but there is also a sizeable minority of the non-religious – 34% – who believed in spiritual beings.

## 2.2 spiritual beliefs

Spiritual beings are not the only kind of spiritual belief, and when people were asked about other phenomena their response was similar.

Nearly two in five adults (39%) believe in the existence of a soul, 32% in life after death, 26% in heaven, 16% in reincarnation, 13% in hell, and 13% in the power of deceased ancestors. In total, over half the British public (54%) holds at least one of these spiritual beliefs. By comparison, only 13% agree with the statement “humans are purely material beings with no spiritual element”.

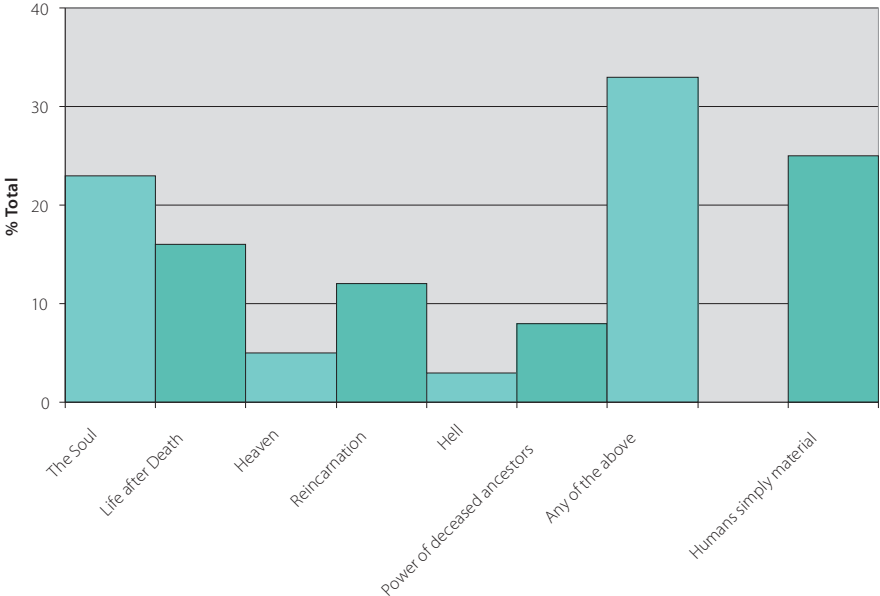
**Figure 3: Which of the following do you believe in? (Total sample)**



Base (all): 2,036

As with spiritual beings, women are more likely than men to hold these spiritual beliefs (64% compared to 43% men). Again, religious people are more likely to believe than the non-religious, but even the non-religious showed significant levels of spiritual belief. Thus, while 33% of the non-religious believed in at least one of the above spiritual entities (i.e. the soul, heaven, hell, reincarnation, or the power of deceased ancestors), only 25% of the non-religious agreed that “humans are purely material beings with no spiritual element”. A sense of the spiritual is not only not limited to the religious, but it appears to be a majority position even among the non-religious.

Figure 4: Which of the following do you believe in?  
(Non-religious respondents)



Base: No religion: 721

## spiritual influence

Believing in the *existence* of a higher power, or spirits, or heaven, or the soul is one thing. Believing that they have anything to do with life on earth is another. It could be quite possible that those people who professed these beliefs were doing so in an entirely theoretical manner, without considering any of their beliefs relevant to their everyday lives. Was this the case?

Our research asked people about the *influence* of spiritual forces. What, if anything, in life could be influenced by these spiritual realities in which people professed to believe?

The results show that people's beliefs are not simply theoretical. Over a third (34%) of people claim to believe that "people's thoughts" could be influenced by "spiritual forces". Over a quarter (27%) think that "events in the human world, e.g. causing harm to people or protecting them" could be similarly influenced by "spiritual forces", and slightly under a quarter (23%) think "events in the natural world" could be so influenced. Altogether, half of British adults – 52% – think spiritual forces have some influence either on earth or human beings, more than twice the figure – 25% – who think they have none (22% of respondents said that they did not know).

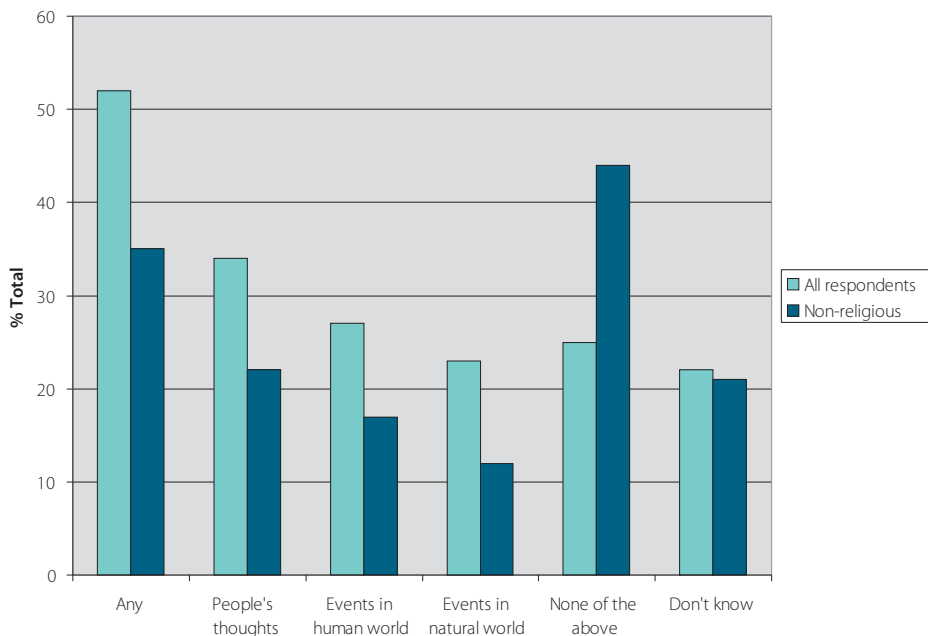
*The results show that people's beliefs are not simply theoretical. Over a third (34%) of people claim to believe that "people's thoughts" could be influenced by "spiritual forces".*

Some now-familiar patterns emerged among the sub-groups: women slightly more likely to believe than men (56% vs. 48%), 25-34s more than other age groups (61%), and no social grade more than any other.

Once again, not surprisingly, the religious groups are more likely than the non-religious ones to believe. Thus, while, for example, 62% of people who call themselves Christians think that spiritual forces have some influence on either people's thoughts, events in the human world, or events in the natural world, over a third (35%) of non-religious people do.



**Figure 5: Which, if any of the below, do you believe can be influenced by spiritual forces? (Total sample)**



Base: All respondents 2,036; No religion: 721

### 3.1 healing prayer

There was an interesting comparison in these findings with the questions we asked about prayer. Prayer is an activity that is often, though by no means always, predicated on the idea that the spiritual realm can influence the material one. But it is also sometimes understood as a more traditional, 'religious' form of spiritual activity, the kind that has declined in its popularity over recent decades. How do the general public view prayer?

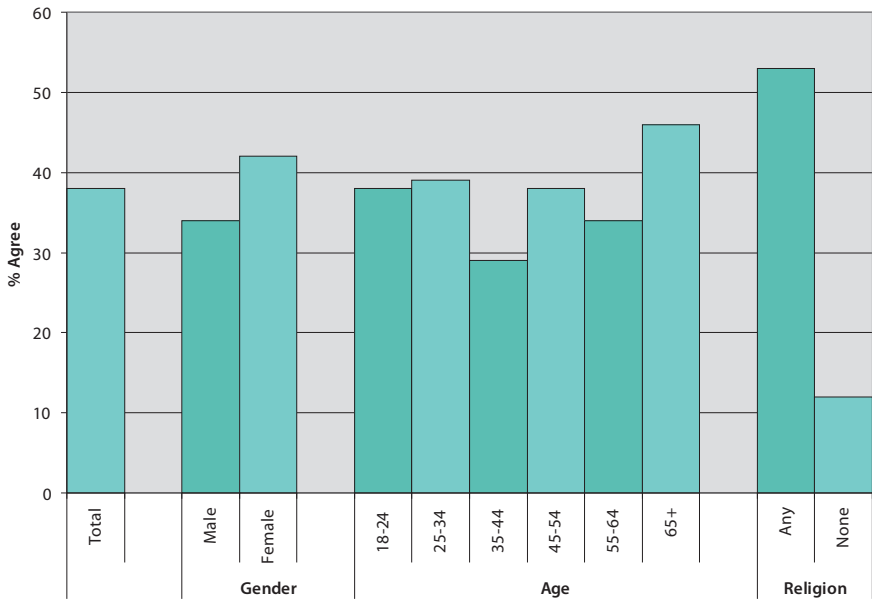
The answer is with similar sympathy and engagement than they did with other forms of spiritual influence. We asked to what extent they thought that prayer could heal people – a notably more specific ask than the more general questions relating to whether spiritual forces can simply influence life – and we found that 38% of people think it can, compared with 50% who think it cannot.

Women are slightly more likely to be sympathetic to healing prayer than men (42% vs.

34%) and although the younger age groups are not noticeably hostile (38% of 18-24s thought prayer could heal), it is the oldest age group (65+) that is most sympathetic, accounting for 46% (perhaps an indication of this being seen as a religious, rather than a spiritual, practice).

This was one area in which the difference between being religious and non-religious really stood out, with 55% of religious people saying they thought prayer could heal people, compared with only 12% of the non-religious.

**Figure 6: To what extent do you believe that prayer can heal you? (Total sample)**

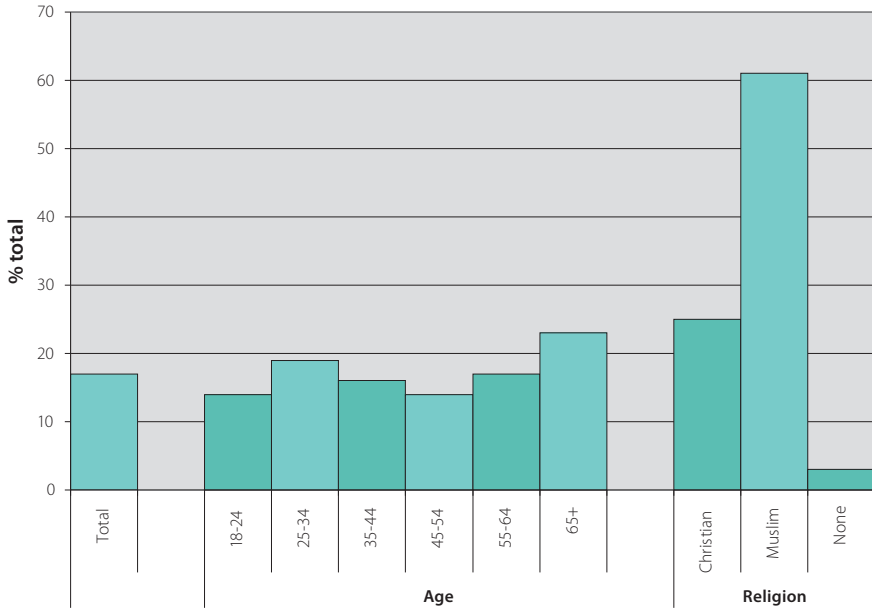


Base (all): 2,036. Males: 999; Females: 1,037. Aged 18-24: 232; aged 25-34: 317; aged 35-44: 330; aged 45-54: 373; aged 55-64: 316; aged 65+: 468. Any religion: 1,221; No religion: 721.

## 3.2 prayer

The public's attitude to healing prayer is also reflected in its attitude to prayer more broadly. A sixth (17%) of people say that prayer works "in the sense that it can bring about change for the people or situation you are praying for" a view most likely to be found among elderly respondents (23%) and religious minorities (although the latter was from a small sample size). There was no gender difference in the answers for this question.

**Figure 7: Identify closest with statement: Prayer works in the sense that it can bring about change for the people or situation you are praying for? (Total sample)**



Base (all): 2,036. Males: 999; Females: 1037. Aged 18-24: 232; aged 25-34: 317; aged 35-44: 330; aged 45-54: 373; aged 55-64: 316; aged 65+: 468; Christian 1,061; Muslim 47; No religion 721

Interestingly, there is an almost identical level of disbelief in prayer. Thus, the same proportion of people (17%) say they think “prayer doesn’t work in any way”. This is a more male opinion (20%) and one held by middle-aged respondents (24%). It is also, obviously, more commonly held by the non-religious, but even here it is a minority opinion. It is worth thinking carefully about the fact that only 36% of people who say they belong to no religion claim that prayer does not work in any way.

The majority view, held by 51% of the sample, is that “prayer works, in the sense that it makes you feel more at peace”. This is the majority view for every sub-group in the sample (including the non-religious, 44% of whom agreed with it) with the exception of Muslims, many more of whom were inclined to believe that “prayer works, in the sense that it can bring about change for the people or situation you are praying for” (although we must always be careful about drawing firm conclusions from the small sub-group size of Muslims).

This majority view of prayer is an interesting one not least because it is amenable to different interpretations. The spiritually-minded will argue that people clearly still think positively of prayer, in spite of the decline of institutional religion; the spiritually-sceptical will argue that the prayer that people think positively about has effectively been secularised, and is little more than a self-help practice. This is one instance where the data alone will not decide the issue, although it is worth noting that the traditions of prayer in the great world religions extend far beyond simply asking for things, and that the idea that prayer works in the sense that it makes you feel more at peace is entirely of a piece with these practices.

### 3.3 miracles

One final aspect of the influence of the spiritual on the material can be seen in people's attitude to miracles. Here, people's opinions are more agnostic. As with prayer, almost one fifth of people think that "miracles are the result of God or a higher power intervening in nature" (17%), whereas nearly a third (30%) take the opposite view, namely that "miracles don't exist – they are simply examples of coincidence or luck". The majority view, agreed by 42% of people, was that "miracles are unusual events that we cannot yet explain through science."

*As with prayer, almost one fifth of people think that "miracles are the result of God or a higher power intervening in nature" (17%).*

The familiar patterns of sub-group opinion are in evidence here but it is worth noting that while the non-religious group favour the view that miracles are non-existent,

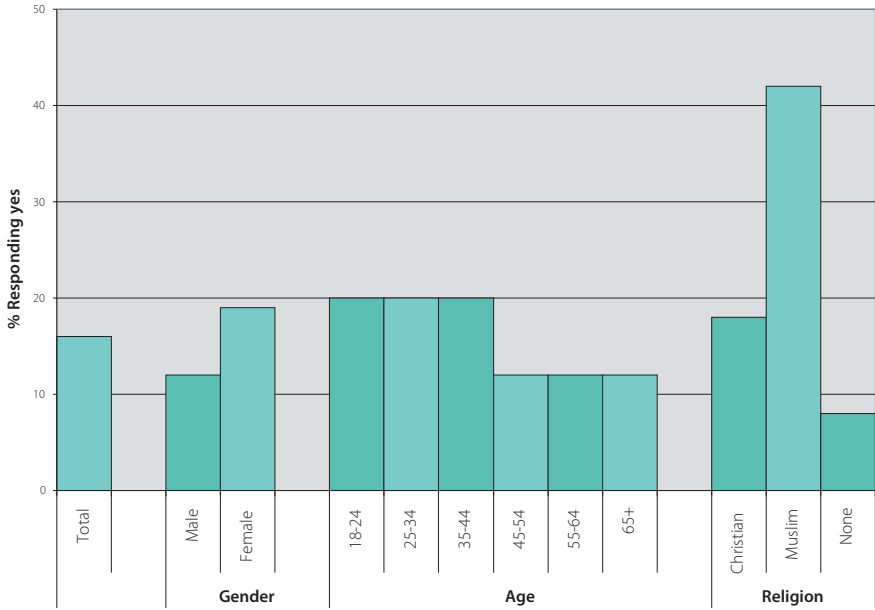
over a third of them think that miracles are unusual events that we cannot yet explain through science.

Finally, we also asked whether the respondent, or anyone they knew, had "ever experienced what [they] would call a miracle?" This is obviously a very specific and narrow question. Moreover, given the general inclination towards scepticism exhibited among the population, one would not expect anything but very low figures indeed for this question.

It is notable then, that 16% of people say yes to this question, and that younger respondents are consistently more likely to say yes than older ones (e.g. ages 18-24, 25-34, and 35-44 all had 1 in 5 (20%) saying yes, whilst the older three age ranges all had 12% saying yes). Given that the older respondents have been around for longer, so might be expected to have had more opportunity to experience a miracle or hear about one from anyone they knew, and that older respondents are generally more religious and therefore might be expected to be more credulous towards miracles, this is a particularly striking result.

It is made more striking still by the fact that 8% of the non-religious claim that they, or someone they knew, had experienced a miracle. It would be hard to find a better example of how the clear lines about religion, belief, and spirituality are blurring today.

**Figure 8: Have you ever experienced what you would call a miracle? (Total sample)**



Base (all): 2,036. Males: 999; Females: 1037. Aged 18-24: 232; aged 25-34: 317; aged 35-44: 330; aged 45-54: 373; aged: 55-64: 316; aged 65+: 468; Christian 1061; Muslim 47; No religion 721.

## do they do anything about it?

We have seen that the majority of people hold spiritual beliefs of one kind or another and that a majority of them tend to believe that the spiritual beings or elements in which they believe are capable of influencing life and the material world. Clearly, there are differences in these opinions between different groups of people but two are worthy of particular note:

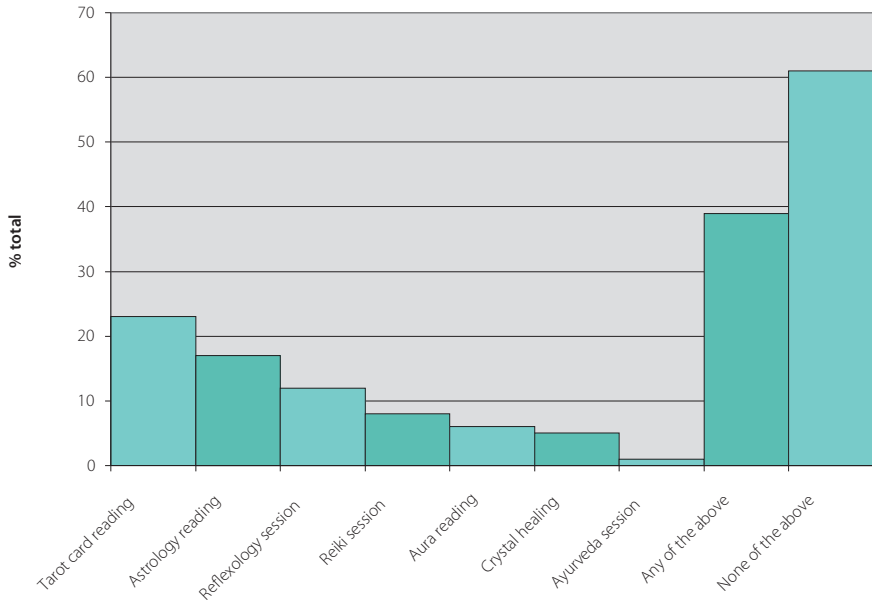
- Firstly, spiritual beliefs are not the preserve of the elderly who might be more inclined towards them on account of having grown up in a more religious culture. They are to be found across the age ranges, concentrated, if anything in the under-34 groups.
- Secondly, spiritual beliefs are not the preserve of the religious but are to be found across religious and non-religious groups. Invariably, those who consider themselves to belong to a religious group are more likely to hold spiritual beliefs, but one of the recurring themes of this research is that a significant minority of the non-religious are perfectly happy to sign up to spiritual beliefs and opinions.

*According to our research, 23% of people said they had had their tarot cards read, 17% had had their star sign read, 12% had had a reflexology session.*

Spiritual beliefs and opinions maybe: but what about practices? So far we have asked about what people believe, but what people believe and what they do, or are even prepared to do, are not, of course, the same. Does the public's general receptivity to spirituality translate into activity?

The answer is that it does, although by no means universally. According to our research, 23% of people said they had had their tarot cards read, 17% had had their star sign read, 12% had had a reflexology session.

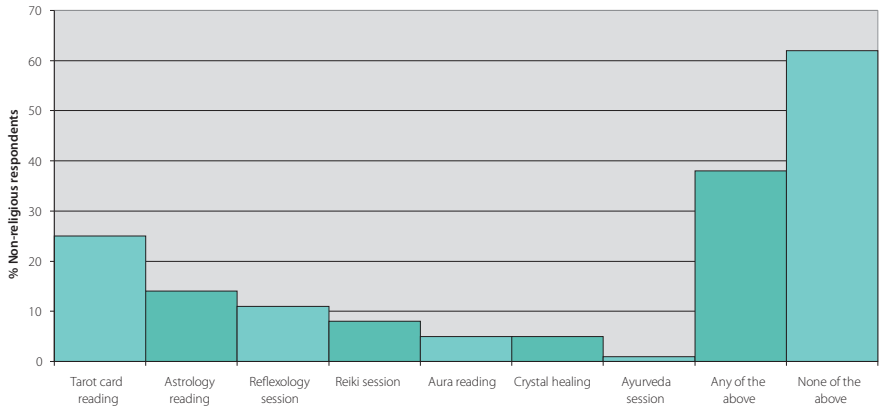
Smaller numbers had experienced more esoteric spiritual experiences, such as having a reiki session (8%), having their aura read (6%), healing with crystals (5%), and having an ayurveda session (1%).

**Figure 9: Which of the following have you undergone? (Total sample)**

Base (all): 2,036

Women are considerably more likely than men to undergo these things (51% vs. 26%) but what is perhaps most interesting about these figures is that, while 39% of the overall population admit to having undergone at least one of these experiences, so do 38% of the non-religious (compared to 40% of the religious). In other words, when it comes to these more obviously non-religious spiritual activities, there is no difference according to whether someone is religious or not.

**Figure 10: Which of the following have you ever undergone?  
(Non-religious sample)**



Base: No religion 721

This pattern was not replicated in the two other forms of spiritual activity we asked people about. When it came to healing, 11% of people said they had “ever visited a spiritual or faith healer, or a religious leader who specialises in praying for the sick”, a figure for which there was no notable difference in sub groups, except among the non-religious where the figure was 4%.

When it came to prayer (what kind of prayer was not specified), 13% say they prayed “daily, or more often”, 8% say they prayed a few times a week and 34% say they prayed occasionally. Nearly a half, or 45%, of people say they never prayed.

By contrast, the majority (81%) of the non-religious say they never prayed, and only 3% say they pray a few times a week or more often. For all their spiritual belief and opinions, it is spiritual practices and, more specifically, what might be called traditional spiritual practices that the non-religious group show most difference from the religious one.



## conclusions

It is clear that spiritual beliefs are not the preserve of the religious. Indeed, this research strongly suggests that a significant minority and sometimes even a majority of non-religious people hold spiritual beliefs.

This is particularly evident when it comes to non-traditional forms of religious beliefs, where it seems to make very little difference whether someone considers themselves religious or not. However, it also applies across the board, such as for beliefs in spiritual beings, many of whom are found, in some form or other, within religious traditions.

Women are more likely than men to hold such beliefs and, in as far as there is any clear age differential, younger people are slightly more likely than older ones.

Findings appear to differ slightly between beliefs and practice, with fewer people acting on their spiritual beliefs than holding them. This may be one of the salient differences between spirituality and religiosity – the latter, because it is more organised, communal, formalised, and explicitly ethical, is more likely to see belief translate into practice; whereas the former, because it is more personal, individualised and diverse is more likely to remain as a belief.

Whatever the nature and reasons for the difference, these research findings confirm what others have outlined, namely that although Britain is less formally and explicitly religious as a nation, it is no less spiritual.





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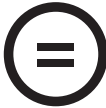
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# The Spirit of Things Unseen: belief in post-religious Britain

The decline of “religion” is well-charted in contemporary British life. According to the 2011 Census, 59% of people in England and Wales consider themselves as belonging to a religious group, a decline of 12% on the previous census.

Yet, for all that formalised religious belief and institutionalised religious belonging has declined over recent decades, the British have not become a nation of atheists or materialists. On the contrary, a spiritual current runs as, if not more, powerfully through the nation than it once did. For example, over three-quarters of all adults (77%) and three fifths (61%) of non-religious people believe that “there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means.”

*The Spirit of Things Unseen* is based on research, commissioned by CTVC and Theos and conducted by ComRes, which looks at the state of spiritual belief in “post-religious” Britain. It finds that spiritual beliefs, in particular the more esoteric ones, are no weaker today – and in some instances stronger – than they were in the past.

Moreover, such spiritual beliefs are not the preserve of the elderly, who might be more inclined towards them on account of having grown up in a more religious culture; or the preserve of the ‘religious’ alone. Rather, they are to be found across the age ranges and across religious and non-religious groups.

*The Spirit of Things Unseen* is an important contribution to the on-going recognition that a “post-religious” nation is not a “post-spiritual” one.

CTVC is an award-winning independent production company specializing in TV, radio and new media content that raises important ethical and moral issues from the perspective of those of “all faiths and none”. Much of CTVC’s output is for mainstream radio and TV outlets. Recent TV programmes have included *David Suchet: In the Footsteps of Saint Paul* for BBC1.

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