

Census 2011: What has caused this massive flight from Christianity?

Posted: Tue, 11th Dec 2012 by [Stephen Evans](#)

So, now we have the census figures and, as expected, there has been a huge drop in the number of people declaring themselves Christian in Britain – from 72% to 59%. The rise in those declaring they have no religion has risen from 15% to 25%.

So what has happened in this country in the decade since the last census? What has caused this huge flight from religion?

It's complicated, but we have to take into account that in that intervening period we have had the trauma of 9/11 and the subsequent rise in Islamic militancy. We have seen a lurch towards conservatism within Christianity, with the Catholic Church becoming aggressively political and reactionary. But the Anglican Church, too, has been taken over by evangelicals with an agenda that repels people, even those who have been traditionally attached to the Church of England.

After the debacle over women bishops, we have seen another demonstration of the inhumane approach that the Church of England is taking to same-sex marriage. Some of the rhetoric coming from the bishops and their supporters in parliament is verging on the crackpot.

There is nothing wrong with them being out of step with the opinions of the rest of the nation, but they have to accept the consequences of their stance – and that is a wholesale defection of their supporters.

The terrible activities of Islamist terrorists also reached their peak in Europe during these ten years. The London bombings, the Madrid bombings, the constant demands for special treatment, the attacks on free speech and the hysterical threats that are made by fanatics may not represent the opinions of the average Muslim, but they bring Islam into disrepute – and in its wake the whole of religion is questioned.

We should also not underestimate the effect of the surge in New Atheism prompted by people like Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. The influence of their thinking, particularly on young people, has been tremendous. As the Catholic commentator Damian Thompson wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*: "It cannot be said too often: the default position of people born since 1980 is agnosticism or atheism."

When the results of the 2001 census were announced and 72% of people had ticked the Christian box, we were told that this meant that Britain was a Christian nation and that religion must have a much greater say in legislation and policy-making.

In another ten years, if the present trend continues (and all the signs seem to point to it accelerating rather than reversing) the Church of England will be non-functional as a religious institution, but it will still cast a huge shadow over our education system. Its role as the established Church will be unsustainable, but there still may not be the political will to disestablish it.

Unfortunately, this is likely to be the last census that is conducted. The Government is questioning the cost of the exercise, so we will have to rely on other surveys and polls for the answers. But they

bring even bleaker news for the churches.

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