

Poll shows majority think councils shouldn't pray

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Two new polls about religion, which specifically asked a question about the Bideford case, illustrate an ambivalent reaction among the public.

Both were conducted by YouGov, but using different samples and methods of approach.

The [first poll](#) (pdf) showed that 55% of respondents were against councils holding prayers with only 26% of respondents in favour. Twenty percent were uncertain. Support for prayers was strongest among those who defined themselves as very/fairly religious (52%), Christians (46%), the over-60s (40%), those considering that Britain should be a Christian country (40%), and Conservative voters (34%).

However, irrespective of their personal view about whether it was appropriate for councils to hold prayers, 55% thought that they should definitely be *allowed* to hold them, rising to 78% of Christians, 76% of the very/fairly religious, 72% of those wanting Britain to be a Christian country, 67% of over-60s, and 66% of Conservative voters. Just 34% argued that councils should not be allowed to have prayers, with 11% expressing no opinion.

Another seeming contradiction that surfaced in the poll was that, although only 24% of the sample described themselves as very or fairly religious and 43% regarded themselves as belonging to a religion, 56% agreed that Britain is a Christian country and 61% that it should be a Christian country.

Endorsement of the proposition that Britain should be a Christian country was, unsurprisingly, highest among professing Christians (88%), the very or fairly religious (79%), over-60s (79%), and Conservative voters (77%). Dissenters numbered 22%, with 18% undecided.

What was especially interesting was that even 37% of those who considered themselves as not at all religious and 44% of those having no religion wanted Britain to be a Christian country. 41% and 43% respectively agreed that it already is such a country. 36% and 40% also thought that councils should be permitted to hold prayers before their formal meetings.

The irreligious, it therefore seems, can be just as equivocal about their 'belief' as the many self-identifying Christians whose lack of commitment to the faith was exposed in the [Ipsos MORI poll](#) for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (UK) published last week.

The [second poll](#) (pdf), for the *Sunday Times*, asked eight questions about religion, the first of which was: 'Do you think that religion is more often the cause of good or evil in the world?' Only 12% elected for good with 58% opting for evil, with the main variation being by gender (61% of men, 54% of women). 27% said that neither answer applied or both equally.

With regard to religion in Britain, 17% viewed Britain today as too religious, 36% as too secular, 31% as balanced between religious and secular, and 17% expressed no opinion. Men and the under-40s were marginally more likely to describe Britain as too religious; Conservative voters, the over-

60s and Londoners as too secular.

49% agreed that religion still provides critical guidance for our everyday lives, with 40% dissenting and 12% unsure. The age cohort with the lowest level of agreement was 25-59 years (43%). While the peak of 61% among the over-60s was to be expected, less predictable was the 50% recorded for the 18-24s.

Respondents were next asked whether the Church of England continues to carry out a valuable role, a question obviously prompted by the Queen's speech at Lambeth Palace on 15 February.

YouGov's respondents were split on this issue, with 42% agreeing, 41% disagreeing, and 16% unsure. Most support for the Church came from Conservative voters (55%); least backing was found in Scotland (32%).

Since the Church of England is established (albeit only in England), it might seem slightly odd that 67% contended that religion should have no place in public life, being entirely a personal matter. 24% wanted religion to have a role in the public square, including 28% of the 18-24s.

51% assessed that religion in Britain is in terminal decline, with no great fluctuation by demographics. 24% disagreed and 26% did not know what to think.

Belief in God stood at 38%, with 21% unsure, and 33% disbelieving. Believers were twice as numerous among Conservative voters (45%) as Liberal Democrat voters (22%), and they were also somewhat concentrated in the over-60s (44%) and in Scotland (45%).

The final topic, triggered by the Bideford case, was whether local councils should be able to hold prayers at the beginning of their meetings. 53% of adults thought that they should (peaking at 66% of Conservative voters and 65% of over-60s), 32% that they should not, with 15% undecided.

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