

“No Religion”; The Army’s Inclusivity Blind-spot – 2021 Update

A report by Lt Col (Retd) L T Quinn MBE, Oct 2021



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- Update

INTRODUCTION

The views expressed in this report are my own and not official policy.

In recent years, the Army, and indeed the other 2 Services, have made great progress in tackling discrimination and promoting inclusivity. However, pro-Christian bias is so hard wired into the British military, that it has become an inclusivity blind-spot. Christianity is officially promoted and endorsed by the military. This favours those of the Christian faith over those of any other religion or philosophical belief. This imbalance is particularly acute towards those declare that they have no religion.

In 2016, I produced a report in which I set out the facts behind this inclusivity blind-spot. It was the product of several years’ extensive research and professional debate. Unfortunately very little has improved since the original report. This update is intended to supplement, not replace, the original 2016 report. Therefore, for a fuller understanding of the issues, the 2 documents should be read alongside one another.

This update takes a fresh look at the data and other evidence to see what changes *have* occurred. Data has been obtained from the MOD under Freedom of Information requests and compiled by Defence Statistics (Tri-Service). I am most grateful to them for their professional and well-presented data.

Laurence Quinn

1 The changing demographic of the Armed Forces

1.1 **The rise of the non-religious.** My original report identified the rise of “no religion” across the 3 Services. More recent data shows how this trend has continued at an accelerating pace. Figure 1 shows the self-declared religious affiliation of the Armed Forces. Currently, 34.0% of all service personnel say they have no religion. This has matched the decline in the number who say they are Christian - currently only 62.3%. In my original report I explained how these figures are captured on the MOD’s Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system. However the *Faith in a Foxhole*¹ study showed that when asked what faith they were, 75.6% said they were Christian, but when asked whether they believed God existed, only 30.5% said that they did. It is likely therefore that the true number of non-religious soldiers is higher than JPA suggests.

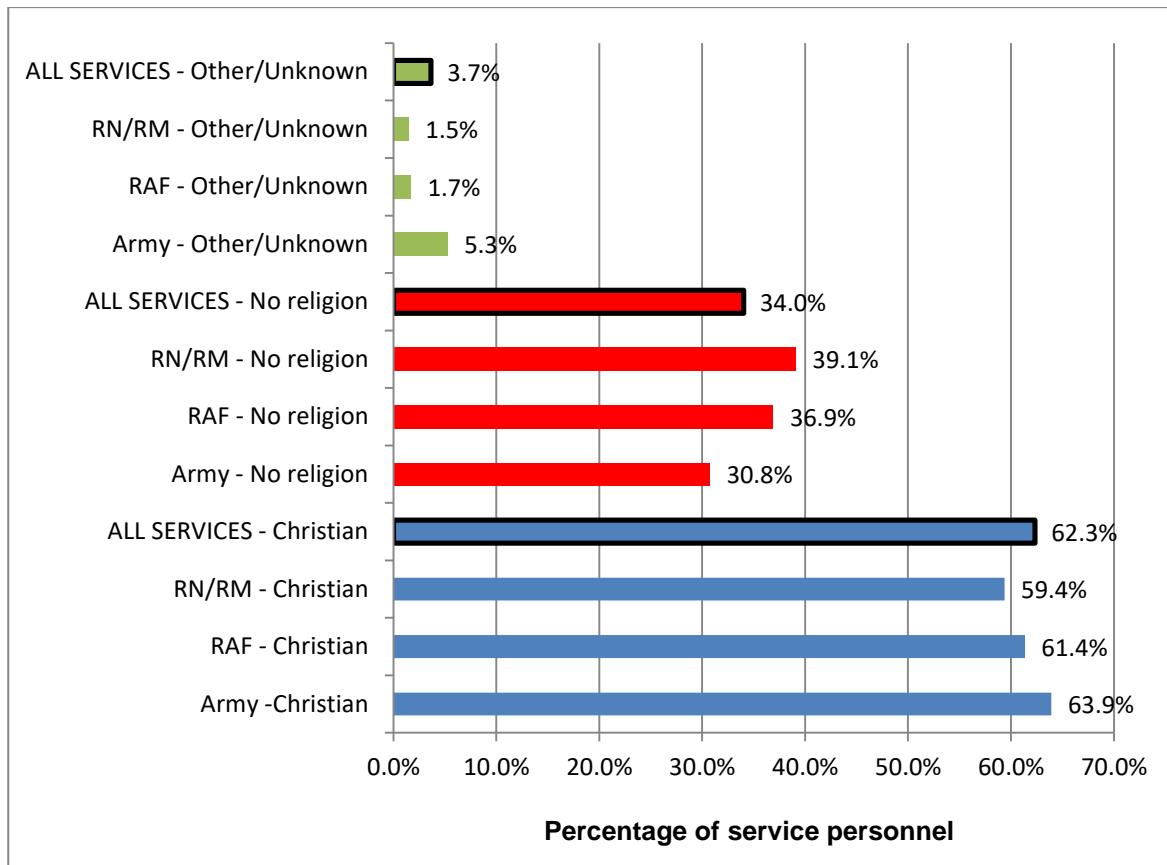


Figure 1. Breakdown of religious self-identification by UK Armed Forces personnel. Figures for each arm of Service is shown along with a combined total for All Services together. Figures are as at 1 Apr 21. Defence Statistics (Tri-service)

1.2 **Difference between Services.** The Army remains the most religious of the 3 Services. However it is not clear why that should be. The Army also has the highest proportion of people with religious faiths other than Christian. Army attestation papers² merely ask “What is your religious denomination?” This may prompt applicants to select a religion rather than say they have none.

¹ KING, Reverend Peter CF, RACChD and Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies. *Faith in a Foxhole? Researching combatant religiosity amongst British soldiers on contemporary operations*. The Defence Academy Yearbook, 2013, pp 2-10

² Army Form B 271A (Revised 31/10/09) and AFE 7545 (Rev 01/15)

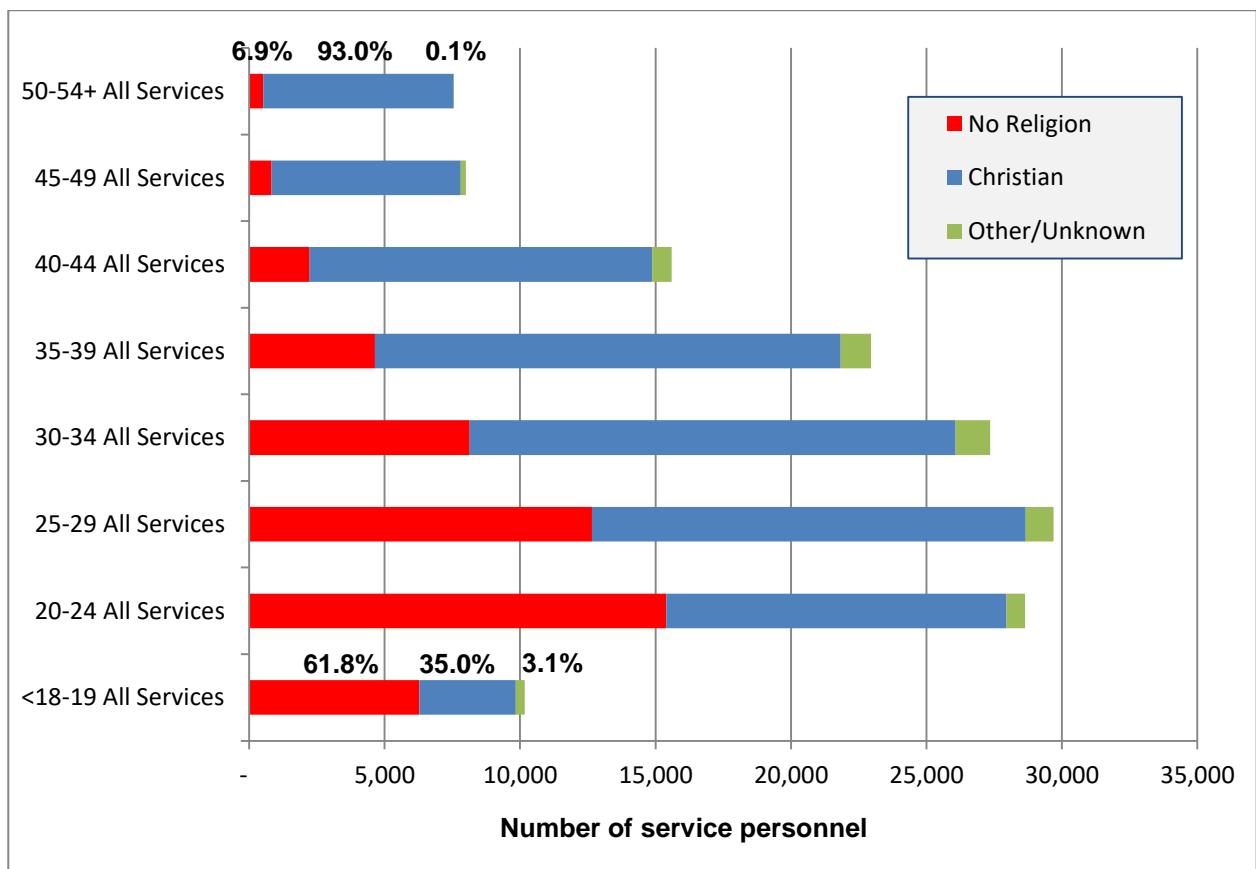


Figure 2. Armed Forces religious self-declaration by age group, 1 Apr 21.
Defence Statistics (Tri-service)

- 1.3 **Huge disparity of religious affiliation across age groups.** When you look at a breakdown by age group, you get a better understanding of what is happening within the Services. Figure 2 shows data for each 5-year age group of service personnel. It is clear that each successive group is increasingly less religious. As each of these groups gets older, they replace their more religious seniors. The oldest group (50-54+) currently declares that they are 93.0% Christian. However the youngest group (<18-19) is 61.8% non-religious. It is important to bear in mind that it is within the oldest group that decisions are made that effect the inclusion or otherwise of the others.
- 1.4 **Religions other than Christianity.** This graph also shows that the number of service personnel declaring a religious faith other than Christianity, is very low. This is not reflective of the population of the UK as a whole. Worryingly, more recently, the proportion of personnel with non-Christian faiths appears to be falling off. Why is this?
- 1.5 **It's a young person's profession.** Figure 2 also shows clearly that most service personnel are in the younger age groups; hardly surprising given the physically demanding nature of the profession. The average age of personnel in the Armed Forces is currently only 32. It therefore does not take long for this generational change in belief to have a significant impact. Compared to the UK population as a whole, this phenomenon can happen relatively quickly.

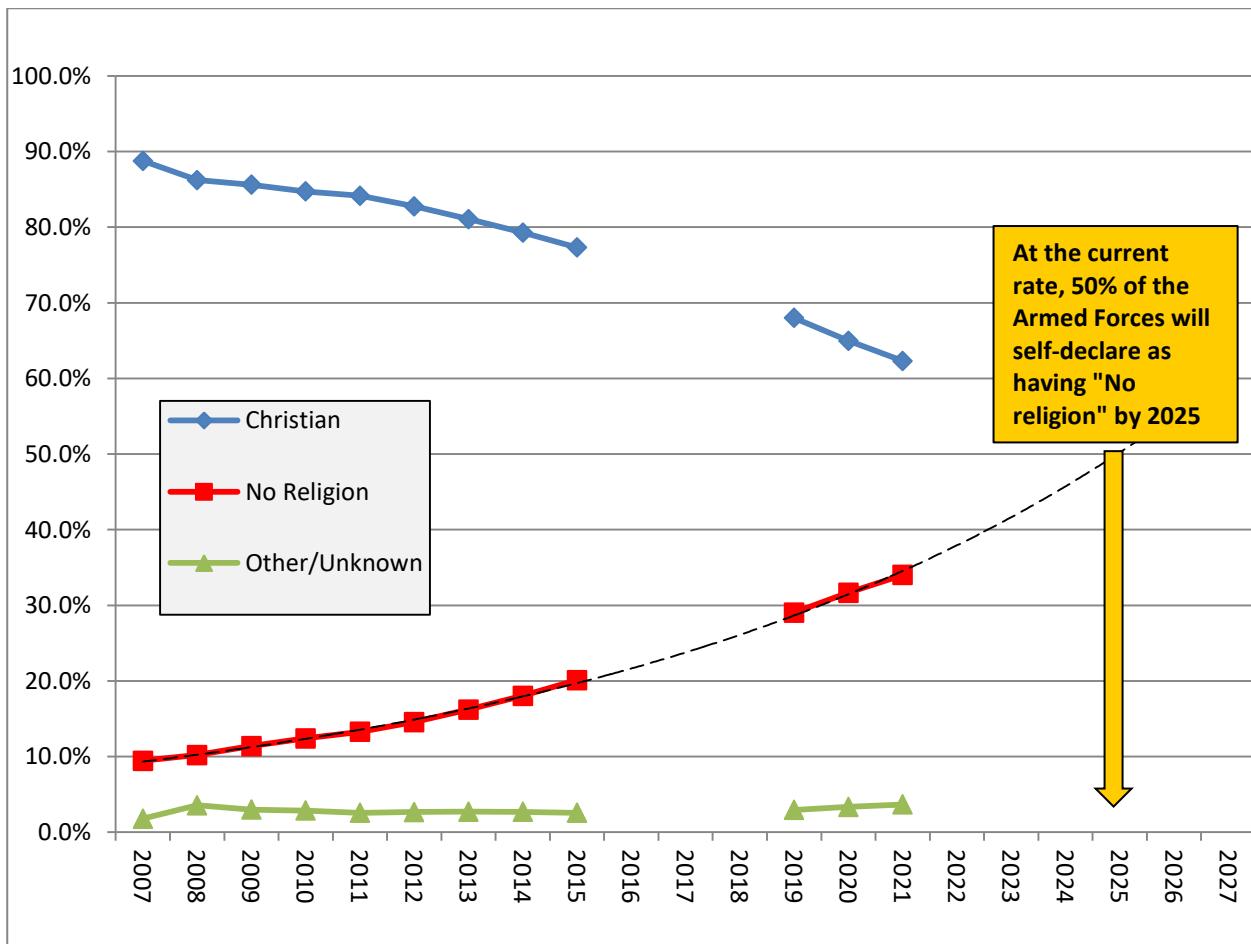


Figure 3. Forecast of religious affiliation of the Armed Forces. The best-fit trendline shows exponential growth. Defence Statistics (Tri-service)

- 1.6 **Exponential growth of “No religion”; 50% by 2025?** This replacement of Christians by those who have no religion is most clearly seen in Figure 3. Analysis of the data shows an exponential growth in the number of personnel who declare they have “no religion”. If the current rate of change persists, by 2025, the non-religious will account for 50% of the military population. What possible further reason could there then be for the Armed Forces to be institutionally Christian?

2 Changes to Queen's Regulations for the Army

- 2.1 **Queen's Regulations improved?** In my original report I described the important role Queen's Regulations plays in the administration and practices of the Army. Unfortunately, the version extant at the time of the original report³ had a number of clauses which were not conducive to inclusivity. Fortunately, in response to criticism, the most recent version⁴ has removed or amended 3 of these clauses:

- 2.1.1 **Atheists could not, in effect, be Commanding Officers.** Clause J5.263 required that;

"Commanding officers are to encourage religious observance by those under their command and are themselves to set a good example in this respect."

It is difficult to see how an Atheist CO could have complied with this.

- 2.1.2 **Soldiers had to get permission to change religion.** Under Clause 5.272, a soldier was only allowed to change religion if both his CO and chaplain allow it;

"When a member of the armed forces wishes to change his denomination he is to notify his commanding officer, who is at once to inform the chaplain(s) concerned in order that the matter may be discussed with the individual and any necessary religious instruction given. The commanding officer is to arrange for the personal documents to be amended when he is satisfied that the individual has decided to make the change and is fully aware of the significance of his action, and when the chaplain concerned has notified the commanding officer of his concurrence in the change."

- 2.1.3 **Reverent religious observance.** The old Clause J5.262 said that the reverent observance of religion in the armed forces is of the highest importance. This was changed in the update to reflect that the opportunity for the reverent observance of religion *is of great importance for those who profess a religious affiliation.*

- 2.2 **Ordering a religious military parade.** Unfortunately under the latest version of Queen's Regulations, the Army reaffirms its right to order a religious military parade;

Clause J5.264. *"...No one is to be compelled to attend an act of religious observance against their wishes (except as provided in para 5.268)"*

Clause 5.268 d. *"Parades are not to be ordered in connection with religious services except that a CinC or GOC may order a parade which includes a religious service on special occasions of national or local importance. No officer or soldier on such a parade is to be expected to take part, against their wishes, in a service of any religion, denomination or recognised belief system other than their own or in any joint service."*

A soldier may therefore be compelled to attend a religious military parade, but must not be made to take part. They stand silently and respectfully whilst their unit comrades take part in the ceremony; standing together **but not included.**

³ Queen's Regulations for the Army, 1975, Amdt 31, **July 2013**. [viewed 2 Oct 21]. Available from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/440632/20150529-QR_Army_Amdt_31_Jul_2013.pdf

⁴ Queen's Regulations for the Army, 1975, Amdt 37, **May 2019**. [viewed 2 Oct 21]. Available from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/826092/The_Queen_s_Regulations_for_the_Army_1975.pdf

3 Collective and symbolic acts

- 3.1 **Symbols and meaning.** Symbolism and symbolic gestures are humankind's earliest and most basic language. They are an important and integral element in understanding culture. They reinforce our norms and values and they provide a way to express meaning. The difficulty with powerful symbols however, is that what is implied can vary widely from person to person. They can mean different things to different people. All it takes is a shift in perspective.
- 3.2 **Blessing the Army flag.** On 14 Oct 16, the Chaplain General blessed the new Army flag in front of the Executive Committee of the Army Board (ECAB). On one level this flag is just a piece of cloth; what does it matter whether or not it is blessed? However performing a Christian blessing was a deeply symbolic act, marking out the flag and by extension, the Army, as Christian. There have been no other blessings by other religions, nor any affirmation by Humanists. The ECAB is the senior decision making element of the Army Board. This endorsement by the Army's most senior officers is clear and unequivocal; the Army is institutionally Christian. It is no doubt of great symbolic significance to a Christian soldier to mark out the Army's flag, and by extension the Army, as being Christian. However, to me, a non-Christian, this is an alienating act. It is akin to saying to me "although you may shed your blood with us, don't forget that this is a Christian Army."
- 3.3 **Fusing religion and military parades.** There is a gulf between stated policy intent and actual practice, particularly in the Army. Army General Administrative Instructions state:

Paragraph 75.023. *"Acts of Remembrance on Armistice Day and others, should be inclusive and seek to avoid being conducted as a wholly religious event. Inclusive Acts of Remembrance should separate religious elements from those that pay tribute to the fallen. This may be achieved by holding a religious service followed by the Act of Remembrance."*

However, in practice, soldiers are held on parade as the event moves seamlessly from a military occasion, to a religious one and back again. Acts of Remembrance are bookended by religious acts of devotion and dedication. The two are fused together. For example at the passing out parade at the Army Foundation College at Harrogate⁵, young soldiers were addressed by the inspecting general who handed straight over to the chaplain to lead them in Christian prayer. He went through the unit collect⁶, before finally concluding "*..and that together in this life, we may build firm foundations as soldiers and so be found worthy of your eternal kingdom.*" These are fine words, but they speak only to the Christians on parade, which according to data shown earlier, was probably only a minority. Clearly speaking with the powerful endorsement of the General Officer on parade, our newest recruits were reminded that they are joining a Christian Army.

- 3.4 **The importance of Acts of collective Remembrance in the military.** Acts of collective Remembrance are opportunities to remind ourselves of the sacrifices that we, as soldiers, may have to make in the discharge of our duty. They are an opportunity for us to reaffirm our pledge to remember our fallen, to recall the fellowship we share with their memory. It shows our younger soldiers that we hold their lives dear and that should they die, their memory will live on within our collective consciousness in some symbolic way. The participation by soldiers in acts of remembrance therefore is an essential component in developing a professional Army and in fostering unit cohesion and identity. Acts of remembrance do need to be formal military occasions.

⁵ The parade is viewable on YouTube. [viewed 9 Oct 21] Avail on <https://youtu.be/Mf23VQ62cdg>. The chaplain's address is @ 1:18:19

⁶ In the original report, I explained why unit collects should be made inclusive by becoming secular.

- 3.5 **The toxicity of lip service.** Most people enjoy singing in a group and as soldiers we expect to join in collective affirmations. The desire by soldiers to take part in remembrance can be, in effect, misappropriated by the religious aspects of the service. For example, we often choose soldiers from Private to Commanding Officer, to read chapters of the Bible adding “this is the word of the Lord”, at the end. Do they all actually believe what it is they have read out, or is it that they accept it as something we are simply expected to do? Indeed throughout the whole remembrance service, all those on parade are invited to repeat many solemn oaths or pledges, such as to serve God. Many may do so, as they feel it is expected of them as part of the ritual of the service. However, how many people honestly, fully mean what it is they are forswearing? In doing so, we are effectively training soldiers to ignore the bits they don’t actually believe. Making these sacred rituals secular would increase their relevance and meaning for everyone. Either the words are important and mean something, or they don’t. If they don’t matter, then why object to changing them? The fact is they should and *do* matter very much.
- 3.6 **Why religious military parades for Remembrance are not inclusive.** As explained in the previous chapter, soldiers may be ordered to attend religious military parades, but not compelled to take part in the religious service. However, in practice, the acts of remembrance and worship are fused together as one. Soldiers cannot simply fall-out and back in again throughout the event at the various relevant points. Throughout the unit’s parade, collective oaths are said, collective acts undertaken and a soldier’s instinct is to join their comrades in unity. No to do so, alienates them. Non-Christian soldiers are therefore present on parade, shoulder-to-shoulder with their Christian comrades, but are simply considered to be, in effect, by-standers to the service. Is this the standard of inclusivity we should accept? It’s not that non-religious object to religious services *per se*, it is simply that they are not included in them. We want to take a full and active part in our unit’s Remembrance ceremony; to say things we truly mean make oaths we intend to honour. That’s not an unreasonable expectation.
- 3.7 **Accommodating religious observance.** As I have explained in the original report, we should encourage and support service personnel in their own personal beliefs. This includes facilitating religious events after or before the unit’s Remembrance ceremony. Should some church or other religious body hold a Remembrance service and military personnel wish to attend, we should encourage them to do so, even in uniform. This is a personal, free decision to attend on the part of the service person. However, where there is a formal military parade, this is a service person’s workplace and so should be free from domination by any one religious group – it should be inclusive by being secular.
- 3.8 **Spirituality is important for many personnel, religious or otherwise.** For some, the word “spirituality” is a euphemism for “religion”. However it actually encompasses the feeling of awe and wonder, of transcendence, self-esteem, purpose and meaning. It is undoubtedly a key part of the *Moral Component of Fighting Power*.⁷ This is as true for religious and non-religious personnel alike.

⁷ Army Field Manual, Land Operations. AC71940 March 2017.



Figure 4. These cadets, attending an act of remembrance, were formed up outside a church and marched inside, row after row. How many of these young people would have felt comfortable challenging their officers at this point? Why make them all attend Christian worship?

4 *Towards an inclusive chaplaincy*

- 4.1 **Non-Christians are still barred from being chaplains in regular Army units.** In my original report, I highlighted the fact that only Christians, from a select group of “sending churches”⁸, can be chaplains in regular Army units. Sadly, this still remains the case.
- 4.2 **Equitable representation for the non-religious.** Figure 5 gives a comparison the number of non-religious service personnel and the denominations of their religious comrades. From this, a number of key observations can be made:
 - 4.1.1 **No religion is almost the largest *denomination*.** If it were a religious group, “No religion” is only just second in size to the largest denomination, the Church of England. Data presented earlier in this update suggests that the Non-religious will overtake them by 2022.
 - 4.1.2 **There are more Atheists than Roman Catholics.** There are even more *Atheists* than Roman Catholics. Roman Catholic chaplains can provide moral, pastoral and spiritual care to troops, but Atheists are not allowed to. To be clear, the specific ecumenical, religious support a chaplain provides is just one small part of the valuable role they perform. Humanist pastoral support workers repeatedly show that you don’t need to be religious to provide this support to those that need it – yet they remain barred from doing so.

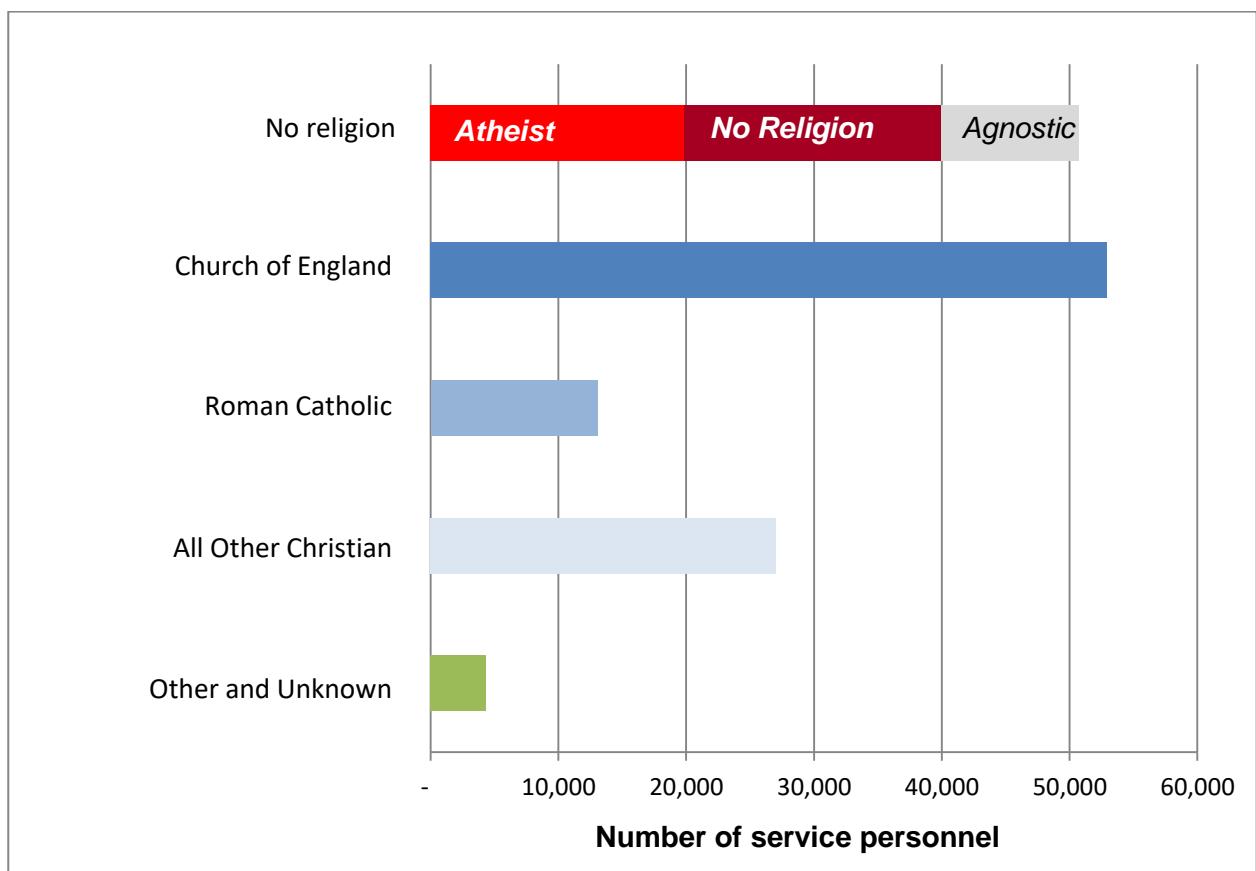


Figure 5. Comparison of the non-religious with religious groups within the Armed Forces as at 1 Apr 21. Defence Statistics (Tri-service)

⁸ The sending churches are; Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Church of Scotland, Presbyterian, Baptist Union, United Reformed, Congregational, Free Church of Scotland, Elim Pentecostal and Assemblies of God.

- 4.3 **Chaplaincy for the non-religious?** Also in my report I described why there needs to be pastoral support for the non-religious just as much as their religious comrades. In this there has been a little progress. The MOD has agreed to commission an independent external report into pastoral support for the non-religious.

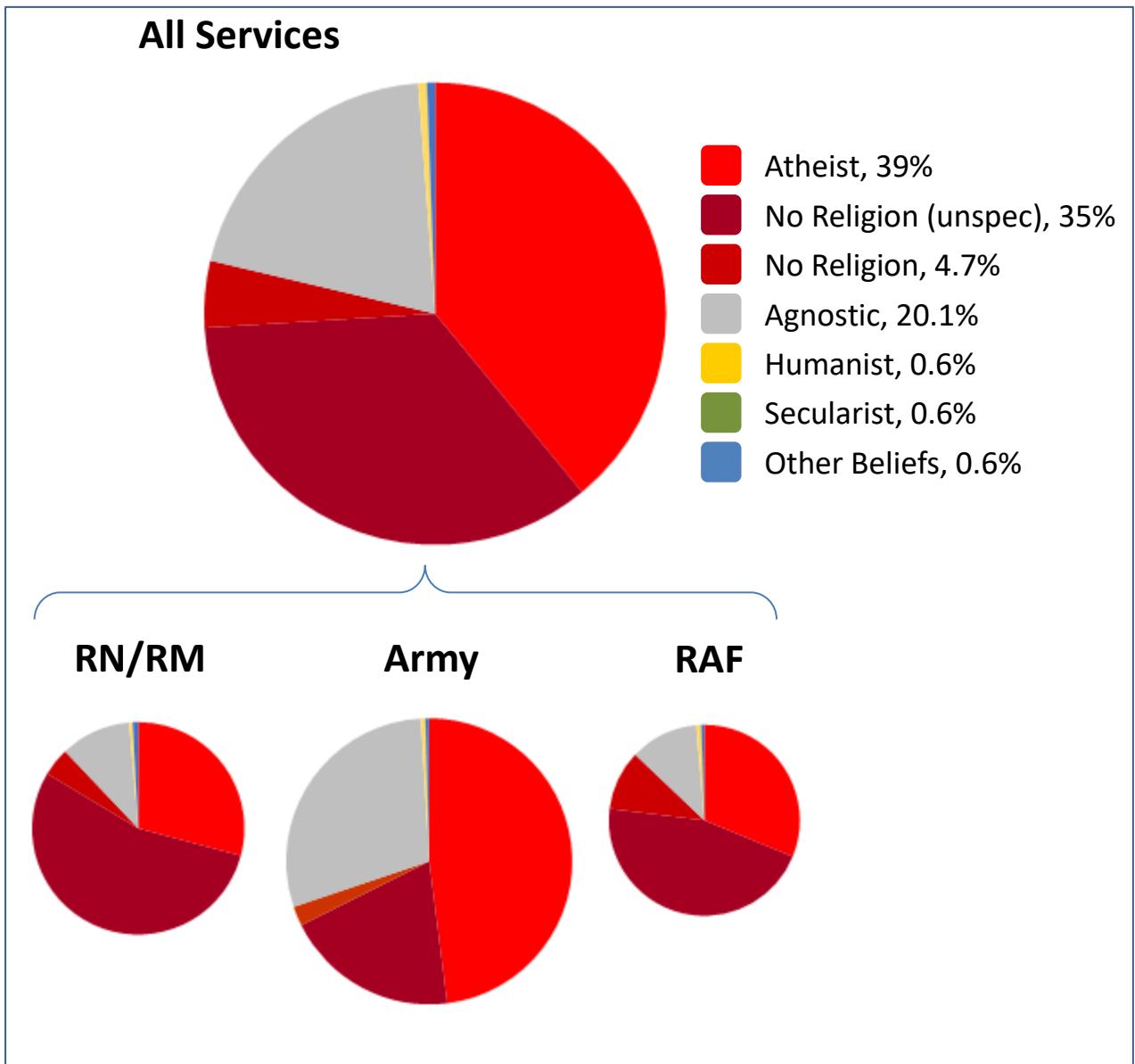


Figure 6. This shows how those service personnel who declare that they have “no religion”, further elaborate on their non-belief. The majority of non-religious soldiers are Atheists. Whilst in the RAF and Royal Navy, the largest group are those who simply declare “no religion”. Defence Statistics (Tri-service)

- 4.4 **Are the non-religious, also Humanists?** Figure 6 shows a breakdown of how those who declare they have “No religion” in the first religious record field in JPA then go on to elaborate on their non-belief. The charts show that the largest single group are those who describe themselves as Atheists. Unfortunately, the way JPA gathers this data leads to confusion and distortion of the actual picture. This second religious record field on JPA is called “Religion Requirements”. Only one option may be selected from this list:

- Atheist
- No Religion (unspec)
- No Religion – *[it is not made clear how this differs from the one above!]*
- Agnostic
- Humanist
- Secularist
- Other Beliefs

Clearly it is possible to be an Atheist, Secularist, Humanist and have No Religion all at the same time. However, not everyone who selects “No religion” from the first field subsequently also identifies as a Humanist. Nor might they select “Atheist” if they want to stress their Humanist identity. Therefore, it is currently impossible to use JPA to determine with any accuracy how many Humanists, Atheist etc. there are in the Armed Forces. Consequently when JPA shows that there are just 300 Humanists across all 3 Services, it is possible that the number may be far higher. Nevertheless whether a service person elects to use the term “Humanist” to describe their belief (as opposed to non-belief), they probably have a *humanistic* outlook on life. It is clear that further work is needed by the MOD to understand the spiritual needs of its non-religious personnel.

4.5 Proselytising. As highlighted in the original report, Army chaplains are told not to actively seek to convert people to their faith, but are instructed to “set forth God’s word at all times”.⁹ Why? What has this to do with improving military capability? Chaplains have access to young, impressionable people and, at times, to soldiers and their families in distress. They must never take advantage of that position to advance their particular worldview whether religious or non-religious. And yet...

4.5.1 Casualty Notification Officer procedures. The Army’s Casualty Notification Officer Handbook¹⁰ gives the following instruction;

“Do not ask the family if they want to see the Padre, as he/she will visit anyway, and if they say no, this makes his initial visit a little difficult.”

At best this is deeply disrespectful towards a grieving family. Surely they should be asked whether they would like to see a chaplain before sending one?

4.5.2 Official support to evangelising organisations. The Soldiers’ & Airmen’s Scripture Readers Association (SASRA) is an overtly evangelising organisation. On its website¹¹ it states:

Working alongside the Chaplaincy, our Scripture Readers work to introduce soldiers and air force personnel to a practical experience of the Christian faith by living alongside and working alongside them “behind the wire”.

The SASRA is given official access to service personnel, ***in their barracks***, in order to promote Christian belief. This privileged position is not offered to evangelising groups of other faiths. Further, SASRA members are actually rewarded for their evangelising by no less than the Chief of the General Staff¹².

⁹ RACHD, Chaplain’s Handbook (2014), p 6.

¹⁰ Army “Casualty Notification Officer handbook”, AC 64429, version 2, October 2017.

¹¹ Soldiers’ & Airmen’s Scripture Readers Association website. [viewed 9 Oct 21] Available at: <https://sasra.org.uk/about/what-we-do/>

¹² “Chief of the General Staff Commendation awarded to Army Scripture Reader Lee McDade”. Defence Christian Network, September 2021 Update.

5 A final word on Inclusivity

- 5.1 **The gulf between policy and practice.** Diversity policy set out in the “Guide to Religion and Belief in the MOD and Armed Forces” clearly states that:

“Our policy is that religion is a private life matter.”

From encouraging and rewarding Christian evangelising to barring non-Christians from becoming regular Army chaplains, the gulf between official policy and *on-the-ground* practice is very wide indeed. The Armed Forces and in particular the Army, is institutionally Christian; its culture and practices make it far from being as inclusive as it should be.

- 5.2 **What does “secular” mean?** Being secular simply means keeping official business and religion separate. It does not mean banning religion. Religion is left to individuals to pursue as their conscience dictates. In a religiously plural organisation, secularism is the only means of ensuring *inclusivity* by neither privileging nor disadvantaging anyone because of their religion or belief. For the Army (or indeed all the Services) secularism simply means affording Christianity the same status as other religions; Christianity would no longer be specially privileged. A secular British Army would not seek to ban religious belief – simply make it a personal matter. Soldiers would be supported and encouraged to develop their own beliefs if they wished to do so.
- 5.3 **It’s all about inclusivity.** The case for secularism isn’t in these or any other figures. The Armed Forces, indeed any society or group will only cohere when they have a set of principles and rules around which to unite. Secularism, which does not favour one belief over another, provides the framework around which to build a shared common identity amongst diverse individuals. Resisting change is merely arguing to defend an unfair privilege. Secularism is the foundation for religious inclusivity. This is about showing *Respect for Others* and having the *Courage* to do what’s right; 2 of the most important Army Values.

A secular British Army privileges no one belief above another, making it inclusive and meaningful for all.

A note on the statistics used in this report.

The graphs and data in this report were supplied by the MOD under Freedom of Information requests and were compiled by the Defence Statistics (Tri-Service). They came with a series of notes and caveats:

1. UK Regulars comprise Full time Service personnel, including Nursing Services, but excluding Full Time Reserve Service (FTRS) personnel, Gurkhas, mobilised Reservists, Military Provost Guard Service (MPGS), Locally Engaged Personnel (LEP), Non Regular Permanent Staff (NRPS), High Readiness Reserve (HRR) and Expeditionary Forces Institute (EFI) personnel. Unless otherwise stated, includes trained and untrained personnel.
2. “Religion” and “Religious Requirement” as reported on the Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system (JPA). “Unknown” includes those with an unrecorded religion, and those who chose not to declare.
3. Ages are calculated as the difference between an individual’s Date of Birth, and the strength date mentioned above, as recorded on the JPA system.
4. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 10 in line with disclosure control policy.