

## Religion in Great Britain

The UK is currently considered as the most irreligious countries in the world.

There was a watershed in 2016 when the number of Britons identifying themselves as non-believers exceeded the proportion of self-described Christians. Before the 16<sup>th</sup> century the main religion in Britain was Roman Catholic.

The UK is different from France in many respects. Church and State have been separated in France for a century, but it is not the case in England where the Church of England has special advantages as a state religion. The relationship to the state is part of the constitution.

Britain has become a multi-faith society guaranteeing freedom of worship. Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, who started settling down in Britain with the offset of decolonisation and the creation of the Commonwealth of Nations, are the country's main and most active religious minorities. They are followed by Jews, who fled Eastern Europe pogroms and Nazi persecution.

Anglican churches account for only a third of all churches in the UK, while in France an overwhelming majority of churches are Catholic.

Are Christians to become a minority in the UK, a country with Christian-based institutions?
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### 1. The Historical Background

Henry VIII, a staunch catholic, was awarded the title of « Defender of the Faith » by the Pope in 1521, but found himself faced with a political and dynastic problem : only one of the seven children borne of Catherine of Aragon, his wife, had survived ( Princess Mary, later Queen of the Scots).

England had never been ruled by a woman then and Henry feared the Tudor dynasty might become extinct (the War of the Roses had only ended in 1485).

For purely political reasons, he asked the Pope for the annulment of his marriage, but the Pope refused (Catherine of Aragon was kin to Charles of Spain).

In 1529, he summoned a Reformation Parliament and broke up with the church.

In 1534 the Act of Supremacy declared Henry « the only Supreme head on Earth of the Church of England called Anglicana Ecclesia » (he became Supreme Governor in 1559).

Later under the reign of Edward VI, the Church of England became a full fledged Protestant church. The Church of England kept the episcopacy, but with a markedly Protestant theology.

The Puritans were not satisfied, they would have preferred more Presbyterian lines (concerning episcopacy).

The Civil War of 1642-1649 against the puritans (under Elizabeth I) was won by the puritans and England was turned into a Republic for a short time (Oliver Cromwell). The Monarchy and the rule of the Church of England was restored in 1660.

Roman Catholics were deprived of all political rights until 1829. The Catholic Church was restored in Britain only in 1850.

Scotland has a national church of its own – that is to say, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland founded upon Calvinism.

### 2. The Church of England nowadays

It is nowadays regarded as a “middle way” between Catholicism and Protestantism.

There have been spectacular changes in recent years, the most striking being the ordination of women to the priesthood. The Anglican Church has never opposed the right to abortion. The remarriage in church of divorced couple is allowed in exceptional circumstances. In 2003, an openly gay bishop was consecrated in the Episcopal Church, the American branch of Anglicanism. Despite such progress, the Church of England has repeatedly come under fire and there have been calls for its disestablishment. Indeed, there have been growing claims that Lords Spiritual should

not seek to change legislation. Much controversy arose on the subject in 2014 when a welfare bill destined to impose a cap on family benefits was defeated in Parliament following the intervention from Spiritual Peers.

There are many free churches : Methodist, Baptist and United Reformed, but also, the Salvation Army, the Presbyterian church in Ireland, the religious society of Friends (Quakers), the Unitarian, the Pentecostalist...

In Northern Ireland, due to a higher birth rate, the Catholics now account for close to 50 % of the population.

### 3. The Importance of Christianity in British society : the Decline of Christianity

Religious education at school is not optional. It is in the curriculum for all pupils. Schools are requested by law to provide a daily act of collective christian worship. However there is a possibility of separate or multifaith assemblies.

The authorized version of the Bible (King James I translation) contributed to a deep sense of national and cultural identity.

It is customary in the court of law to take an oath on the Bible, marriages in a church are automatically recognized at the registry.

However, atheism is growing and there is a rise of Islam on the other hand. An increasing number of Britons describe themselves as having no religion, church attendance is in decline. 62% of young people regard themselves as non-believers against 48% of all adults. It's obvious in the rising number of non-religious funerals, non-church baby namings and civil weddings. It would seem unthinkable for a contemporary political leader to refer to faith upon taking office, as Margaret Thatcher did on her arrival at 10 Downing Street.

### 4. The status of other religions

- Jews

They were persecuted until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, now there are around 260,000 jews (2011 census) in the UK (second largest community in Europe).

- Muslims

The Muslim community represents 3 million of people, part of them coming from Pakistan and Bangladesh, or second generation.

There are between 1,000 and 2,000 mosques in Britain. However marriages celebrated by an imam are still not recognized.

With on Briton out of nine predicted to be a Muslim, the UK is on the course to become the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest Muslim community in Europe.

- Atheists

About half the population in the UK declares having no religion.

## RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AMONG ADULTS IN GREAT BRITAIN

