

Callum G. Brown

The People of ›No Religion‹

The Demographics of Secularisation in the English-speaking World since c. 1900

In the 1950s during her teenage years in England, a woman later recalled, she proclaimed in the school playground her non-belief in God, and for her breach of childhood rules was taunted by her classmates and called a »heathen«.¹ The 1950s was a decade when there were varying degrees of difficulty almost everywhere in the western world for somebody to proclaim oneself as an atheist. It was especially difficult for a woman, upon whom high expectations were placed for setting a moral and religious standard which would lead, ultimately, to providing the headship, as mother and wife, for the respectability and proper Christian upbringing of a family. In the sixty years since, there has been a remarkable change. The new-found freedom of the individual to proclaim an absence of religious belief and practice has been one of the greatest cultural changes which mark out our modern times. The extent to which the people of the West have become free from religion varies between nations and even within nations, sometimes enormously. But the trend is nonetheless widespread and very marked.

Susan Budd ended her history of unbelief in England at 1960, at the very point when ›no-religionism‹ started to explode in western culture.² It is time to take the story forward, and to reflect on this massive alteration, and to transform the way we consider ›no religion‹ – from consideration of the minorities who have no faith, to analysis of the development of those who form the majorities in some nations of the early twenty-first century. In 2005, 52% of Europeans said they believed in God; but, as we shall see, even before 2000 a majority in some nations did not adhere to a religion.³ This article explores the social history of the rise of the people of ›no religion‹ in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, and the United States with additional evidence from Australia and New Zealand, mainly covering the period from 1950 to 2010 but with some additional review of available evidence stretching back to 1900. After reflecting on the state of existing knowledge in the field, it will explore problems of definition. Using statistics, it will then make a quantitative evaluation of the patterns of growth in the numbers of ›no-religionists‹ in the above countries, and then inquire more deeply into some demographic patterns observable from the data. The aim is to begin the construction of a narrative of the history of ›no religion‹.

I. UNDERSTANDING ›NO-RELIGIONISM‹

Academic interest has been sluggish to grow in the rise of people without religious adherence. The field has been dominated by two main tropes: first, atheists, deists and secularists as deviants, and second, the much more influential trope of secularisation as the decline of Christianity. Focus on ›no-religionism‹ per se has tended to be much less

1 *Stef Pixner*, *The Oyster and the Shadow*, in: *Liz Heron* (ed.), *Truth Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties*, London 1985, pp. 79–102, here: p. 85.

2 *Susan Budd*, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850–1960*, London 1977.

3 European Commission, *Social Values, Science and Technology: Special Eurobarometer 225/Wave 63.1*, 2005, p. 12.

well-developed, especially amongst historians. Amongst sociologists it has started to become a more serious topic, though historical analysis has been largely absent.⁴

The rise of people of ›no religion‹ has been most often dealt with in regard to ecclesiastical, political and social deviancy. Most of the historiography looks at the leading figures of secularism and atheism, those in secularist movements, those confronted by the law for the expression of non-religious views, and those who have been involved in high-profile controversy which elicited a public reaction. In such work, the focus is on the history of the development of organised ›no-religionism‹ – freethinking, secularism, and rationalism – and on the battles that have been fostered in relation to freedom of conscience of the individual, the separation of church and state, and the payment of church taxes. The struggles for these rights have taken specific forms in different countries depending on the national constitution, the configuration of organised religion, and its relations with the national government. Indeed, it is the nature of these struggles, many of which have lasted from the late eighteenth century to the present, which have shaped and continue to shape the character of organised ›no-religionism‹ in each country. In this respect, there are particular histories to the development of the politics of ›no-religionism‹ – distinctive relationships between secularists and the state, shaped by distinctive constitutional and legal frameworks.

The origins of modern atheism have been the subject of some significant studies. On the one hand there has been important research on the atheism and freethinking in the early-modern world, whilst on the other research has pointed to the appeals the Enlightenment philosophers made to antiquity in search of a modern secularism, and the ability of Anglicans to combine freethinking with support for the Church of England.⁵ From the late eighteenth century, a well-established literature describes how the Enlightenment threw up terms which became fixed in the European imagination: secularist, atheist, agnostic. From the 1790s to the 1870s, for the first time, movements of these groups came into being, the majority coalescing around radical and republican politics. The result is that freethinking from then on tends to be seen as a daring adjunct to the class struggle, its heroes, orators and organisers, those willing to be imprisoned for their beliefs (or lack of them). Thomas Paine, Charles Bradlaugh, and Robert G. Ingersoll are probably the three leading figures, cast up as the heroes of a long-term fight against organised religion. The British history of ›no religion‹ emphasises the heroes of free speech, freethinking, birth control and socialism. Edward Royle wrote two key books on the origins of British secularism in the republicanism and radicalism emanating from Thomas Paine and Robert Owen from the 1790s through to the 1840s, and then through the influence of George Holyoake in the mid-Victorian decades and onto the foundation of the National Secular Society (1866), Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant in the 1880s, and the trials of George Foote in the 1910s. Royle argued that secularism was for a brief period a popular philosophical system beside working-class socialism, rising in the face of Victorian Evan-

4 See for instance: *Barry A. Kosmin/Ariela Keysar*, *The American Nones. The Profile of the No Religion Population. A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008*, URL: <<http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org>> [11.1.2011]; *Michael Hill/Zwaga Wiebe*, *The Nones' Story. A Comparative Analysis of Religious Nonalignment*, in: *New Zealand Sociology* 4, 1989, pp. 164–189; *Phil Zuckerman*, *Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment*, New York 2008.

5 *Michael Hunter*, *The Problem of ›Atheism‹ in Early Modern England*, in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (5th Series) 35, 1985, pp. 15–57; *Peter Gay*, *The Enlightenment. The Rise of Modern Paganism*, London 1995; *Michael Graham*, *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead. Boundaries of Belief on the Eve of the Enlightenment*, Edinburgh 2008; *Sarah Ellenzeig*, *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking, 1660–1760*, Stanford, CA 2008.

gicalism; »in the end«, he wrote, »secularisation made Secularism redundant.«⁶ He showed that as a membership movement it peaked in the 1850s, acting as a small sect of a few thousand.⁷ With Annie Besant in the 1880s, a strong gender dimension intruded, whereby freedom from religion became linked to feminism and freedom of control for women over their own bodies.⁸ Birth control symbolised a growing breach between conventional Christianity and women's freedom, and it was to be the human body that was to form an important theme in debates in the 1960s and after about the role of, intrusions by and defection from religion.

The stories vary in important details between countries. In the United States, Robert G. Ingersoll stands far above the crowds as the dominant figure, a man of enormous fame for his oratory. Yet he is the object of some infighting within organised »no-religionism« – between those who proclaim him as »the great agnostic« and those who proclaim him an atheist in all but name.⁹ The United States shows more clearly than most countries the divided nature of organised »no-religionism« – organisations that have developed during the second half of the twentieth century into a community rather fractured partly by ideology (some stressing atheism, some stressing humanism, some other variants) but much more by personality, organisational empires, money and scandal.¹⁰ Still, it is in the United States that organised »no-religionism« has had the greatest legal successes in the twentieth century, not least aided by the constitutional separation of church and state and the ability of secularists to win court cases to keep religion out of schools, the judiciary and other areas of government activity.¹¹ As we shall see, the US has the weakest »no-religionism« of the nations under review, but it has the readiest legal platform for secularist work.

The heroism of freethinkers and radicals is recounted by David Nash in a slightly different way, by approaching the issue through a study of blasphemy and the prosecution of secularist blasphemers. He uses this to show a longer (and still incomplete) strand of the story of »no-religionism« stretching from Thomas Paine in the 1790s to the last person in Britain to go to gaol for blasphemy, J. W. Gott in 1921 (for comparing Christ to a circus clown), and through to the trial of Gay News magazine in 1977 (for publishing a poem which described the homosexual love felt by a centurion for the crucified Christ).¹² Stressing the concept of »no religion« through the narrow dimension of blasphemy, this approach emphasises the issues of freedom of speech and thought, tending to shift attention

6 *Edward Royle*, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain 1866–1915*, Manchester 1980, p. 328.

7 *Idem*, *Victorian Infidels. The Origins of the British Secularist Movement 1791–1866*, Manchester 1974, pp. 287, 298 and 303.

8 Besant also contributed to »no-religionism« in the British Empire; *Anne Taylor*, *Besant, Annie (1847–1933)*, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 2004, URL: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30735>> [3.1.2011].

9 On the contest between atheists, agnostics and humanists, see *Susan Jacoby*, *Freethinkers. A History of American Secularism*, New York 2004, pp. 149–185, and the somewhat unfavourable essay by one of the leading atheist figures, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, at URL: <http://www.atheists.org/Robert_G._Ingersoll> [25.6.2011].

10 This was nowhere more set in relief than by the disappearance and violent death in 1998 of the leading American atheist, Madalyn Murray O'Hair. For a sensationalist account, see *Ann Rowe Seaman*, *America's Most Hated Woman. The Life and Gruesome Death of Madalyn Murray O'Hair*, New York 2006.

11 The 1791 First Amendment to the US Constitution proclaimed: »Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof«. O'Hair was able to proudly claim thirty years after a court case in the 1960s: »There is no »Lord's Prayer« in the public schools of the United States because I, as an atheist, challenged it specifically«. Quoted in *Bryan Le Beau*, *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair*, New York 2003, p. 305.

12 *David Nash*, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, Aldershot 1999, pp. 189–190 and 239–256.

to the survival in the twentieth century of laws proscribing the individual's ability to criticise Christianity, and illustrating the extent to which even in the twenty-first century the law in many countries sustains the possibilities of prosecution. From 1989, the blasphemy laws of Great Britain and Ireland, as of some European countries like Denmark, were brought to the fore again. This was partly through the challenge of Muslims seeking protection for Islam and the Prophet in particular from satirical or other treatment considered by them to be inappropriate.¹³ But in Ireland in 1999, the Supreme Court ruled that the law against blasphemy enshrined in the 1937 national constitution was unenforceable, and ten years later in 2009 the government introduced a new blasphemy law which defined an offence as »publishing or uttering matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby intentionally causing outrage among a substantial number of adherents of that religion, with some defences permitted«. ¹⁴ Meanwhile in England and Wales in 2008, Prime Minister Gordon Brown abolished the crimes of blasphemy and blasphemous libel; in Scotland the offence was restated in 1825 but the last prosecution was in 1843, and by now it is not considered as a crime; and though Canada has a blasphemous libel law modelled on an English original, it has been little used since the 1930s.¹⁵ For the »no religion« movement, episodes such as that in Ireland were reminders that, notwithstanding the vast change to the religious culture of these countries in the last sixty years, religion in general, or a version of Christianity in particular, continued to enjoy positions which seemed privileged and unwarranted.

Generally in these historical studies, there is an overlapping coverage of pretty much the same terrain using slightly different focuses: freethought, atheism, blasphemy, radicalism and the anti-censorship cause of libertines, gays and others. But throughout, the stress is on the struggle for human rights, one fought for by a minority of people. And concomitant with that is the idea that the beneficiaries of the struggles were also minorities – and often a few individuals, unsupported by likeminded people because they could not find any who would express themselves. And even when, in the nineteenth century, there emerged larger groups of radicals of one kind or another willing to subscribe to freethought, secularism and/or atheism as part of wider struggles for the rights of democracy, trade unions and working-class movements, the numbers who independently allowed themselves to be considered (or to consider themselves) as »no-religionists« of whatever hue were minuscule. Moreover, this issue of numbers is one that has taken a back seat in the historiography of atheism. Indeed, the issue has rarely been considered in open reflection in the standard histories of »no-religionism«; the demographics are difficult, admittedly, but they become rather side issues (even tackled as in Royle in appendices).

What is left largely unconsidered is a history of the popularity of »no-religionism«. The only way in which the concept of »no religion« has entered historiography in any serious and systematic way is through the study of secularisation, in which the wider demographics of »no-religionism« have been studied almost entirely in terms of the decline of organised Christianity. Historians have traditionally approached secularisation by emphasising the evidence of the decline of Christian religion (mostly since the late nineteenth century): the decline of churchgoing, church membership, Christian rites de passage and ritual, Christian culture, and the decline of Christian thinking in intellectual affairs and

13 This was led in Britain by the Salman Rushdie affair; cf. *Callum G. Brown, Religion and Society in Twentieth Century Britain*, Harlow 2006, pp. 304–306.

14 URL: <<http://blasphemy.ie/why-campaign>> [19.1.2011].

15 For England and Wales, see Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, s. 29; for Scotland, see *Gerald H. Gordon/Michael G. A. Christie, The Criminal Law of Scotland*, Vol. 3, Edinburgh 2001, p. 671, paragraph 41.28; for Canada, see *Toronto Star*, 6.7.2008, at URL: <<http://www.thestar.com/comment/article/454787#article>> [3.1.2011].

affairs of state.¹⁶ Despite the existence of studies of rationalism and atheism, this narrative of »loss« dominates, and reveals a religious-centric approach, whether implicit or explicit, which has rarely been challenged. The history of the rise of a society close to dominated by the idea of »no religion« has hitherto been almost entirely approached as a negative – the decline of Christendom.

So, this article seeks to take forward the study of the death of the dominant Christian culture in major English-speaking countries by approaching the subject from a »positive« viewpoint. The rise of the people of »no religion« is reaching a point of extraordinary breakthrough in Western Europe, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, has been at a high level for some time in Russia and some other nations of the former Communist bloc, and is showing signs of strong growth in many parts of the United States. What is occurring should not merely be understood as decline in Christianity or the collapse of Christendom, as some scholars have called it. There is a positive story to tell.

II. CONCEPTUALISING THE STUDY OF THE PEOPLE OF »NO RELIGION«

If we start trying to count »no-religionists«, who do we count and how do we categorise them? This may seem to be an unusually difficult problem, but it is no more difficult for scholarship than that of measuring religionists. There is indeed an equivalence in the difficulties, and one needs to resort to similar solutions.

Before proceeding to consider the empirical pragmatics of beginning a social history of »no-religionism«, it is important to offer some reflection on deeper issues. The social history of religion as a field of study is, to state the obvious, a field dominated by the central historical record of religion (in my own field, that of Christianity mainly). The study of secularisation has been almost wholly considered as a concept of the decline of religion; it is difficult to think of a work in this field, including all my own publications to date, that fail to take religion (or a part of it) and its decline as the starting point for study. Even when reflecting on postmodernism's impact on secularisation studies, I have committed this assumption explicitly (though without self-awareness of wider ramifications). Having advised some years ago that secularisation was a narrative produced by Christianity in modernity, and that awareness of this was a product of the postmodern condition¹⁷, what is wholly omitted is the quite obvious – that secularisation can be viewed from the opposite perspective as the growth of a condition of »no religion«, comprising as part of it the theory and practice of »no-religionism«. The scholar of the social history of religion after 1960 must of necessity be also a scholar of the social history of »no religion«. A narrative of »no religion« needs to be composed, and dealt with as a positive part of the human condition.

The fact that scholarship has not dealt with »no religion« in this way before, and is now considering doing so, is a result of very recent changes. The growth of secularisation as a holistic concept in the social history of religion was a product of the western (and spe-

16 Important examples include *Hugh McLeod*, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City*, London 1974; *Owen Chadwick*, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge 1976; *Hugh McLeod*, *The Dechristianisation of the Working Class in Western Europe (1850–1900)*, in: *Social Compass* 27, 1980, pp. 191–214; *idem* (ed.), *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities 1830–1930*, London 1995; *idem*, *Piety and Poverty: Working-class Religion in Berlin, London and New York 1870–1914*, New York/London 1996; *idem*, *Religion and the People of Western Europe 1789–1989*, Oxford 1997; *idem*, *Secularization in Western Europe 1848–1914*, Basingstoke 2000; *Callum G. Brown*, *The Death of Christian Britain. Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000*, London 2001; *Hugh McLeod/Werner Ustorf* (eds.), *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750–2000*, Cambridge 2003; *Hugh McLeod*, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, Oxford 2007.

17 *Callum G. Brown*, *The Secularisation Decade: What the 1960s Have Done to the Study of Religious History*, in: *McLeod/Ustorf*, *The Decline of Christendom*, pp. 29–46, here: p. 40.

cifically West European) society that fractured Christendom in and from the 1960s.¹⁸ It goes along with that that the rise of ›no religion‹ has been also a product of the same historical change, and that historical scholarship is now contemplating ways of studying this as a positive development. This essay is about to demonstrate the quantitative evidence to underpin this claim to conceptual change: It will show that it was the 1960s that changed everything in the history of ›no religion‹.

The shaping of a new field of study of the history of ›no religion‹ to stand alongside the study of the history of religion is a significant new enterprise. It involves not so much a paradigm shift as a paradigm inversion. As such, one will encounter the same pitfalls in concept, in categorisation, in statistical analysis, and in historical narration as the study of the history of religion. There is no difference in principle concerning the complexities. And those complexities are no more insuperable, and no more obstructive to the development of the field of study, than they have been in the past to the social history of religion. Indeed, it is the development of complexity, and debate concerning them, that has ennobled the social history of religion. The same process can occur for ›no religion‹, and may even proceed at greater speed as a consequence of there having been (in the manner of Gerschenkron's theory of industrialisation¹⁹) a pace-setter to copy – the experiences and successful problem-solving that occurred in the social history of religion.

And the necessary starting point is to demonstrate the scale of the revolution that afflicted Christendom in the late twentieth century. For that ›no religion‹ revolution was underpinned by a discursive revolution that allowed both the people to conceive themselves as of ›no religion‹, and for the historian to come, belatedly, to see those people as a category for analysis – and not as mere deviants, nor embattled tiny minorities, nor as lapsed Christians or religious laggards, but as a vast demographic category in their own right. The discursive revolution which has allowed the phenomenon of ›no religion‹ to emerge is the same that allows scholarship to perceive it.

To undertake that initial quantitative exercise, we must deploy the same techniques for solving conceptual problems that the social historian of religion uses in studying the people of religion. We start by acknowledging that there is no one measure of ›no religion‹. The religious can be discerned in churchgoers, church members, those baptised and doing the baptising, those who marry by religious rites, those who pay religious taxes, and those who read and absorb and genuflect to discursive frameworks of religion in their own self, their family and in their community (including the role of religion in civil government), and submit to religious rules (not always willingly) concerning proper and improper appearance, deportment, leisure and sexual activities. It has been important in the social history of religion to acknowledge how the way of establishing religiosity has changed in different cultures, and in different religions, and in different time periods. To take one simple example, for at least half a millennium European Christianity has tended to be a religion dominated by female practice (notably in churchgoing), giving it the reputation of being what the Victorians dubbed a ›Ladies‹ religion, whilst Islam and Judaism have been dominated by male practice. To take a second example, churchgoing was more important to establish Christian credentials in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain than it was in the early-modern period or (it may be argued by some) in the later twentieth century.²⁰ In such ways, the social history of religion has had to acknowledge the shifting sands of what ›a Christian‹ has been, and to question any notion of there being an acceptable practice (in scholarship) of trying to decide who might be ›a true Christian‹ and who not.

18 Clearly, the term has longer provenance, but it was more conceptually confined than it became from the 1960s. See *ibid.*, p. 35.

19 *Alexander Gerschenkron*, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge, MA 1962.

20 On this subject, see *Margaret Spufford*, *Can We Count the ›Godly‹ and the ›Conformable‹ in the Seventeenth Century?*, in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36, 1985, pp. 428–438.

The same applies for those of ›no religion‹. There is no difference in principle in doing this, but merely an adept reversal of the perspective (from religion to ›no religion‹). The people of ›no religion‹ may be classified as one or more of: negatively the non-churchgoer, the non-church adherent, the avoider of religious ritual, and the religiously indifferent (a very large category, and one which will constitute the greatest problem for scholarship); positively amongst those who perceive their political, moral and personal identity to be evidenced in particular choices of occupation, commitment (ideological generally, ranging from feminism, socialism, human rights and eco-activities to a wider humanitarianism), in forms of domesticity, lifestyle, or everyday activity; and positively, in intellectual fashion, as the avower (to varying degrees and by varying methods) of atheism, agnosticism, freethought, secularism, humanism, scepticism, rationalism, and other possible intellectual positions. The ›no-religionist‹ appears as a construct of one or some of these, the possible combinations being numerous and in need of more exploration than there is space for here. The defining of the people of ›no religion‹ will remain a constant work in progress, and the above should not be regarded as closed categories, and should always be seen as over-lapping. And, as with the religionist, there is no moral (or scholarly) virtue in trying to establish what qualities constitute the ›true no-religionist‹; there is no fixed certainty to this, no single ›test‹ of ›no religion‹.

The quantitative exercise, therefore, must approach ›no-religionists‹ with some of the same types of decision. Where the social historian of religion accepts measures, for example, of the numbers of churchgoers and church adherents as in themselves significant indicators of Christian identity (and offering different histories²¹), so the social historian of ›no religion‹ needs to accept numbers of non-churchgoers and non-church adherents as significant indicators of religious alienation. These are important categories but are not the only ones: rates of religious solemnisation of marriage, baptism, confirmation and first communion often display different trajectories, whilst opinion poll questions about church attendance and belief display different again. Indeed, the basis of the social historian's work with statistics is to accept that there is no single countable category of religiosity, but several which offer discrete indicators of Christianity's fortunes. Where those indicators tend to fall together, as they did in most of Europe, North America and Australasia in the 1960s, this can usually be taken as good evidence of a general decline in the social significance of religion. Where that decline is sustained, as it was in most of Europe and Canada (but not so much the USA) for fifty years after the 1960s, this may be taken as reliable evidence of a comprehensive decline (and perhaps collapse) of Christendom. Reversing the perspective, in these processes is to be found evidence of the growth and maturing of ›no-religionism‹.

The historian hoping to discern an identifiable ›core‹ to ›no-religionism‹ that can equate to a core of religionism should be restrained. The idea that a core ›faith‹ (Christian or Islamic for instance) can be ›matched‹ by a core ›unbelief‹ may flounder if tests are put up for an absence. Clearly, unbelief can be at the heart of somebody's ›no-religionism‹, but equally it may not be; ›no-religionism‹ can be the product of non-speculative atheism²² – that is an absence of reflection on the issue of belief in a god. In this regard, we should be quite open about the multiplicity of sub-categories that can be enveloped in ›no-religionism‹. Whether ›no-religionism‹ existed in all cultures is also an important question; there may be a case for arguing that in early-modern England atheists were rarely ›no-religionists‹.²³ These issues will need thought and to be researched through.

21 For reflection on such complexities, see *Brown*, *The Secularisation Decade*, pp. 41–43.

22 A term developed in *David Berman*, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*, London 1988, pp. 1–43.

23 Cf. *Ellenzweig*, *The Fringes of Belief*.

As we approach the task of enumerating ›no religion‹, we confront immediately not merely the issue of multiple indicators (as with religion), but the twin problems that (a) most of these indicators tend to be negatives of religion, and that (b) most are expressions of belief given to enumerators (either in writing or in person) and not counts of actions (as with for example churchgoers). There is, broadly, no equivalent of going to church for the non-believer; membership and attendance at meetings of ›no religion‹ groups (such as the British Humanist Association, American Atheists, or the international »Center for Inquiry«), are very small compared to population, and rarely an equivalent to religious worship. Recourse to humanist and atheist marriages, baby-naming and funerals offers alternative activity-centred measures, but the popularity of these is regionally highly varied within high-secularising nations: high in Scotland (where humanist weddings were state recognised in 2005), moderate in England and Wales (where they are not), and negligible in Canada (even where they are recognised in Ontario). Non-religious ritual, certainly within Europe, North America and Australasia, and probably in the world, is at its highest in Scotland, a country of the United Kingdom with autonomy over law concerning the main life rituals.²⁴ In this regard, Table 1 shows the dramatic growth of these rituals in that country in the early twenty-first century, reaching minimum figures of 11.4% of all non-state weddings and 5.4% of funerals in 2009. However, as the table also indicates, these figures do not so far match the spectacular scale, or growth, of ›no-religionism‹ in the Scots population at large – which rose from 27.6% in 2001 to 40% in 2008. No other country can yet match these figures across the range from ritual to adherence. It seems likely that ›no-religionist‹ ritual will grow significantly in coming decades (the trends are currently upwards in every western nation that measures it), but except in Scotland they are not yet numerically sufficiently significant for major research analysis.

Table 1: ›No-Religionism‹ at its Ritual Peak: Humanist rites de passage in Scotland 2000–2009

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
% Scots ›no religion‹		27.6	30	31	31	33	35	39	40	
Humanist Society members	423	507	570	634	682	1114	2121	2682	4040	5757
Humanist weddings (as % of all non-state marriages)	53 (0.3)	71 (0.4)	110 (0.6)	86 (0.5)	80 (0.5)	116 (0.8)	443 (3.0)	710 (4.9)	1025 (7.5)	1515 (11.4)
Humanist baby naming (as % of births)	16 (0.0)	23 (0.0)	30 (0.1)	49 (0.1)	46 (0.1)	61 (0.1)	81 (0.1)		105 (0.2)	128 (0.2)
Humanist funerals (as % of deaths)	325 (0.6)	507 (0.9)	734 (1.3)	1059 (1.8)	1387 (2.5)	1666 (3.0)	1862 (3.4)		2533 (4.5)	2883 (5.4)

Note: ›No religion‹ figure for 2001 from census, 2002–2008 from Scottish Household Survey. Humanist weddings until 2005 were unrecognised by the state (and thus required a supplementary state wedding). Figures for humanist ceremonies are minimum figures, as independent humanists also operate in several parts of Scotland.²⁵

24 This autonomy predates the formation of the Scottish parliament in 1998, and was and remains administratively held by the Registrar General for Scotland under legislation stretching back to 1855.

25 Sources: Membership and Ceremonies Data, Humanist Society of Scotland Annual Reports 2000–2010; Scottish Household Survey, Private Communication; GRO Scotland Vital Events Reference Tables 2009, Tables 3.2, 5.3 and 7.7, URL: <<http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/statistics/theme/vital-events/general/ref-tables/index.html>> [4.1.2011].

There are some indicators of ›no-religionism‹ that are not negatives, but almost invariably poor indicators. For instance, the numbers of atheists, agnostics and humanists are counted in some countries when they are ›written in‹ on census forms, but because these are generally not offered as printed categories on those forms they are less likely to attain their full representation. In any event, the numbers of these are small. For instance, in the census of England and Wales in 2001, out of a population of 52 million, there were, as self-described written-in categories, 14,909 agnostics, 10,357 atheists, 8,297 humanists, 278 heathens, 37 rationalists, and 11 secularists; contrast these figures with the category of ›no religion‹ offered on the census form, which was ticked by 7,274,290 people.²⁶ Similarly, in the census of Ireland in 2006, out of a population of 4,239,848, there were 1,515 agnostics and 929 atheists, but 186,318 people of ›no religion‹.²⁷ With atheists barely reaching 0.02% of population in either of these countries, it is clear that this is a poor measure of ›no religion‹, whilst the more popular category ›agnostic‹ is open to wide interpretation.²⁸ This makes measures of atheism and agnosticism quite problematic. Certainly, the proportions of atheists in the population are significantly smaller in census returns to questions when set in the context of religious affiliation (i. e. do you belong to a church/religious denomination?) rather than when set in the context of belief or not in God; for example for Britain, atheists enumerated in belief-based questionnaires achieve results of 39 to 44%, compared to 0.2% in the affiliation-based questionnaire of the 2001 census.²⁹ Phil Zuckerman estimated from a survey of secondary literature that between 500 million and 750 million people in the 2000s did not believe in God;³⁰ expressed in proportional terms, this represented between 7.3 and 10.9% of the planetary population.

However, the collection of such data has been extremely poor in historical terms: The questions have not been asked in any geographical detail (for sub-territories of countries), have rarely been asked at regular intervals over the twentieth century, and the sample sizes have often been quite small (or are now indeterminate). The manner of answering questions on religion is also problematic. Before the later twentieth century, there were often pressures from employers, landlords, work colleagues and family to be faced in describing one's religious adherence, and, for an atheist, as we have seen, it could be an offence in Britain, Ireland or Canada to deny the existence of God. This meant that the freedom to be honest might be restricted, and even now, it has been argued by American sociologists, it is socially harder to ›come out‹ as an atheist in the USA than as a communist.³¹ With the additional problems of definition, the high degree of questionnaire variation depending on wordage, the variation in answers from form-based to face-to-face in-

26 Table-2-2, written-in answers, 2001 census, URL: <<http://www.brin.ac.uk>> [4.1.2011].

27 Irish Census 2006, Vol. 13: Religion, URL: <<http://beyond2020.cso.ie/census/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx>> [30.1.2009].

28 I have interviewed 57 humanists and members of other non-religious groups, and around one third describe themselves as ›agnostic‹, and explain this to mean a principled position (where they take atheism to be scientifically unjustified, and agnosticism the logical position on the existence of God). However, many English-speaking people take ›agnostic‹ to signify indecision on the question, thus generating considerable divergence in meaning.

29 The figure 39% comes from *Pippa Norris/Ronald Inglehart*, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, New York 2004, 44% from a BBC survey ›What the World Thinks about God‹, Broadcast BBC2 tv, 26.2.2004.

30 *Phil Zuckerman*, *Atheism: Contemporary Rate and Patterns*, in: *Michael Martin* (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Cambridge 2007, URL: <<http://atheism.110mb.com>> [4.1.2011].

31 *Penny Edgell/Joseph Gerteis/Douglas Hartmann*, *Atheists as ›Other‹: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society*, in: *American Sociological Review* 71, 2006, No. 2, pp. 211–234.

interviews³², and the general incomparability of data across nations and (with a few exceptions) across time periods, this leaves measures of atheism and associated descriptors as poor tools for the historian of ›no religion‹.

This makes the categorisation of ›no religion‹ itself as an important, arguably the best, initial statistical device in this field. Its merits are that it is a category included in virtually all government censuses of religious affiliation, it is offered as a ›box category‹ for ticking on forms and in instructions to enumerators, has applied from its earliest national usage (in Canada) in 1871 to the present, has been set in an affiliation context rather than the very problematic belief-based context, and has generally had relatively unchanging manners of collection and computation. In Canada, for instance, the instruction to enumerators in 2001 was: ›for persons who have no connection or affiliation with any religious group or denomination, mark ›no religion‹. Report ›atheist‹ or ›agnostic‹ if applicable‹.³³ There were only three significant problems. First, in all countries, including Canada and Ireland, the issue arises whether answering the religion question was compulsory or voluntary, and secondly what extent of latitude was permitted for ›not stated‹ to be entered as an alternative (as this was a significantly variable number across the decades, and could bear strongly on interpreting numbers entering ›no religion‹). These first two issues actually offer some interpretational opportunities, for ›not stated‹ in some countries (like Canada) was actually inflated in certain censuses, indicating important trends. But the third issue is more significant. What did a person mean when responding ›no religion‹? This might be interpreted as varying between, at the one extreme, the principled ›no-religionist‹ (encouraged, for instance, by campaigns by humanist and atheist groups to get secularists to stand up to be counted at censuses as part of a challenge to religious power³⁴), to the religiously indifferent person who, with no affiliation to a church in his or her adulthood, may enter ›no religion‹ to mean ›no church‹. This latter problem has been highlighted in the 2001 UK censuses, as there were three differently-worded forms: In England and Wales respondents were offered ›no religion‹ beside names of religions (i. e. Christian, Muslim, Judaism), whilst in Scotland and Northern Ireland the format used was that historically adopted in Canada, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand – namely, of offering ›no religion‹ beside church names (Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic Church, Other Christian, as well as names of the minority religions). The difference is thought in England and Wales to have tended to inflate those responding ›Christian‹ (in contrast to those answering one of the Christian churches in Scotland), thereby causing an underscore for ›no religion‹ in England and Wales compared to other countries. With the difference in manner of question to be broadly repeated in the 2011 census, there is no way at present of bringing England and Wales into line with the results of other countries.

There is another problem. In some nations, having a religion is almost a civic necessity. This applies notably in some of the otherwise most secular nations in the world, including Scandinavian ones, where the payment of church taxes has traditionally ensured access to rituals such as the social conventions of church marriage and church funeral. This helps to explain some of the results of recent sociologists' analysis of ›no religion‹. Andrew Greeley analysed data from the International Social Survey Programme to assess

32 One researcher, Geoffrey Gorer, pointed to variations in claimed ›no religion‹ in England by manner of survey: face-to-face interviews in two polls of 1947 and 1950 gave figures of 8 and 9% respectively, a form-based survey he undertook himself in 1954 gave 22%, whilst an interview-based one he did in 1965 gave 9 and 4% for men and women respectively; *Geoffrey Gorer, Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain*, London 1965, pp. 161f.; *Brown, Religion and Society*, pp. 182–187.

33 Statistics Canada, *Census Guide [for enumerators]*, Ottawa 2001, question 22, p. 10.

34 Such a campaign was run in 2011 in UK by humanist groups; *Juliet Wilson, If You Are Not Religious for God's Sake Say So!*, *Humanitae* Winter 2010/11, p. 5.

change in ›no religion‹ between 1991 and 1998 in 24 European countries; he found that in only three countries, Austria, Northern Ireland and Italy, had there not been a statistically significant increase, whilst the greatest change was in Hungary, Slovenia, Britain and Ireland. But the absolute strength of ›no religion‹ by 1998 was highest in former East Germany (68%), Netherlands (58%), France (47%), Britain and the Czech Republic (both 45%), lowest in Cyprus (0%), Ireland and Poland (both 6%), Portugal (8%) and Switzerland (9%), with a European average of 23%. This left, in the middle ground, otherwise highly secularised nations with lower-than-expected levels of religious affiliation – Sweden (29%), former West Germany (15%), Denmark (12%), and Norway (10%).³⁵ This shows that ›no religion‹, like every other category, has country-specific connotations which make an absolute measurement of religious alienation maybe impossible.

The issues raised in the last two paragraphs are important, but are far less fatal to scholarship than the issues surrounding the notoriously-problematic use of religious statistics. Indeed, there is much greater simplicity in using ›no religion‹ since it is a category that did not change within nations as a result of church union and schism, and, more importantly, did not change as a result of (a) variation in the strictness of application of criteria of church membership and (b) changes in the definition of communicants.³⁶ When used in single-country analysis, ›no religion‹ offers for the historian of statistics something sublimely simple and with a conceptual wholeness; ticking its box marks an unequivocal distance from belonging, membership or participation in religious rites and churches. Despite its negativity, its use by individuals in the midst of societies dominated by religious adherence, practice and (usually) civil law (as, broadly, virtually all but former communist countries were in the twentieth century) is an act of some commitment, a statement of nonconformity, of positive choice, and a breaking of the discursive framework. It surely incorporates for many people an act of intellectual defiance of the hegemonic norm – that of religious belonging. In most cases until very recently (until the 1990s at least), the person ticking ›no religion‹ was breaking the tradition of the family, inscribing the first breach in the religious continuity between generation and generation going back centuries – a breach in what the French scholar Danièle Hervieu-Léger called the ›chain of memory‹ of religion (a concept wholeheartedly adopted and expanded upon by English sociologist Grace Davie).³⁷ Here is the commitment to the new, a statement of individualism, a form of what Bernice Martin once called ›the expressive revolution‹.³⁸ By filling in the decennial census form, the individual is confronting the government and its official form, answering questions on the household's occupants, their ages, occupations and other empirical ›objective‹ demographic data. In the midst of this the householder is asked to tick his/her own religious preference, that of other adults in the household, and the religion in which children are or are likely to be raised. With all the population covered (or a 20% sample as in Canada's post-1980 censuses), there is an official quality to the census answer that the opinion pollster cannot match on the street corner or in the telephone inquiry. The historian should treat that tick with great seriousness.

35 *Andrew M. Greeley*, *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium. A Sociological Profile*, New Brunswick 2003, pp. 55f.

36 The best example of the latter practice occurred between the 1950s and 1970s when the Church of England gradually replaced the measurement of Easter Day communicants with the measurement of Easter Week communicants (the latter producing a higher figure). See the graph of both measures in *Brown*, *The Death of Christian Britain*, p. 164.

37 A concept in which both scholars float the possibility of religion surviving the institutional collapse of Christianity by being embedded in the memory of European individuals; *Danièle Hervieu-Léger*, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Cambridge 2000; *Grace Davie*, *Religion in Modern Europe. A Memory Mutates*, Oxford 2000.

38 *Bernice Martin*, *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change*, Oxford 1981.

III. THE GROWTH OF ›NO RELIGION‹: CENSUS MEASURES

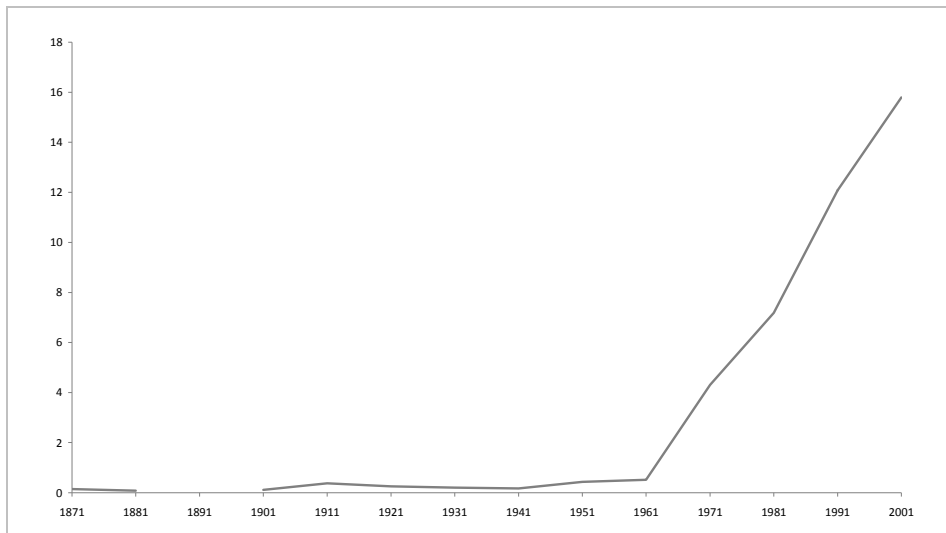
In Canada, where the people were first asked at a census in 1871, there were 5,198 out of 3,689,257 people (a mere 0.14%) who stated ›no religion‹ to the enumerators.³⁹ Since then, other countries have come to ask the same sort of question. Mainland Britain had no official state census of religious belonging until 2001; only in Northern Ireland and in Ireland (both before and after partition in 1922) did censuses record the numbers of non-believers. Australia starting asking the question from 1906, New Zealand from at least 1951, and the United States did not ask for the numbers of non-religious in official censuses, though it did undertake a sample survey in 1957 which did record ›no religion‹. So, the category has actually a long statistical heritage. However, the category has had to suffer some existence in a nether world; in Ireland the ›no-religionists‹ were lumped in with ›not stated‹ until 1961 (and are thus inseparable in published census data), and in other regards as a category it has not been studied to any significant degree in any country until comparatively recently.

But with the emergence of the category, what can be discerned of the progress and character of ›no-religionism‹?

Canada

The Canadian census recorded the religious affiliation of the population (in later years by 20% sampling), and the category ›no religion‹ has been offered at each census since 1871 (though in 1891 it was not separately recorded). The results are given in Figure 1. Several remarkable features are noteworthy.

Figure 1: ›No Religion‹ in Canada 1871–2001: Proportion of Population at Decennial Census



Note: The graphline shows the percentage of the people indicating ›no religion‹ (or for 2001 ›no religious affiliation‹). The category was not separately measured in 1891.⁴⁰

39 Statistics Canada, online data, Series A164-184: Principal religious denominations of the population, census dates, 1871 to 1971, URL: <<http://www.statcan.gc.ca>> [24.11.2009].

40 Sources: Statistics Canada Table 075-0016 CANSIM (database), URL: <http://cansim2.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-wein/cnsmcgi.exe?Lang=E&CNSM-Fi=CII/CII_1-eng.htm> [13.11.2009]; and URL:

First, the proportion of ›no religion‹ is tiny until the later twentieth century. Until the 1971 census, the numbers are so small (barely breaking 0.5% in 1961) that these data add considerable weight to the idea that a proclamation of ›no religion‹ was unacceptable to almost the entire population – including, arguably, for reasons of social acceptance as much as individual belief. Only in 1991 does the proportion begin to exceed 10%.

Second, in many census years there was a reduction in not just the proportion of people, but the number of people enumerating themselves as ›no religion‹. Between 1911 and 1941 there were three decades of declining numbers, despite rapidly rising population. This may in part reflect the growing organisation of the churches and their improved coverage in both urban and rural districts of Canada, through which they spread not only active membership but also passive identity amongst the less committed. Notwithstanding this, the trend towards decreased non-religious identity would suggest very strongly that there was no progressive, gradualist growth in non-religiosity in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed the reverse seems to be the case. Fewer and fewer people were willing to classify themselves as without a church to which they ›belonged‹, and the numbers so doing fell from a high of 87,000 in 1881 to a low of 17,000 in 1941. This point is emphasised when considering the category ›religious denomination not stated‹ – those failing to respond to the census question. (This figure was recorded from 1871 to 1941, but from 1951 it was no longer ›allowed‹ by census enumerators who were under strict instructions to obtain a response.⁴¹) When given the option of not responding to the question of religious adherence, the people in the Canadian census were being asked specifically if they were not adherents of a denomination (or church). Thus, the numbers responding negatively in this way were at the minimum making a statement of indecision about adherence. In this regard, it is noteworthy how from a high point of 87,000 in 1881, the numbers fall continuously and substantially to 16,042 in 1931, and then only rise marginally to 17,459 in 1941. This would suggest a decreasing number unable or unwilling to align themselves with a denomination. This enhances the argument that an articulated non-religiosity was diminishing in the first half of the twentieth century, tending to support the refutation of the hypothesis of gradualist secularisation.

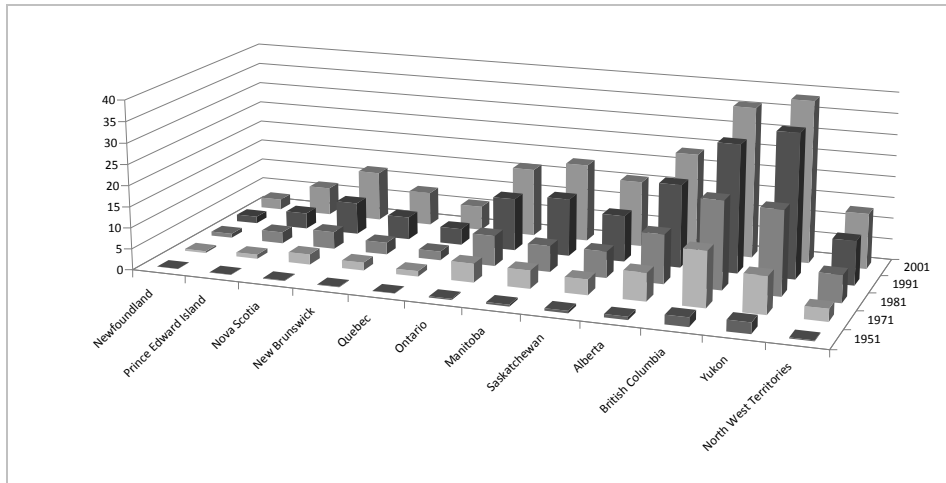
Third, the 1960s were the breakthrough years for ›no religion‹ in Canada. There was a 734% increase in the proportion claiming that status between 1961 and 1971, and a ten-fold leap in the numbers from 95,000 to 930,000 people. The numbers then close to doubled in the 1970s and again in the 1980s, though proportionately the growth rate was slightly less. This conclusion is given extra weight when analysing the data for those not expressing a religious affiliation in this graph – which is a larger group than ›no-religionists‹, for it included the ›not stated‹ group that started to rise from the 1960s.

Fourth, perhaps surprisingly, the growth rate in the proportion reporting ›no religion‹ fell in the 1990s compared to the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s; the rate of growth was half that of the previous two decades. But there are various indicators that numbers have risen again in the 2000s.

<<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/standard/themes/RetrieveProductTable.cfm?Temporal=2001&PID=55821&APATH=3&METH=1&PTYPE=55440&THEME=56&FOCUS=0&AID=0&PLACENAME=0&PROVINCE=0&SEARCH=0&GC=9&GK=NA&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=&FL=0&RL=0&FREE=0&GID=431515>> [25.11.2009].

41 In the 1991 Census Handbook, Statistics Canada reported the following as the instruction to enumerators: ›Question 17 Religion: What is this person's religion? Indicate a specific denomination or religion even if this person is not currently a practising member of that group. For example, Roman Catholic, Ukrainian Catholic, United Church, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Mennonite, Jehovah's Witnesses, Salvation Army, Islam, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh‹. Note the absence of ›no religion‹ options from these suggestions; Statistics Canada, 1991 Census Handbook, Ottawa 1991, p. 51.

Figure 2: ›No Religion‹ in Canada 1951–2001: By Province and Territory



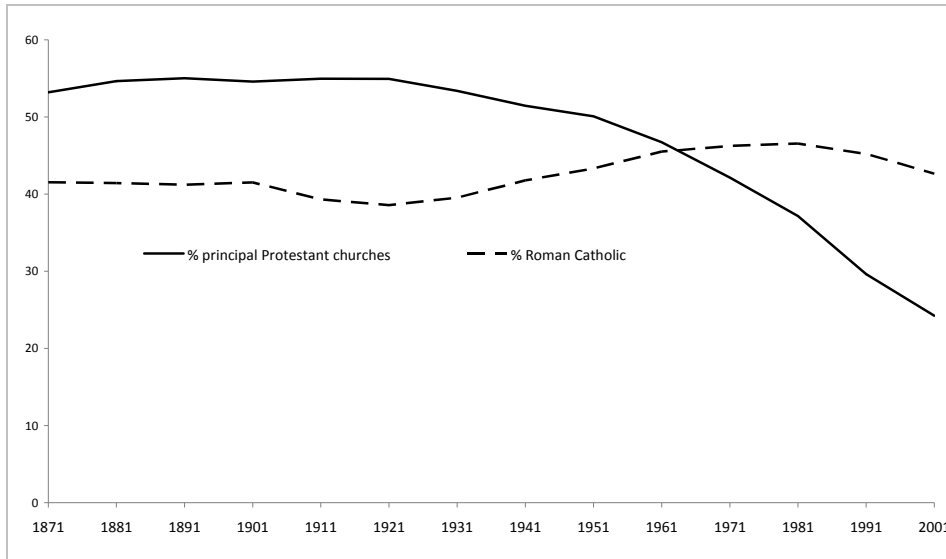
Note: The bar chart shows the proportion of the people indicating ›no religion‹ (or for 2001 ›no religious affiliation‹) for each province and territory. For 2001, North West Territory includes the territory of Nunavut created in 1999.⁴²

The growth of ›no religion‹ has not been geographically even across Canada. Figure 2 is a bar chart displaying the rate of change over the period 1951–2001 by province and territory. This shows that the greatest growth of ›no religion‹ responses at censuses was in the western areas of Canada in Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta. A second tier of provinces with mid-level growth emerged mostly in central Canada – Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and North West Territories. By comparison, the eastern and maritime provinces showed comparatively low levels of ›no religion‹ responses, even in 2001 – New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Quebec and, lowest of all, Newfoundland and Labrador. This west-to-east ordering appears to over-ride the economic and metropolitan order of provinces, which tend to start with Ontario and Quebec. However, the low level of stated ›no religion‹ in Quebec needs to be treated with special caution. There is now a wide acceptance of the concept of the ›quiet revolution‹ that unfolded in that province in the 1970s, and which afflicted the popularity of Catholicism in very stark ways.⁴³ The result is seen to be a very major transition from a province with a strong Catholic heritage to one which had witnessed not merely a weakening in the popular place of the Catholic Church, but a broader secularisation. So, it is wise not to accept data such as these as the last word on the rate and geography of dechristianisation.

42 Sources: Statistics Canada Table 075-0016 CANSIM (database), URL: <http://cansim2.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-wein/cnsmcgi.exe?Lang=E&CNSM-Fi=CII/CII_1-eng.htm> [13.11.2009]; and URL: <<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/standard/themes/RetrieveProductTable.cfm?Temporal=2001&PID=55821&APATH=3&METH=1&PTYPE=55440&THEME=56&FOCUS=0&AID=0&PLACENAME=0&PROVINCE=0&SEARCH=0&GC=99&GK=NA&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=&FL=0&RL=0&FREE=0&GID=431515>> [25.11.2009].

43 *Michael Gauvreau*, *The Catholic Origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, 1931–1970*, Montreal 2005; see also *Thomas Sloan*, *Quebec: The Not-so Quiet Revolution*, Toronto 1965.

Figure 3: Protestant and Roman Catholic Adherents in Canada 1871–2001:
As Percentage of Population



Note: Each graphline displays the proportion of total population identifying as belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, or to a principal Protestant church (Anglican, Baptist, Congregationalist, Evangelical Church, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Pentecostalist, Presbyterian, Salvation Army and United Church of Canada).⁴⁴

Finally from Canada, Figure 3 indicates something of the denominational sources of the rise of 'no religion'. The trend was set by the decline in adherence to Protestantism, and notably from the United Church of Canada (UCC). In the middle decades of the century Catholicism was becoming more influential as a result of the patterns of immigration, but from 1981 the Catholic proportion of the population was also declining. This supports evidence from Europe that dechristianisation started in the 1950s and 1960s in Protestantism and then spread in the 1970s and 1980s to Catholicism.

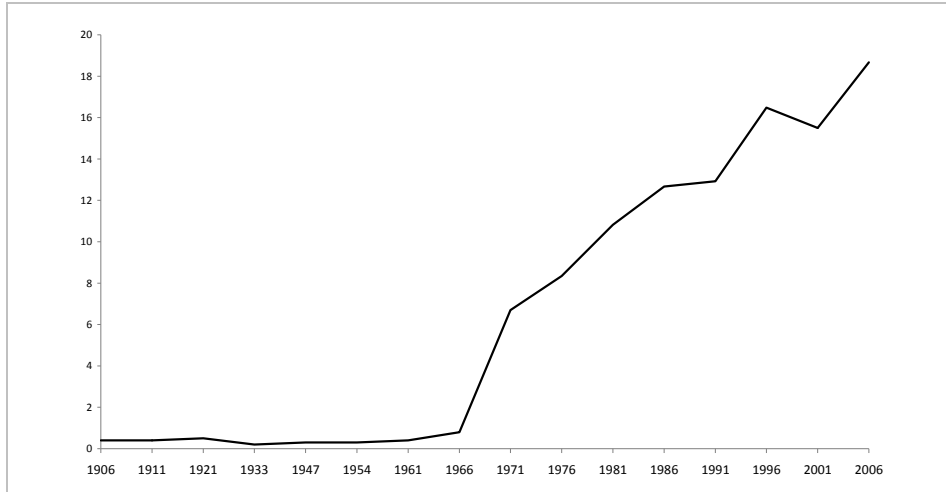
The rise in the proportion of 'no-religionists' coincided after 1965 with the near evisceration of Christianity in Canada, incorporating the collapse of Christian institutions, practice and culture. In 1946 weekly church attendance in Canada was 67% of population, and in 1965 still stood at 55%. But by 1985 the figure had fallen to 35% and by 2001 to 20%.⁴⁵ This stands surely as one of the most dramatic changes in popular religious practice ever seen in any nation. It has aroused extensive debate in church circles, especially viewed from the previous convention that Canada followed a religious destiny broadly linked to that of the United States.⁴⁶

44 Sources: Figures calculated from data from Statistics Canada: for 1871–1971, Table 075-0016 CANSIM database [13.11.2009]; for 2001: Religion and Sex for Canada [14.11.2009]; 1981 Census of Canada: Population: Religion (Ottawa 1983); Census 1991: Religions in Canada: The Nation (Ottawa 1993), table 1, pp. 6–17.

45 Figures cited in Nancy Christie/Michael Gauvreau, Secularisation or Resacralisation? The Canadian Case, 1760–2000, in: Callum G. Brown/Michael Snape (eds.), Secularisation in the Christian World. Essays in Honour of Hugh McLeod, Farnham 2010, pp. 93–117.

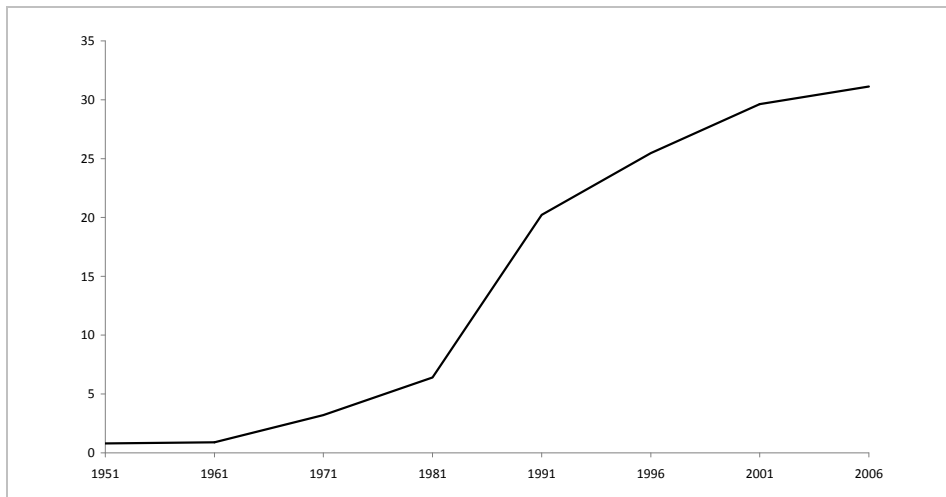
46 Mark A. Noll, What Happened to Christian Canada?, Vancouver 2007.

Figure 4: ›No Religion‹ in Australia 1906–2006: Proportion of Population at Censuses



Note: The graphline shows the percentage of the people indicating ›no religion‹. The data points on the x axis are irregularly spaced.⁴⁷

Figure 5: ›No Religion‹ in New Zealand 1951–2006: Proportion of Population at Censuses⁴⁸



47 Source: Yearbook Australia 2006, Table 12.26, URL: <<http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au>> [6.12.2009].

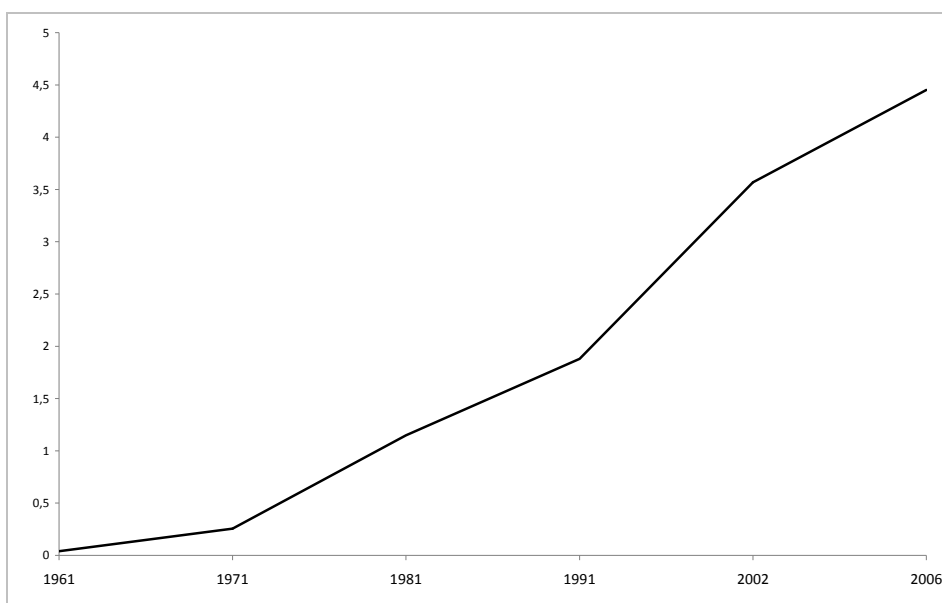
48 Sources: Data for 1951–1981 from Michael Hill/Wiebe Zwaga, Religion in New Zealand: Change and Comparison, in: James A. Beckford/Thomas Luckmann (eds.), The Changing Face of Religion, London 1989, p. 72; data for 1991–2006 from New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings, 2001, table 16 (1), and 2006, religious affiliation (1), URL: <<http://www.stats.govt.nz>> [25.6.2011].

Australia and New Zealand

Figures 4 and 5 show the proportions of people responding ›no religion‹ in Australasia. The first of these indicates the levels since 1906 in Australia. It shows a remarkably similar scale and developmental history to that of Canada. First, the proportion is under 0.6% until the mid-1960s. Second, the proportion actually falls after 1921 and does not recover until the 1960s, indicating how there was no gradualist growth in this indicator of secularisation. Third, the proportion starts to rise in the early 1960s, doubling from 0.4 to 0.8% between 1961 and 1966, but then grows by more than 800% in five years to 6.7% in 1971. Fourth, the growth rate then slows but stays at a high level, to 18.7% in 2006. In each of these four features, Australia replicates extremely closely the Canadian pattern and, most importantly, demonstrates the key place of the 1960s in the emergence of ›no-religionists‹.

The New Zealand data in Figure 5 tend to confirm the pattern. The dataset shows a level of ›no-religionism‹ at 0.8 and 0.9% in 1951 and 1961 respectively, and then the characteristic breakthrough in the 1960s – in this case of more than 300% in a decade. The 1980s seem to show a dramatic change from 6.4 to 20.2%, and a sustained climb to 31.1% in 2006. New Zealand has a very high level of ›no-religionism‹, and would bear close examination of the reasons.

Figure 6: ›No Religion‹ in Ireland 1961–2006: Percentage at Censuses



Note: The figures for 2002 and 2006 include the small numbers of atheists and agnostics as ›written-in‹ answers (the results for which were published for the first time for those years).⁴⁹

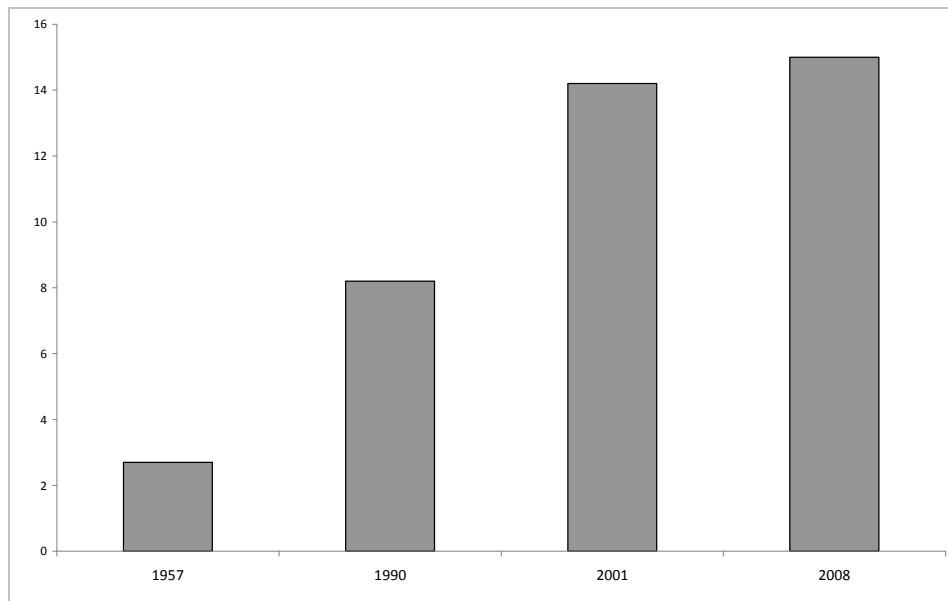
49 Sources: Irish censuses 1926–1991, URL: <www.cso.ie/census_26> etc. [27.11.2009]; Census 2006, Vol. 13: Religion, URL: <<http://beyond2020.cso.ie/census/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx>> [30.11.2009]; for 2002 see URL: <<http://beyond2020.cso.ie/Census/TableView/tableView.aspx>> [30.11.2009].

Ireland

Figure 6 shows that the figures for ›no religion‹ have been much lower in Ireland than in all of the other countries studied, and remain very small to the present time. However, the gradient of change follows a familiar curve.

In Ireland, the number of ›no-religionists‹ were counted and published from 1961; before then, the non-religious were counted with ›not stated‹. The proportion of ›no religion‹ was minuscule (0.04%) in 1961, and even in 2002 the proportion (3.6%) was lower than it had been in Canada in 1971. By 2006 it had reached 4.5%, which suggests a point at which other countries being reviewed reached during or by the end of the 1960s. Nevertheless, the numbers of ›no-religionists‹ rose sevenfold in Ireland in the 1960s and in the decade following, in a way that they could not have done before, suggesting that though the scale of ›no-religionism‹ was on a much reduced scale it still felt the winds of change of that decade. Notwithstanding the substantial growth rate, Ireland was a society in which Christian identity and practice were extremely strong down to the early twenty-first century; in terms of the North Atlantic community, it was a community with the lowest level of ›no religion‹. It represents a model of a strong Christian culture in both popular and civic life matched by only a few places in the Europeanised world – notably in Northern Ireland (of which more in a moment) and the Balkans.

Figure 7: ›No Religion‹ in USA 1957–2008: Proportion at Phone Polls



Note: Percentage responding ›no religion‹ in comparable surveys of ca. 50,000 people (telephone sampling). The one in 1957 was commissioned by the US Bureau of the Census.⁵⁰

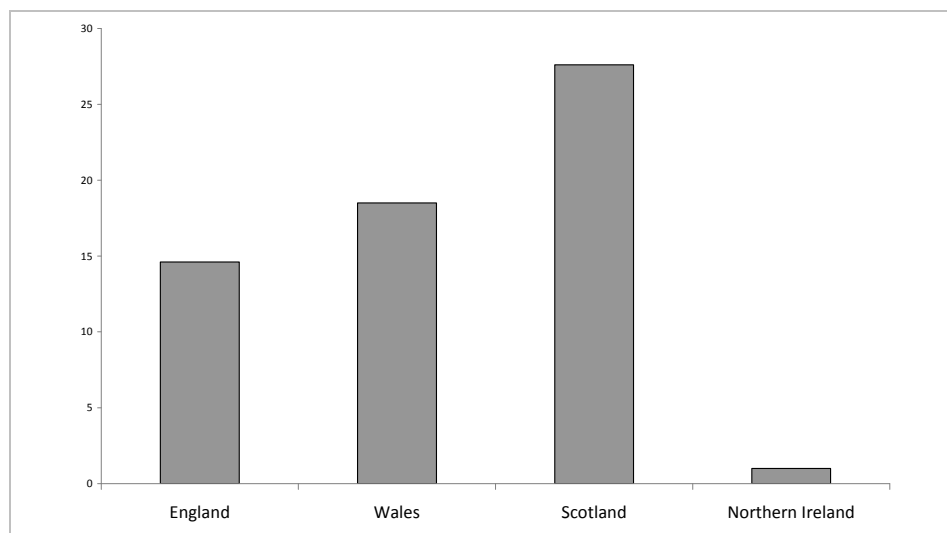
50 Sources: Statistical Abstract of the United States 1968, table 49, p. 41; Barry A. Kosmin/Egon Mayer/Ariela Keysar, American Religious Identification Survey (City University of New York), URL: <http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris.pdf> [19.11.2009], Exhibit 15, pp. 39–42; Barry A. Kosmin/Ariela Keysar, The American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population: A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008, URL: <www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org> [11.1.2011].

United States

Figure 7 displays the result of four comparable surveys, the first conducted by the US Bureau of the Census, and the others by the City University New York. The 1957 survey was the only time the US Census has surveyed religion, which it afterwards decided was not constitutional for it to undertake.

It can be seen that there has been a great growth in ›no religion‹ as a category in the USA. However, the extent of the growth is much less than in all the countries being surveyed here other than Ireland and Northern Ireland. The figure for 1957 at 2.7% is significantly higher than for other countries at that date, suggesting strongly that the mode of enquiry (by telephone rather than by census enumeration) may have had an impact on the figures; however, it may indicate something more profoundly singular in the USA in the use of the term ›no religion‹.⁵¹ Moreover, we are unable to conclude from these data the significance of the 1960s, nor the precise course of development by decade. Despite this paucity of information, in reviewing the figures of 8.2 for 1990, 14.2 for 2001 and 15.0 for 2008, the authors of the last three surveys have concluded that: »The 1990s was the decade when the ›secular boom‹ occurred – each year 1.3 million more adult Americans joined the ranks of the Nones. Since 2001 the annual increase has halved to 660,000 a year«.⁵² This does not necessarily conflict with suggesting that the 1960s may also have been an important decade, but it will require acquisition of other data. Notwithstanding this and the apparently relentless growth of ›no-religionists‹ in the USA, the country's levels of ›no religion‹ are significantly behind Canada, Australia, New Zealand and, as we shall see, the UK.

Figure 8: ›No Religion‹ in the UK by Country 2001: Proportion in Census⁵³



51 This is something adumbrated briefly by José Casanova, *The Religious Situation in Europe*, in: Hans Joas/Klaus Wiegandt (eds.), *Secularization and the World Religions*, Liverpool 2009, pp. 206–228, here: pp. 221f.

52 Kosmin/Keysar, *The American Nones*, p. 20.

53 Sources: Scotland: Census 2001, Tables UV17 and KS07, URL: <<http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/>> [25.11.2009]; England and Wales: Table KS07, URL: <<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=6682&Pos=5&ColRank=1&Rank=240>> [25.11.2009].

UK Countries

In the UK, the measurement of religion has not been an activity of the general census on the mainland until 2001. In Northern Ireland, it has been conducted for longer, for reasons of religious inequality measurement in a society sharply divided between Catholic and Protestant communities. The 2001 census results are shown in Figure 8.

In Northern Ireland, the numbers of those categorising themselves at the census as of ›no religion‹ have been tiny. In the 2001 census, in answering the question ›Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?‹, 45,909 people, or only 2.7%, were ticked as answering ›no‹. But of these, 30% were born outside Northern Ireland, and 6.5% were of Chinese ethnicity (when the latter only made up 0.32% of the total population). Furthermore, 17,325 of these were under 12 years of age (21,286 under 16) years; the proportion of those over 15 years answering ›none‹ was only 1.91%. Therefore, amongst native Northern Irish adults, levels of those identifying themselves as of ›no religion‹ might be estimated after such deductions at not much more than 1%.⁵⁴ What is additionally remarkable is the minute number of specified ›no-religionists‹: In 2001, there were in Northern Ireland only 106 atheists, 66 agnostics, and 40 humanists.⁵⁵ In such circumstances, of course, we must be led into identifying the category ›no religion‹ as having little salience in Northern Ireland. Religion is a badge of belonging in a heavily sectarian society, which virtually everybody carries in their daily lives.

Turning to mainland UK, the proportion of ›no-religionists‹ is highest in Scotland, followed by Wales and then England. There was a slight difference in possible answers permitted in England and Wales compared to other countries, but the figures do seem to reveal real differences. In particular the Church of England has retained some level of religious identification when Wales broadly has no established or ›national‹ church, and when the Church of Scotland (which has retained a notional ›national‹ identity) has clearly suffered a collapse in popular identification. The change to the religious identities of Wales and Scotland are very marked since the 1950s when they were regarded as bearing staunch Christian heritages and fairly puritanical legislation, in something of a contrast to what was then seen as the more ›secular‹ England.⁵⁶

As to the trends, the best estimate we have is from the British Social Attitude surveys shown in Figure 9 which demonstrate a steady growth of ›no-religionism‹ from 1983 (when it stood at 31.6% of adult population) and 2009 (50.7%). Despite some sampling issues⁵⁷, the long-term upward movement in ›no religion‹ seems to be clear, though these data do not allow us to readily date the origins of this trend in Britain.

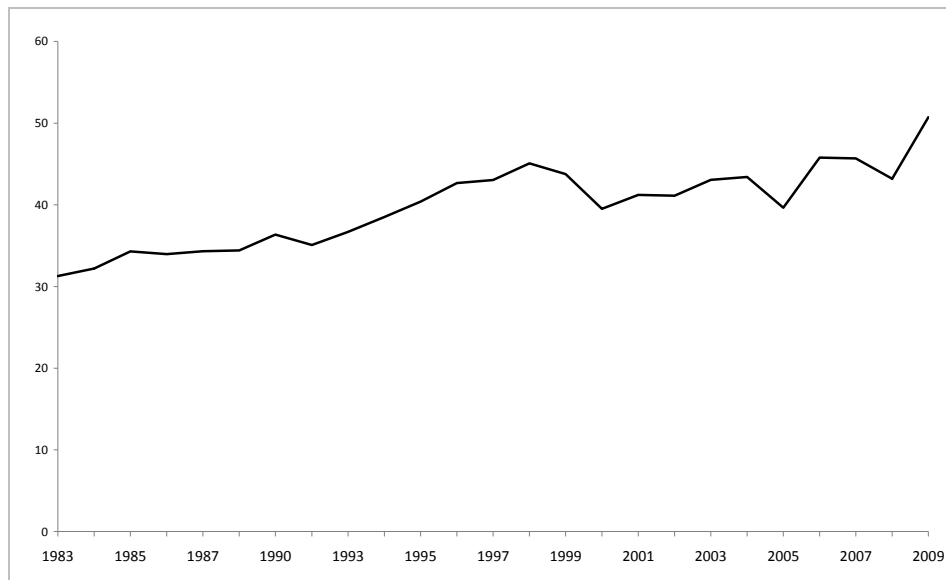
54 Calculated from data in NISRA, Census 2001, Theme Tables: 1. Demography: People, Families, Households, Table T35, URL: <http://www.nisranew.nisra.gov.uk/census/pdf/theme_tables.pdf> [8.12.2009].

55 Data from NISRA, Census 2001, Table S308 Religion by Sex, URL: <http://www.nisranew.nisra.gov.uk/census/Census2001Output/standard_tables_ni.html#Demography> [8.12.2009].

56 John Highet, *The Scottish Churches*, London 1960, pp. 55–57.

57 What is a little concerning in these data is the volatility of the score (from a c. 3,500 sample), which contrasts with much greater steadiness in another measure by the Scottish Household Survey (from a much larger sample of c. 12,000).

Figure 9: ›No Religion‹ in Britain 1983–2009: British Social Attitudes Surveys



Note: Proportion of people responding ›no religion‹ in annual face-to-face (and later computer-assisted) interviews of around 3,500 people. The 2009 figure may be unweighted.⁵⁸

IV. WHO WERE ›NO-RELIGIONISTS‹?

›No-religionists‹ show some important general characteristics. First, they have tended to be younger than the general population or the religionists; in Canada in 2001, almost 40% were aged under 25 years compared to 33% of total population (with a median age of 31 years compared to 37 respectively); of all ›no-religionists‹, only 6.2% were over 64 years (compared to 12.2% of total population), and whilst they were most over-represented in the under 15 age group (as reported by parents and guardians in most cases), they were notably numerous in the 25–44 age group (35% compared to 31% of population).⁵⁹ Similarly, in England and Wales in 2001, 40.4% of ›no-religionists‹ were under 25 years, compared to 31.1% of the general population, though they were even more numerous in the 25–49 age group (44.3% as compared with 35.3% of population).⁶⁰ It seems likely, though still to be investigated, that this balance in relative age has been fairly constant.

But there have been some important changes to other characteristics of ›no-religionists‹. It has long been an accepted truism that migrants tend to be strong in their religious faith.

58 Sources: British Social Attitudes survey results given online at URL: <<http://www.britsocat.com/BodySecure.aspx?control=BritsocatMarginals&var=RELIGION&SurveyID=221>> [1.9.2010]; annotated questionnaire, 2009 survey, URL: <<http://www.natcen.ac.uk/study/british-social-attitudes-27th-report>> [28.12.2010].

59 Statistics Canada, Religions in Canada: 2001 Census: Analysis Series, Ottawa 2003, pp. 9 and 20.

60 Calculated from data in T53, Theme Table on Religion, at URL: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/cn_105_link.asp> [19.1.2011].

However, research by Hugh McLeod for New York during 1870–1914 showed that experience varied considerably by ethnic group (though tended to be strongest amongst English-speaking migrants) and persisted for several generations, yet was no higher or lower overall than the native-born.⁶¹ However, research in Canada shows a changing vista on migrant religiosity. In 2001, immigrants who arrived before 1961 were overwhelmingly religious, with only 11 % of ›no religion‹; however this was way above the level of religion in the whole population as recorded in 1961, and might tend to question the reliability of memory. In any event, this proportion rose steeply in successive waves of immigration – 13.5 % in 1961–1970, 16.5 % in 1971–1980, 17.3 % in 1981–1990, and 21.3 % in 1991–1990.⁶² This is a trend linked strongly to the migration of people born in China (PRC), Hong Kong and Taiwan; 59 % of ethnic Chinese responded ›no religion‹.⁶³

In the United States, there was significant racial change to the ›no-religionists‹. In the 1950s, some 3.5 % of non-whites were classified as ›no religion‹, but only 2.6 % of whites.⁶⁴ By 2001, the racial composition of ›no-religionists‹ had evidently changed. In the American Religious Identification Survey, 73 % were white, 8 % black, 5 % Asian, 11 % Hispanic, and 4 % of other ethnic identity.⁶⁵ In this way, there was a ›whitening‹ of ›no religion‹ in the US in the second half of the century.

Did this happen elsewhere? The ›whitening‹ of ›no religion‹ was only partially evident in the UK. In the 2001 census, in Scotland ›no religion‹ was markedly lower for non-white groups: 2.8 % of Pakistanis, 23.1 % of blacks, though higher at 32 % of those self-identifying as Caribbean and 63 % of Chinese. Moreover, 27 % of ›white Scots‹ described themselves as ›no religion‹, compared to 30.8 % of non-Scottish white people. In England in 2001, only 0.5 % of Pakistanis described themselves as ›no religion‹.⁶⁶ So Scottish ethnic minorities were significantly more prone to label themselves as non-religious than the equivalent groups in England, bearing out perhaps the view of other commentators that religiosity, and notably fundamentalism, was markedly lower in Scotland than in England.

One of the striking characteristics of the rise of ›no-religionism‹ between the 1950s and the 2000s in every country studied is the gender change. In the middle decades of the twentieth century in every nation, the ›no-religionists‹ were overwhelmingly male. The proportion female was only 31 % in Canada in 1951, 26.2 % in the USA in 1958, 36 % in Ireland in 1960, and 42 % in Australia in 1976. By the 2000s, the proportions were almost even – ranging from 45 to 47 % in each nation (including the UK countries), but were still significantly lower in the USA (39 %). To proclaim oneself of ›no religion‹ in the mid-twentieth-century was, for a woman much more than for a man, to court a loss of social respectability. So, increasing gender equality in ›no religion‹ has been becoming apparent.

Economic sources of ›no-religionism‹ can be sought through statistical correlations. In the American Religious Identity Survey of 2001, levels of ›no religion‹ varied between a high of 25 % in Washington State and a low of 3 % in North Dakota. Looking for relationships, economic factors were poor variables. Correlating states' levels of ›no religion‹ with personal income level produced a correlation coefficient of +0.2338, which was a poor relationship, but one suggesting that levels of ›no religion‹ rose with mean income level. In a second correlation of religious adherence with percentage of the population of

61 *McLeod*, *Piety and Poverty*, pp. 53–56.

62 Statistics Canada, *Religions in Canada: 2001 Census: Analysis Series*, pp. 9 and 19.

63 *Brian Clarke/Stuart Macdonald*, *Simply ›Christian‹: Canada's Newest Major Religious Denomination*, in: *Toronto Journal of Theology* 23, 2007, pp. 109–125, here: p. 115.

64 Calculated from data in *Current Population Report, Series P-20-079 (1957)*, cited in *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1968, Population*, table 49, p. 41.

65 *Kosmin/Mayer/Keysar*, *American Religious Identification Survey*, Exhibit 13, p. 35.

66 *Brown*, *Religion and Society*, p. 7.

each state below the poverty level, a correlation coefficient of -0.2240 was obtained – again a poor relationship, but one suggesting that as level of ›no religion‹ rose the poverty level fell. Though each of these economic factors had poor relationships with levels of ›no religion‹, they were consistent in indicating that levels of ›no religion‹ tended to rise as prosperity rose.⁶⁷

The level of ›no religion‹ in Northern Ireland has been extremely low – less than 3% in 2001 and less than that for previous decades. Notwithstanding this, amongst the 25 local government districts of Northern Ireland, there was a strong negative correlation between level of ›no religion‹ and level of Catholic upbringing (a correlation coefficient of -0.8409); conversely, there was a strong positive correlation with level of Protestant upbringing (a coefficient of $+0.8135$).⁶⁸ This would indicate that the development of ›no religion‹ identity – tiny as it is – has been very much stronger in Protestant communities than in Catholic ones. This is something that applies more broadly. In examining the loss of religion since childhood down to 1998, Andrew Greeley noted the wide variations in the loss rate between countries – high losses in former East Germany (46%), Netherlands (43%), Britain (33%), and France (both 31%), but a negative loss (i. e. religious gain) in Russia (-40%), against a European average of 15%. But at the same time, he noted that that greatest loss was to those from Protestant backgrounds (a European average of 21%) compared to Catholic (15%), Islam (13%) and Orthodox Christian (5%).⁶⁹

In this way, different nations show in some regards different civic, cultural and religious backgrounds to the rise of ›no religion‹. This article has focussed on the major English-speaking nations, but has demonstrated that these do seem to form neither a uniform experience, nor a distinctive experience from that of continental Europe. Yet, a number of generalising conclusions are possible. One, the level of ›no religion‹ was remarkably similar in all measured countries between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries (to the 1950s), and the level throughout this period was very low (with the possible exception of the USA, at under 1%). Two, where the data can show this, there is evidence of a decline in ›no religion‹ between the early and mid-twentieth centuries, suggesting no gradualist growth in this category but, on the contrary, a rising cultural pressure to eschew it. Three, in all the countries for which the data can show this, the 1960s marked a turning point, with dramatic rates of growth of ›no-religionism‹ which, though they later declined, remained at a high rate for successive decades down to the 2000s. Four, the level of ›no religion‹ that emerged was broadly similar in Canada, mainland Britain, Australia and New Zealand, but much lower in Ireland, Northern Ireland and the United States. Five, relying on non-census data, the level of ›no religion‹ across Europe appears to have diverged markedly by the 1990s, though the trends were generally similar and in a strongly secularising direction. Six, ›no religion‹ grew strongest (or perhaps earliest) amongst Protestant rather than Catholic or other religious communities. Seven, the gender change between the 1950s and 2000s is a common denominator everywhere as far as the data stretch; from being a strongly masculine trait, ›no religion‹ emerged by the early twenty-first century as almost equal between men and women.

67 The ›no religion‹ data for the correlations was obtained from *Kosmin/Mayer/Keysar*, American Religious Identification Survey, Exhibit 15, pp. 39–42. The data for personal income per capita in 2000 (current dollars) for each state came from Statistical Abstract of the United States 2001, Table 652, p. 426; the data for proportion of population in each state below the poverty level came from Statistical Abstract of the United States 2002, Table 673, p. 443, both online at URL: <<http://www.census.gov>> [19.11.2009].

68 These correlations were conducted on the data in community background (religion or religion brought up in), from Census, April 2001, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, URL: <<http://www.statistics.gov.uk>> [25.11.2009].

69 Figures from and calculated from *Greeley*, Religion in Europe, pp. 56 and 58.

V. RE-CONCEIVING SECULARISATION IN TERMS OF THE RISE OF THE PEOPLE OF
 ›NO RELIGION‹

In the data reviewed in this article, we have the basis for establishing a narrative of the modern history of people of ›no religion‹. The demographic contours begin to emerge of this vast category of the population that was formed in the Europeanised world by the early twenty-first century.

There still remain issues to be explored concerning causation. At the root of this must surely rest the evidence of the timing of change. If we look at secularisation as a growth of people of ›no religion‹, we must conceive of this as a process in which the freedoms to not attend or affiliate with a church, and to express non-belief, is one related to wider social changes. In this regard, it is surely no coincidence that the changes started in the 1960s, and, where the data permit greater detail, to the later 1960s.⁷⁰ At the same time, it can be no surprise that the change was also one in which there is a significant growth of non-adherence and expression of ›no religion‹ by women.

The significance of the 1960s to secularisation and religious change in Britain and other nations is now more widely appreciated.⁷¹ It was a decade of enormous cultural change in which the hegemony of discursive Christianity underwent widespread collapse. Parts of that cultural transformation placed women as central figures, and from many perspectives key agents. A review of social surveys conducted in Britain between 1951 and 1973 showed that single women exhibited a critical linked change to both their religious and sexual behaviour in the early and mid-1960s – occurring before the arrival of the contraceptive pill for this group, demonstrating that those women with the greatest sexual adventurousness displayed the greatest decline in religiosity.⁷² Studies of autobiographical evidence show a strong element of religious alienation growing in the late 1950s and early 1960s amongst those teenage girls who became, from 1964 and 1965, the backbone of the British feminist movement; some of these have gone on to be strong supporters of organised humanist and atheist groups.⁷³

In this way, there is an argument for viewing secularisation as in part the growth of a positive ideology of ›no-religionism‹, linked to feminism and to other forms of radicalism which flowered in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, this link is not the only explanation. The vast bulk of ›no-religionists‹ attained that status not through commitment but through various degrees of apathy, producing a practical agnosticism rather than a ›speculative atheism‹ (or thinking non-belief in a god). Yet, it is important to acknowledge that a person's drift from a religion within a religious society, however explained as apathy, was also an act or journey of adventurous rejection – involving neglect of family values (frequently involving revolt against parents), dismissal of school compulsion, and a counter-cultural revolt. For women, this journey was especially difficult given the expectations that religion braced the respectable woman. It is in the midst of this, often difficult, pas-

70 The importance of this half decade is emphasised in *McLeod*, *Religious Crisis*, pp. 141–160.

71 Notably *ibid.*; *Brown*, *Death of Christian Britain*; *Patrick Pasture*, *Christendom and the Legacy of the Sixties. Between the Secular City and the Age of Aquarius*, in: *Review d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 99, 2004, pp. 82–117.

72 *Callum G. Brown*, *Sex, Religion and the Single Woman c. 1950–1975. The Importance of a ›Short‹ Sexual Revolution to the English Religious Crisis of the Sixties*, in: *Twentieth Century British History* 22, 2011, pp. 189–215, online at URL: <<http://tcbh.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2010/11/30/tcbh.hwq048.full.pdf>> [25.6.2011].

73 *Callum G. Brown*, *Women and Religion in Britain. The Autobiographical View of the Fifties and Sixties*, in: *Brown/Shape*, *Secularisation in the Christian World*, pp. 159–173; *idem*, *Gendering Secularisation: Locating Women in the Transformation of British Christianity in the 1960s*, in: *Gareth Stedman Jones/Ira Katznelson* (eds.), *Religion and the Political Imagination*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 275–294.

sive form of secularisation that the development of an ideology of ›no-religionism‹ broached the possibility of it being a respectable position for women; without the ideology starting to pervade the cultural milieu from the 1960s, the passive female ›no-religionist‹ could have found that the family and community pressure made her transit from religion personally difficult. Oral history research can do much to reveal the remoulding of the female religious self within humanism and atheism that occurred between the 1960s and the 1980s, often in fraught family and community circumstances.⁷⁴ In this sense, in Britain and other countries, there were between the 1960s and 2000s underlying moral drivers to growing humanism, atheism and agnosticism – drivers including feminism, toleration for sexualities, euthanasia and assisted suicide, and anti-racism. Whilst recognising that in some countries (like the USA and Canada) there was greater divergence amongst ›no-religionists‹ in their moral positions, it seems highly likely that the British experience was replicable elsewhere.

The difficulty that a woman had in the 1950s to proclaim herself an atheist has largely disappeared in most nations under review. This decline is most marked in Western Europe, including mainland Britain, but least strong in the United States where the moral distrust of atheists is reported by sociologists as having grown stronger, whilst distrust of other minorities (including gays, racial and religious minorities, and even Muslims post 9/11) has diminished.⁷⁵ Part, perhaps a major part, of the explanation here may lie in the fact, previously noted, that the USA of all the nations studied in the 2000s exhibited the weakest female identification with ›no religion‹; it was still a place, perhaps like Britain in the 1950s, where a girl could be taunted as a »heathen«. Though it would be misleading to equate atheism directly with ›no-religionism‹, this does serve to show that the cultural demonisation of ›no-religionism‹ has waned faster in the greater Europe (including Australasia and Canada) to the point by the 2000s that this outlook is a viewpoint characteristic of a religious minority. The people of ›no religion‹ have emerged as the imminent majority in the bulk of the English-speaking world, as they are of most European nations. They may not all be atheists, but they constitute the major cultural category in these parts. There is still much to be done in tracing their history.

74 This is a project I am currently undertaking in Britain, Ireland, Canada and the United States. See URL: <<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/history/humanism>> [25.6.2011].

75 *Edgell/Gerteis/Hartmann*, Atheists as ›Other‹.

