

Title

An online centre for British data on religion

What this Study Contributes

Making the enormous body of religious statistics in Britain from the last four centuries accessible to ordinary researchers and research users online.

Team

Principal Investigator: Prof David Voas (Manchester)

Research Associate: Dr Siobhan McAndrew (Manchester)

University

University of Manchester

Award

Phase 1 Large Grant £266,517

Research Partners

Dr Clive Field (Birmingham)

Approach

- Identifying and cataloguing the full range of British statistics on religion through updating and rearranging an existing statistical review. This involves a mix of archival research and collection of information from religious organisations via questionnaires and telephone interviews.

- The assembly of a reasonably comprehensive set of statistical time series. These figures – drawn from faith, official and independent sources – will be immediately available to all researchers and concentrate on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Statistics on membership, rites of passage, places of worship and ministry, drawn from published sources will be on offer.
- Preparation of thematic commentaries, involving the preparation of some original work (describing and discussing trends, for example) as well as the identification of suitable material already published that can be reworked for this purpose.

Findings

“British Religion in Numbers” catalogues published data on religion in Britain covering a period of 4 centuries, and draws already from over 1700 sources. It breaks new ground in including opinion poll data. It is comprehensively searchable.

Previously researchers had no up-to-date index of this material, and even for experts it could be a matter of luck finding the best published resources. The best previous compilation was published in 1987 and can now cost over £100 to buy secondhand; [BRIN](#) has made this available free as a downloadable e-book, with expanded text. And it is more thoroughly searchable than the original publication.

BRIN either hosts data or, where practical considerations and copyright issues prevail, gives information on sources and the best guidance possible on where to find it. Its search capabilities enable narrowing down searches to particular dates or places, together with other tools which any serious researcher will welcome when compared to the lottery of using general search engines.

The Manchester team is led jointly by Professor David Voas and Dr Clive Field. David Voas is Simon Professor of Population Studies at the University of Manchester and heads the Institute for Social Change [<http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/socialchange/>]. Clive Field was until 2006 Director of Scholarship and Collections at the British Library and is a particular authority on recent statistics on British religion including the valuable opinion poll data which can be used for studies of trends in religious attitudes and belief. Siobhan McAndrew is Project Officer, and technical support is provided by Sam Smith.

Geographically the sources catalogued by BRIN cover England, Scotland and Wales. Religion is defined in very broad terms in order to include many kinds of belief and folk-religion, including Father Christmas! The team do urge caution in comparing data from different sets. Not only do the categories used in different surveys and measures not necessarily correspond, but even the meaning of simple question like “Do you believe in God?” can change over time. Although BRIN offers ease of access to data, any user needs to bring an awareness of this

perennial problem, but an accompanying Commentary section being compiled as the final phase will provide extensive guidance.

The assembling of sources on a single website has also helped the team provide charts and maps, by-passing the need always to go back to original tables and spreadsheets. These carry the academic credentials of BRIN so can be used and referred to directly in research. The BRIN team also offer a news service, regularly updated with the latest information on data becoming available.

The funding of the launch of BRIN runs out at the end of 2010. With a national census scheduled for 2011, and with an acute awareness that initiatives like this can quickly lose their value if not kept up to date, the team hope that new funding will keep this valuable initiative kept up-to-date well into the future.

Activities and Outcomes

Ruth Gledhill 2010 'Faith by numbers: Fantastic new religious research tool launched', *The Times Online*- The Times' religion correspondent wrote this piece about the British Religion in Numbers project, which appeared on 19th April 2010. Click [here](#) to read it.

Siobhan McAndrew 2010 'Making religion count', *The Guardian Comment is free Cif belief* - Project Officer for British Religion in Numbers (BRIN) wrote this piece about the database which appeared on The Guardian's website on 21st April 2010. Click [here](#) to read it.

Further Information

For our **podcasts**, recorded in April 2010, David Voas and Siobhan McAndrew were in conversation with Norman Winter ([Audio content for broadcast and internet](#)).

- Listen to the complete conversation [here](#).
- Listen to part of the complete conversation, introducing the sources available on BRIN, and its value to researcher [here](#).
- Listen to part of the conversation about what went on behind-the-scenes in assembling BRIN, the new charts and maps made available, and more detailed background to the project [here](#).