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Multifaith Britain and family life: changing patterns of marriage, cohabitation and divorce among different faith groups between 1983 and 2005

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Abstract

The inclusion of a question on religious affiliation in the decennial census for England and Wales, and for Scotland, for the first time in 2001 acknowledged that adequate profiling and interpretation of the contemporary multi-cultural landscape of Britain depended as much upon mapping religious identity as upon charting ethnic origin. Taking marital status as a key indicator of family life and family values in Britain, this study draws on the British Social Attitudes Survey data, collected annually since 1983 (except for 1988 and 1992), in order to model the changing patterns of marriage, cohabitation and divorce among the six faith groups identified on the census form (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism). The analyses draw attention to the limitations of the data source (the small number of adherents to the minority faith groups), to the clear and complex associations between faith traditions and marital status, to the persistence of these associations across the period for which data are available, and to the way in which members of faith groups are following the liberalising trends prevalent among the religiously unaffiliated.

Introduction

Since the 1950s Britain has been moving increasingly toward becoming a multi-cultural society with wide ranging implications for many aspects of social and community life, not least for the public sector, as so well profiled in the mid-1980s by the Swann Report (1985). Attempts to understand the changing face of British identity and the emergence of British identities were first conceptualised in terms of ethnicity and of ethnic difference. It was against this background that the decennial census for England and Wales included a question on ethnicity for the first time in 1991 (Coleman and Salt). The inclusion of such a question permitted strategic modelling and resource allocation to reflect the ethnic composition of local communities.

Religious identity

Throughout the 1990s, there emerged a growing dissatisfaction with the adequacy of the notion of ethnicity to capture the diversity of multi-cultural British society and attention began to turn to the notion of religious identity. Parts of the academic community highlighted the saliency of the social significance of religious affiliation and some leaders within certain minority or emerging communities asserted preference for being identified by their faith rather than their ethnic origin. As a consequence the decennial census for England and Wales, and for Scotland, included a question on religion for the first time in 2001 (see Francis; Weller). The inclusion of such a question now permitted strategic modelling and resource allocation to reflect the religious composition of local communities. For such a question in the census to be really useful, more fundamental research is needed in Britain to establish the predictive power of religious affiliation over a range of socially significant factors.

The present paper contributes to that agenda by focusing on the core issue of family life.

At the same time the inclusion of the religious question in the 2001 census for England and Wales, and for Scotland, allowed for the first time a somewhat more accurate profile of the religious composition of the United Kingdom to be constructed, given that a religious question has been included in the census for Northern Ireland since the partition in 1920 (Macourt). Strict comparability between the four nations remains problematic because the question was posed in three different ways: for England and Wales, for Scotland, and for Northern Ireland. These differences, however, were more likely to affect the counting of the Christian community than the other main faith communities.

Overall, the following picture emerged from the 2001 Census. In England, 72% were identified as Christian, followed by 3% Muslim and 1% Hindu. Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh and other religions taken together recorded less than 2%, while 15% were defined as having no religion, and 8% left the optional question unanswered. In Wales, 72% were identified as Christian. Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikhs, and other religions taken together recorded less than 2%, while 19% were defined as having no religion, and 8% left the optional question unanswered. In Scotland, 73% were identified as Christian. All the other faith groups taken together accounted for less than 2%, while 18% were defined as having no religion, and 8% left the option question unanswered. In Northern Ireland, 83% were identified as Christian, less than 1% as affiliated with other faiths, and 16% as having no religion. In Northern Ireland the question was not optional. These findings from the 2001

Census generated considerable debate, discussion and controversy. For example, the high level of self-reported Christian affiliation compared with the low levels of observed church attendance caused some to question the 'religious' significance of the Christian category (Voas & Bruce). There was also some fear that the Islamic and Jewish communities had been undercounted (Howard and Hopkins; Voas).

Family life

The connection between religion and family life is embedded within many faith traditions. Sacred texts teach about and provide norms for family life; religious institutions promulgate moral guidelines for regulating many aspects of sexual behaviour and family structure; religious functionaries prescribe and administer rites that legitimate new family formations. One way of operationalising a measure of family life is to focus on the relatively clear demographic index of marital status, an index included routinely in social surveys and that generally distinguishes between at least the conditions of being single, married, cohabiting, divorced or widowed. In particular religious texts, institutions and functionaries are concerned about matters like marriage, cohabitation and divorce.

A previous study reported by Williams and Francis has examined the data provided by the annual British Social Attitudes Survey (conducted every year from 1983 with the two exceptions of 1988 and 1992) in order to chart the changing profile of family life in Britain as accessed by information concerning marital status. Over a period of two decades these data demonstrate a decline in the proportion of people who are married, but an increase in the proportion of people who are cohabiting or who are divorced.

Within the research tradition that is concerned to assess the association between marital status and religion, two main indicators have been employed, but generally these indicators have been employed within a construct shaped (almost exclusively) by the Christian tradition. The first indicator has focused on public religious practice, which in a Christian context has been accessed through church attendance. Studies of this kind have been reported by Petrowsky; DeMars and Leslie; Bahr and Chadwick; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy and Waite; Chatters, Taylor and Lincoln; and Wilcox and Wolfinger. These studies routinely find a positive association between weekly church attendance and more traditional or more conventional marital status. Working within this tradition, Williams and Francis confirmed that, using the British Social Attitudes Survey data, in 2005 50% of weekly churchgoers were married, compared with 35% of those who have no religion.

The second indicator has focused on self-assigned religious affiliation, which in a Christian context has been accessed through denominational membership. Studies of this kind have been reported by Bahr and Chadwick; Lehrer; Dempsey and de Vaus; and de Graaf and Kelmijn. These studies routinely find that those who claim religious affiliation espouse a more traditional or more conventional marital status. Working within this tradition, Williams and Francis confirmed that, using the British Social Attitudes Survey data, in 2005 14% of non-affiliates were cohabiting, compared with 9% of Roman Catholics, 6% of Anglicans, and 3% of Free Church members.

Marital status and religious identity

The association between marital status and religious identity across faith traditions remains an under-researched field in general and in Britain in particular. Against this background the present paper proposes to build on the foundations placed by Williams and Francis by revisiting the British Social Attitudes Survey data between 1983 and 2005 in order to address three questions. The first question addresses the fundamental methodological issue of assessing the usefulness of the British Social Attitudes Survey for examining the social correlates of religious affiliation, where religious affiliation is understood to encompass not merely the Christian denominations, but also the other five major faith traditions listed within the 2001 census in England and Wales: Buddhist, Hindu, Jew, Muslim, and Sikh. As a survey intended to be representative of the British population as a whole, are the smaller faith traditions sufficiently represented to be analytically useful?

The second question addresses the association between religious affiliation (as defined by the six major faith traditions) and marital status (as a proxy indicator for family life and for traditional family values). As a survey intended to be representative of the British population as a whole, is it necessary for the survey to distinguish between the faith traditions, or would it be enough simply to distinguish between the religiously affiliated and the non-affiliated?

The third question addresses the trend that is taking place over time in the association between religious affiliation and marital status. Is the association remaining stable over time, strengthening or weakening? For example, if the religiously unaffiliated are becoming less traditional and more liberal over time, are the religiously affiliated

more likely to be influenced by that trend, or are they more likely to hold firm to traditional and conservative practice?

Method

Source of data

The British Social Attitudes Survey was initiated in 1983 and conducted every subsequent year apart from 1988 and 1992 when funding was not made available. The present analyses employ data collected up to and including 2005.

Indicators

Marital Status From 1985 onwards the survey question on marital status distinguished between five categories: married, cohabiting, divorced, widowed, and never married. In 1983 and 1984, married and cohabiting were confused as a single category.

Religious affiliation From 1983 onwards the survey question on religious affiliation distinguished between three main categories: no religion, Christian denomination, and other religions. Although the listing of Christian denominations was revised after 1983, the listing of other faiths remained constant as Hindu, Jew, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and other non-Christian.

Analysis

Analyses were undertaken by means of SPSS.

Results and Discussion

Faith groups

The first step in data analysis and presentation explored the visibility of the six major faith traditions represented in Britain for each year in which the survey had been conducted (see table 1). Since the emphasis of the analysis is on faith group the various Christian denominations were aggregated for each year to generate a single category designated 'Christian', and the category 'other non-Christian' has been omitted from the table in view of the lack of clarity regarding what precisely has been collapsed into that category. The number of individuals involved in the British Social Attitudes Survey varies from year to year, ranging from 1,355 in 1997 to 4,268 in 2005. The data presented in table 1 make it clear that random survey sampling of this magnitude identifies comparatively few adherents of non-Christian faith traditions within any one year. Even when all Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs were counted together, they only accounted for 2% of the total sample in 1983, rising to 4% in 2005.

As a consequence of the small sample numbers involved, individual years need to be aggregated into larger units to lead to meaningful comparisons. Table 1, therefore, also presents the aggregated data for the ten surveys conducted between 1983 and 1995 (recalling that no survey was conducted in 1988 or 1992) and for the ten surveys conducted between 1996 and 2005. Even these aggregated data leave the Buddhist and the Sikh communities represented by fewer than 100 individuals for each of the ten year periods. Nonetheless, the sampling procedures employed by the British Social Attitudes Survey should be adequate for profiling the religious composition of Britain, and comparison made between these two sets of aggregated data present some estimation of the kind of changes that have occurred in Britain between the mid periods covered by the data, roughly 1990 and 2000. Three main trends are

highlighted by such comparison. The first trend concerns the growth in the category 'no religion' from 35.0% to 41.8% of the population. The second trend concerns the decline in the Christian affiliates from 62.3% to 53.9%. In spite of this decline, however, the Christian affiliates still clearly outnumber the non-affiliates. The third trend concerns the growth of affiliates among the other listed world faiths from 2.1% to 3.1% of the populations. Although in one sense the growth is large (a 50% increase in a decade), in another sense visibility within the total population remains small (just three in every hundred individuals).

Looking at the five listed faith groups separately, table 1 suggests that during this decade the Hindu and Jewish communities remained stable, the Sikh community grew by half its number again, and the Muslim and Buddhist communities doubled.

Marital status

The second step in data analysis and presentation explored the association between marital status and religious affiliation, drawing on the two aggregated sets of data for 1983 to 1995 and for 1996 to 2005 (see table 2). In light of the low numbers of individuals interviewed from within some of the faith communities (especially Buddhism), these figures need to be interpreted with care. Given this caveat and the omission of Buddhists from the interpretation, five main trends are highlighted by table 2.

First, looking at the data from the period 1983 to 1995, it is clear that religious affiliation is associated with a greater likelihood of being married. While only a little over half (55%) of the religiously unaffiliated were married, the proportions rose to

63% among Christians, 65% among Jews, 71% among Sikhs, 72% among Muslims, and 80% among Hindus. Second, from the same period, there are higher proportions of widows among Christians (14%) and Jews (14%) than among the non-affiliates (8%). At the same time, there are lower proportions of widows among Muslims (3%), Hindus (4%), and Sikhs (5%) than among non-affiliates. These figures suggest significant differences in the age profiles of the established faith communities (Christians and Jews), the emerging faith communities (Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus) and the religious unaffiliated. Third, for the same period, cohabitation was more pronounced among the religiously unaffiliated (7%) than among any of the faith groups: Sikh (5%), Christian (3%), Muslim (2%), Jew (2%) and Hindu (1%). Fourth, for the same period, divorce seems to draw attention to differences between faith groups. The level of divorce is higher among the religiously unaffiliated (9%), Christians (8%) and Muslims (7%) than among Jews (4%), Sikhs (4%) and Hindus (2%).

The fifth observations concerns the trends that took place between the first set of data (1983-1995) and the second set of data (1996-2005). On the one hand, compared with the religiously unaffiliated, among the religiously affiliated the preference for marriage remains higher, while the preferences for cohabitation and divorce remain lower. On this account, the social significance of religious affiliation persists. On the other hand, the same basic trends over time have occurred among the religiously affiliated as among the religious unaffiliated. Among all groups the preference for marriage has dropped by at least around ten percent. At the same times the level of cohabitation has grown among all groups except the Sikhs and the level of divorce has grown among all groups.

Conclusion

In the light of the increasingly multi-cultural and multi-faith nature of Britain and of the growing recognition of the potential social significance of religion through the introduction for the first time of a question concerning religious affiliation within the 2001 national census both in England and Wales, and in Scotland, the present study drew on the archival data gathered by the British Social Attitudes Survey from its inception in 1983 to 2005, in order to address three questions.

The first question concerned the usefulness of the British Social Attitudes Survey for examining the social correlates of religious affiliation. The data confirmed the usefulness of the archival data for such purposes, but also highlighted the difficulty of basing sound conclusions on low numbers of individuals from any one faith community (with the exception of Christianity). For the British Social Attitudes Survey to generate really useful insights into the social correlates of faith identity, it would be necessary to over-sample the faith communities.

The second question concerned the association between religious affiliation and marital status as a proxy indicator for family life and for traditional family values. The data strongly suggested both that religious affiliation is associated with higher levels of marriage, lower levels of cohabitation and lower levels of divorce, and that the strength of this association varies from one faith group to another. For future research, the British Social Attitudes Survey will need to continue to differentiate between the major faith groups.

The third question concerned the trend that is taking place over time in the association between religious affiliation and marital status. The data confirmed that, although the association between religious affiliation and marital status remains strong, trends toward liberalisation (less emphasis on marriage and higher levels of cohabitation and divorce) are as obvious within the faith communities as among the religious unaffiliated. The implication for British society as a whole is that faith communities may be slowing the trend towards liberalisation and less traditional attitudes toward marriage and family life, but they are not clearly standing against these general trends.

Because of the relatively low numbers of representatives of the main non-Christian faith communities recruited in a survey designed to access a representative sample of the British population, the present study had been able only to compare two sets of data. Such comparison is unable to establish trends, but merely to report on change. It is for later research to test whether the change identified between the two periods between 1983 and 1995, and between 1996 and 2005, will persist through the next decade. Moreover, as faith communities become more conscious of their faith identity and of public interest in the social correlates of that identity, there may be a growing tendency for such communities to re-assert their traditional norms and to resist the liberalising tendencies of their host society.

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Table 1 – Faith groups represented within the British Social Attitudes Survey

	No Religion	All Christian	Hindu	Jewish	Muslim	Sikh	Buddhist
1983	544	1178	7	10	9	3	0
1984	529	1110	10	4	5	4	0
1985	608	1146	13	7	13	3	2
1986	1037	1987	22	13	27	4	3
1987	969	1800	13	24	25	2	3
1989	1037	1935	7	12	14	7	4
1990	998	1700	13	26	26	8	4
1991	992	1819	24	8	30	8	4
1993	1047	1792	21	19	0	4	4
1994	1315	2056	18	8	36	10	3
1995	938	1305	10	5	14	3	3
1996	1533	1951	16	13	48	5	7
1997	574	723	4	4	25	5	3
1998	1398	1629	16	12	32	5	2
1999	1360	1665	12	11	33	10	1
2000	1344	1930	23	26	56	8	5
2001	1353	1790	18	22	42	15	6
2002	1401	1882	25	15	63	7	5
2003	1904	2279	34	34	93	20	9
2004	1382	1708	19	10	41	3	10
2005	1665	2396	33	23	74	18	8
1983-1995	10014	17828	158	136	199	56	30
1996-2005	13914	17962	200	170	507	96	56

Table 2 Marital status by faith groups (%)

	Valid N	Married	Cohabiting	Divorced	Widowed	Never Married
No Religion						
1983-1995	10014	55	7	9	8	22
1996-2005	13914	42	12	13	7	26
All Christian						
1983-1995	17828	63	3	8	14	12
1996-2005	17962	51	5	12	17	15
Hindu						
1983-1995	158	80	1	2	4	13
1996-2005	200	71	2	6	2	21
Jew						
1983-1995	136	65	2	4	14	15
1996-2005	170	52	4	5	18	21
Muslim						
1983-1995	199	72	2	7	3	16
1996-2005	507	62	3	12	3	21
Sikh						
1983-1995	56	71	5	4	5	14
1996-2005	96	60	1	8	3	27
Buddhist						
1983-1995	30	37	10	10	0	43
1996-2005	56	43	9	18	5	25

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