

# Religion and Secularisation

Is religion of declining social  
significance in modern industrial  
societies?

# Definitions I

- Functional
  - belief system that offers solutions to “ultimate problems”
  - belief system that promotes social solidarity/ stabilises society
    - Durkheim and his followers on primitive classification systems
- Rules out the phenomena of secularisation by definition

# Definitions II

- Substantive
  - A belief system that asserts the existence of “supernatural” entities
    - heaven, hell, God, the Devil witchcraft
  - Usually accompanied by the existence of observable practices, sacred buildings etc
    - prayer, ritual, church attendance, baptism, special clothes, fasting etc
- Secularisation can occur straightforwardly if people stop believing/practising and substitute non-religious belief systems ie scientific rationalism

# Diminution in the social significance of religion

- State confiscation of property/facilities
- Transfer to secular control of activities and functions
- Decline in the proportion of time, energy and resources that people devote to super-empirical concerns
- Decay of religious institutions
- Replacements of religious norms with technical criteria as guides to conduct
- Replacement of charms, rites, spells, prayers by empirical, rational, instrumental orientations
- Abandonment of mythical, poetic and artistic interpretations of nature and society in favour of matter-of-fact description
- Rigorous separation of evaluative and emotive dispositions from cognitive orientations

– Taken from Bryan Wilson, *Secularization and its Discontents* in his *Religion in Sociological Perspective*

# Causes of Secularisation

- Social differentiation
  - roles previously played by religious institutions are taken over by other institutions ie the State
    - welfare, education, medicine
- Societalisation
  - Shift from local to national
    - disrupts transmission of traditional shared values
    - allows people space to “opt out”
    - religion less public performance more “private consolation”
  - Plausibility of a single “sacred-canopy” is challenged
- Rationalisation
  - increase in “technical” means-ends thinking relative to ultimate ends thinking
  - Judaeo-Christianity (partly) removed God from the world (in a sense creating the secular)
  - Protestantism went even further

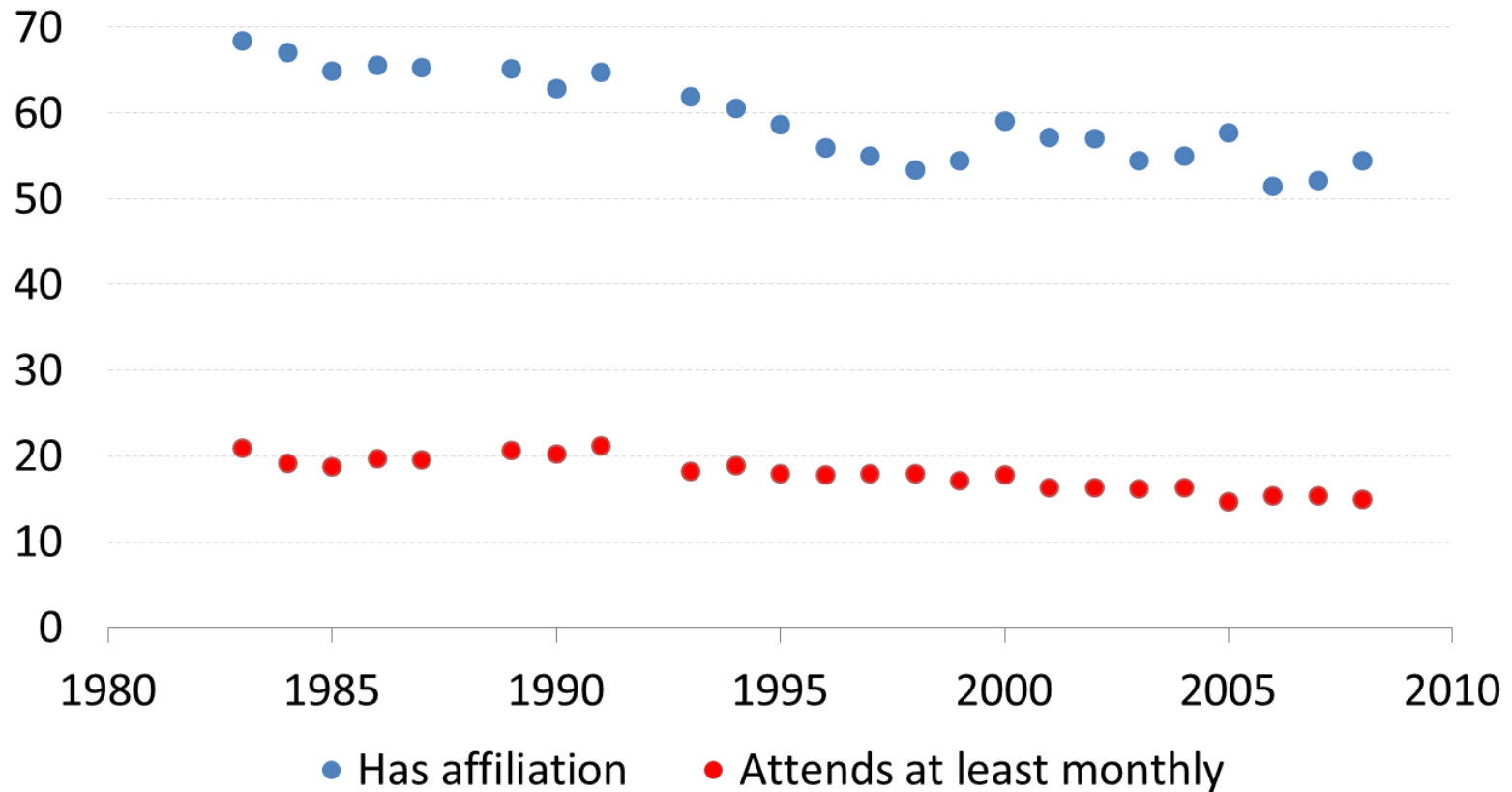
# Debate

- Bryan Wilson – *Religion in Secular a Society*
  - Western Europe behavioural indicators point in one direction
    - Decline
      - attendance, observance, membership, baptism
- David Martin – *A Sociology of English Religion*
  - Religion still important, but consumption more privatised
    - people still watch *Songs of Praise*, listen to *Thought for the Day* etc

# Problems with establishing the facts

- Sources of data
  - Records of church attendance
  - Commitment to religious beliefs and attitudes as expressed in surveys
  - Membership
  - Adherence to rites of passage
    - Baptism, marriage, funerals
  - Number of buildings, clergy etc

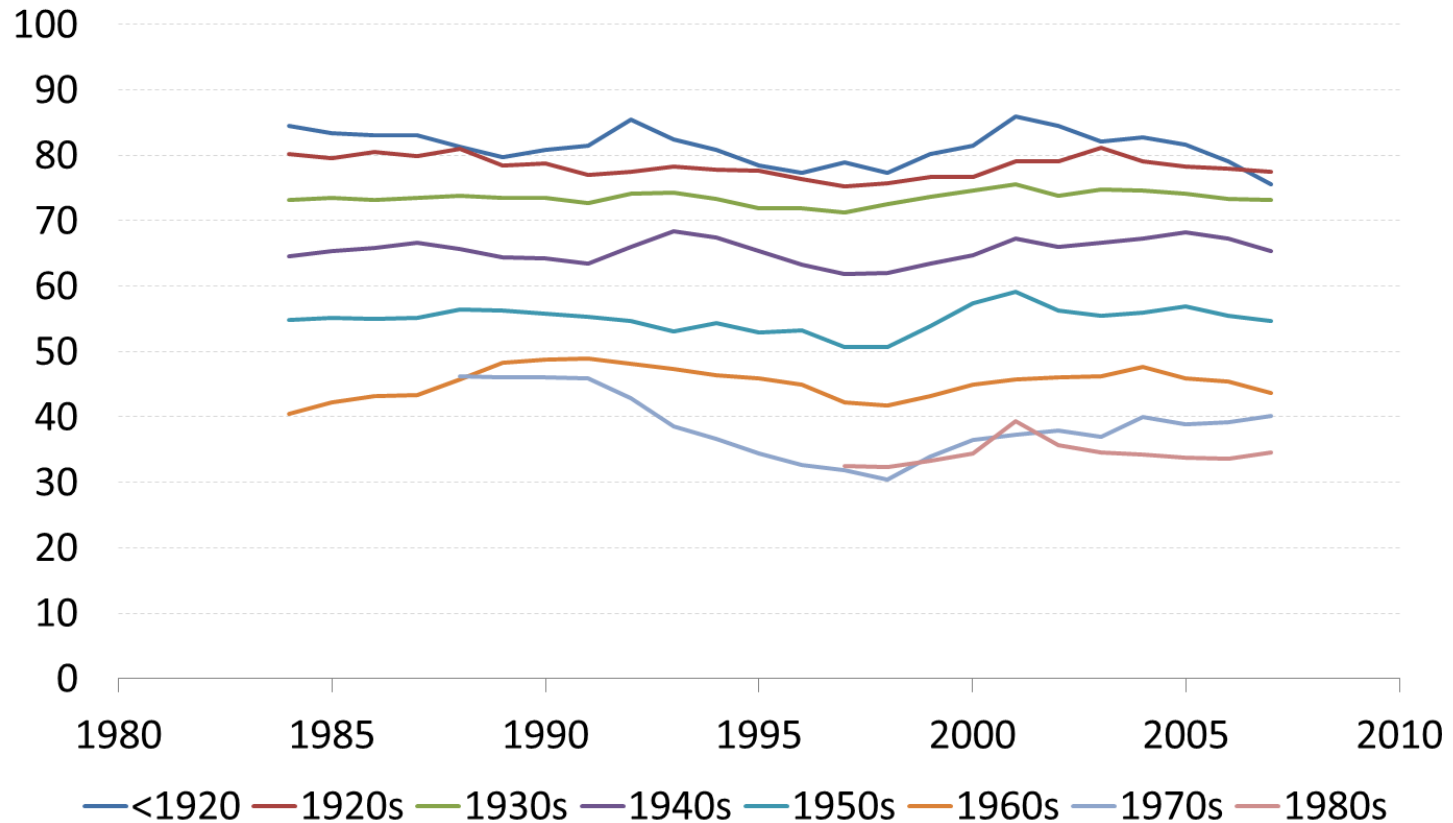
# Religious affiliation and monthly attendance



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1983-2008. White British population. See D. Voas & A. Crockett (2005) 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging' *Sociology*, 39, 11-27.

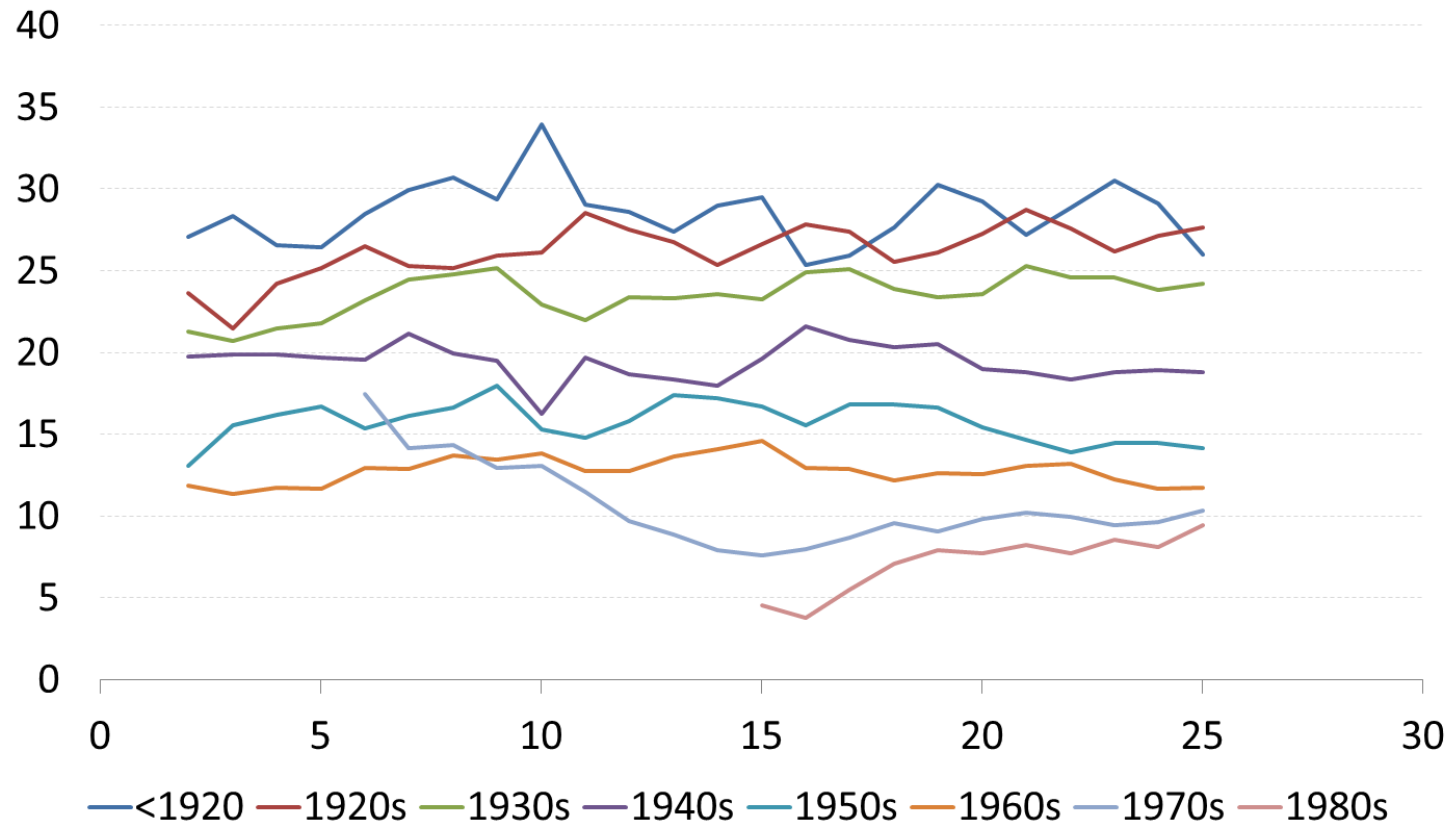


# Religious affiliation by birth cohort



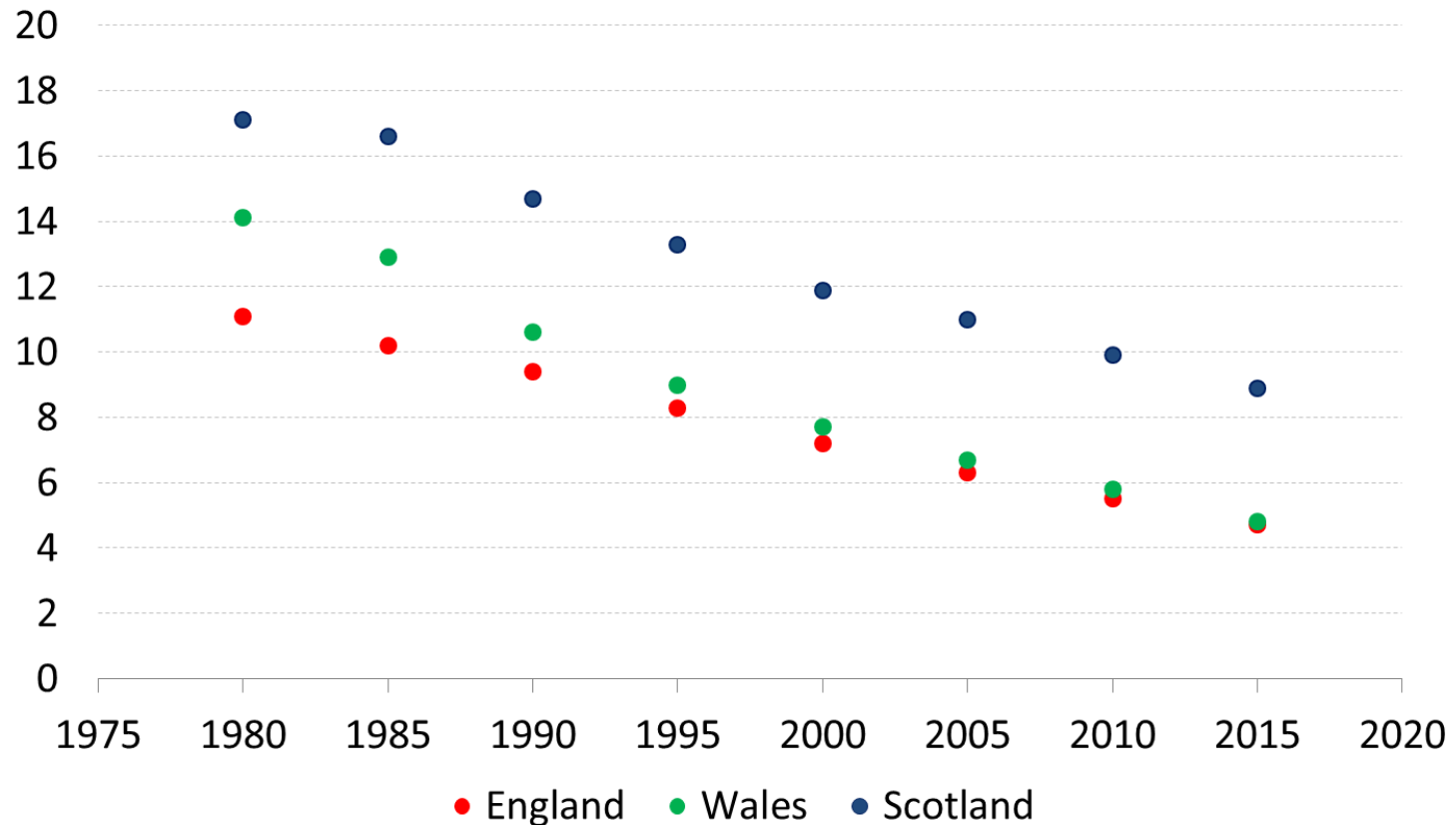
Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1983-2008. Three year moving averages. White British population. See D. Voas & A. Crockett (2005) 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging' *Sociology*, 39, 11-27.

# Church attendance at least monthly by birth cohort



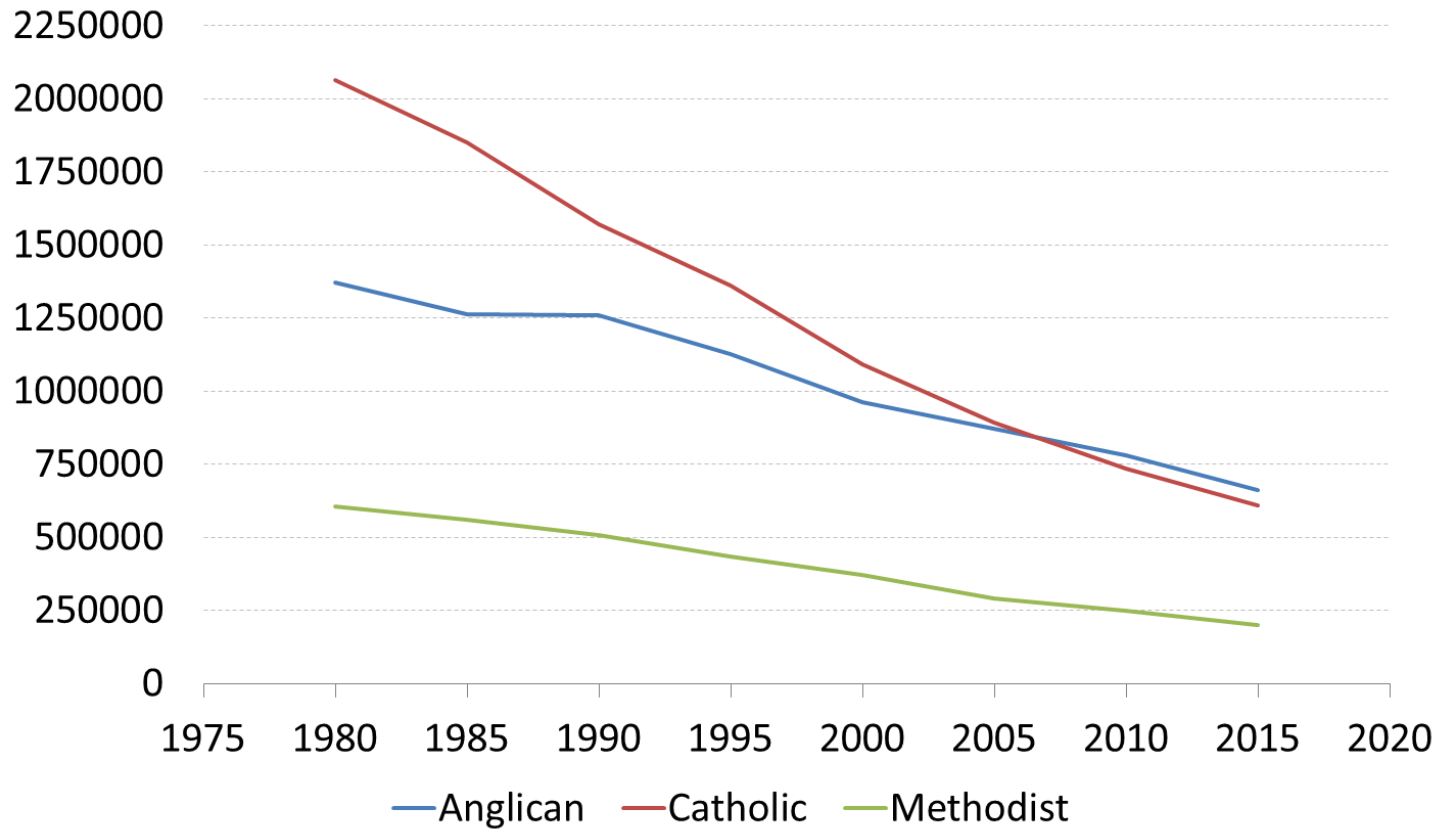
Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1983-2008. Three year moving averages. White British population. See D. Voas & A. Crockett (2005) 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging' *Sociology*, 39, 11-27.

# Estimates of Christian church attendance as % of population



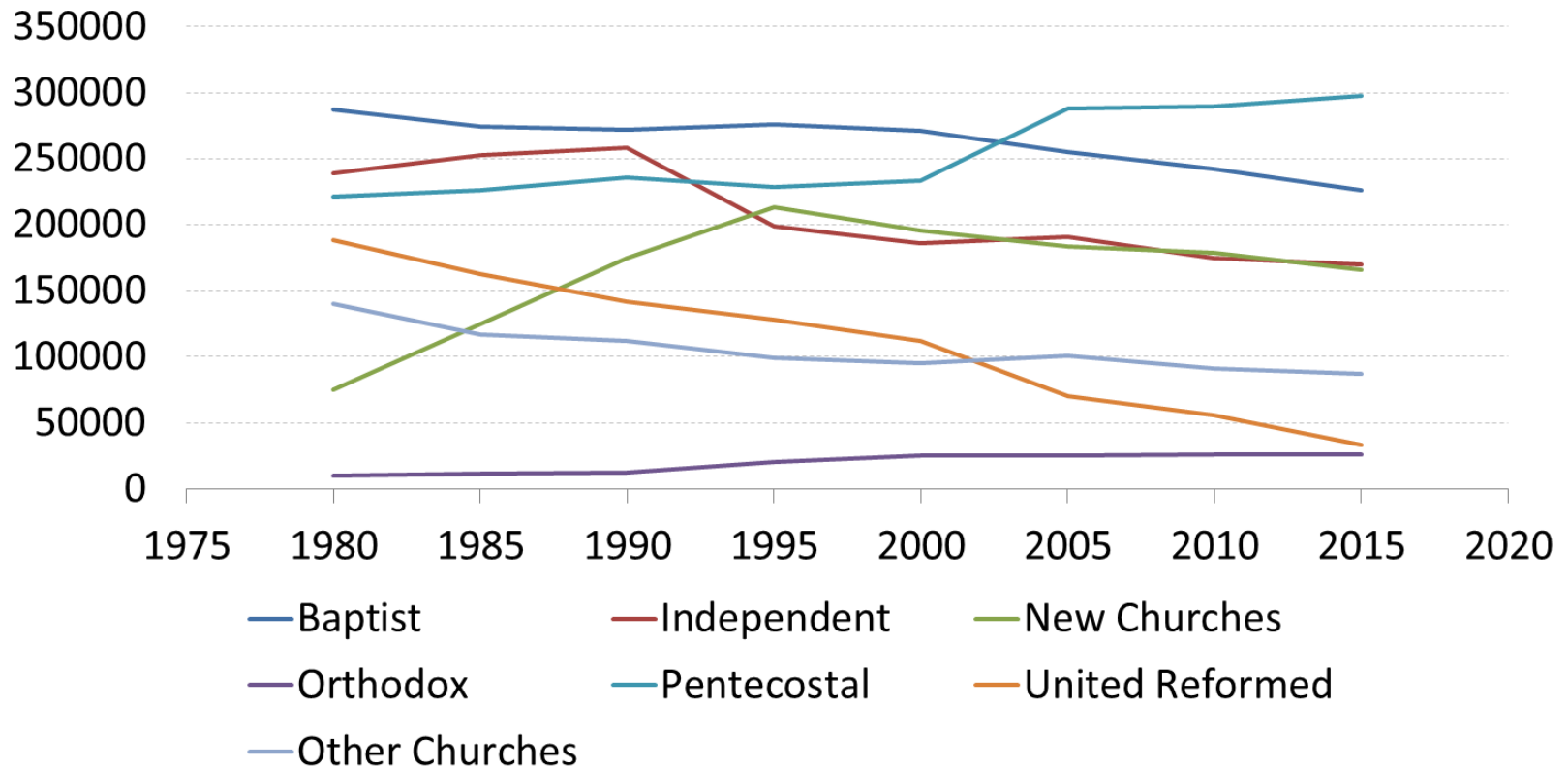
Source: Estimates by Peter Brierley from Religious Trends and other sources. 2015 figures projection.

# Attendance numbers for the largest Christian denominations



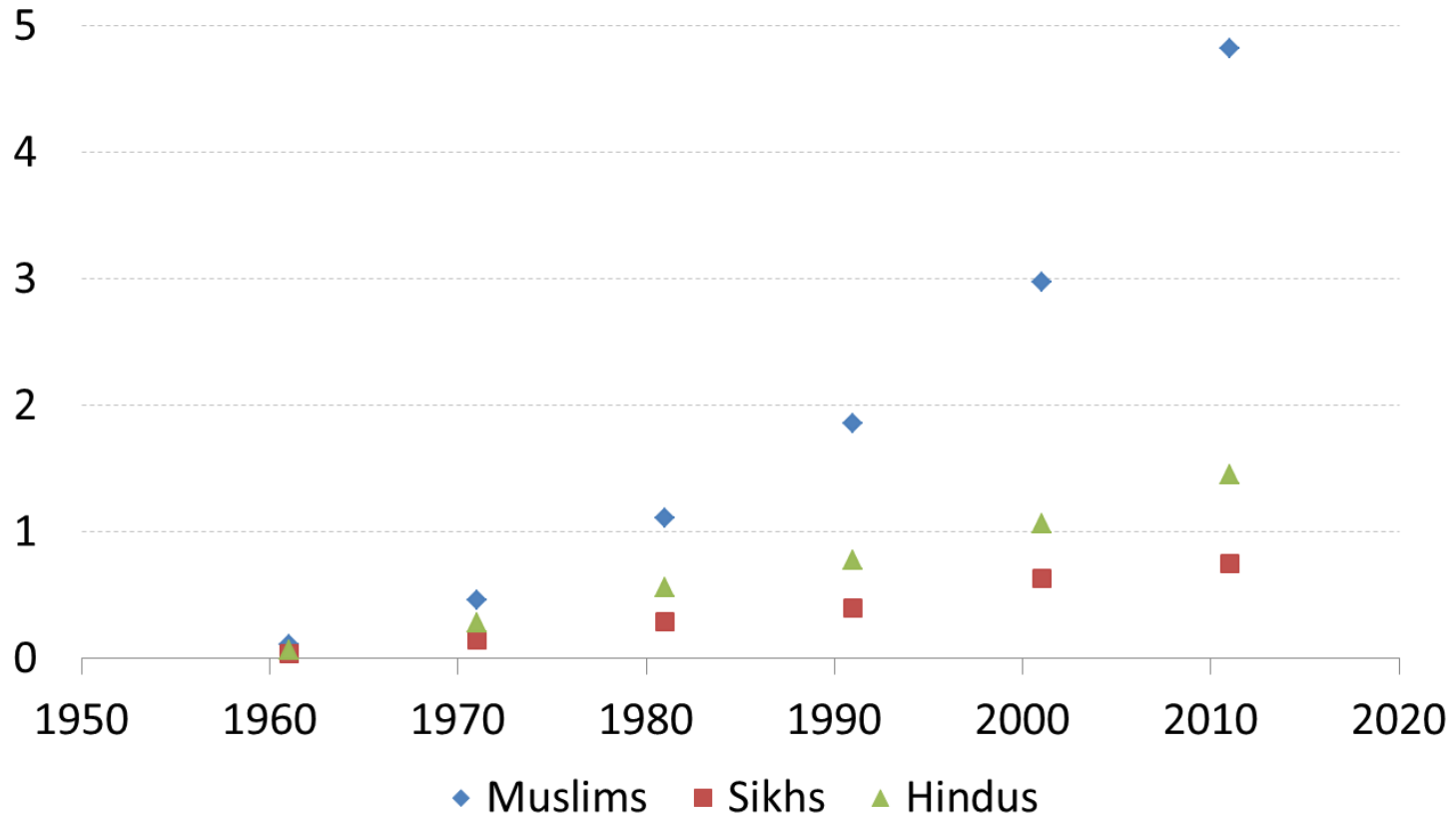
Source: Estimates by Peter Brierley from Religious Trends and other sources. 2015 figures projection

# Attendance numbers for the smaller Christian denominations

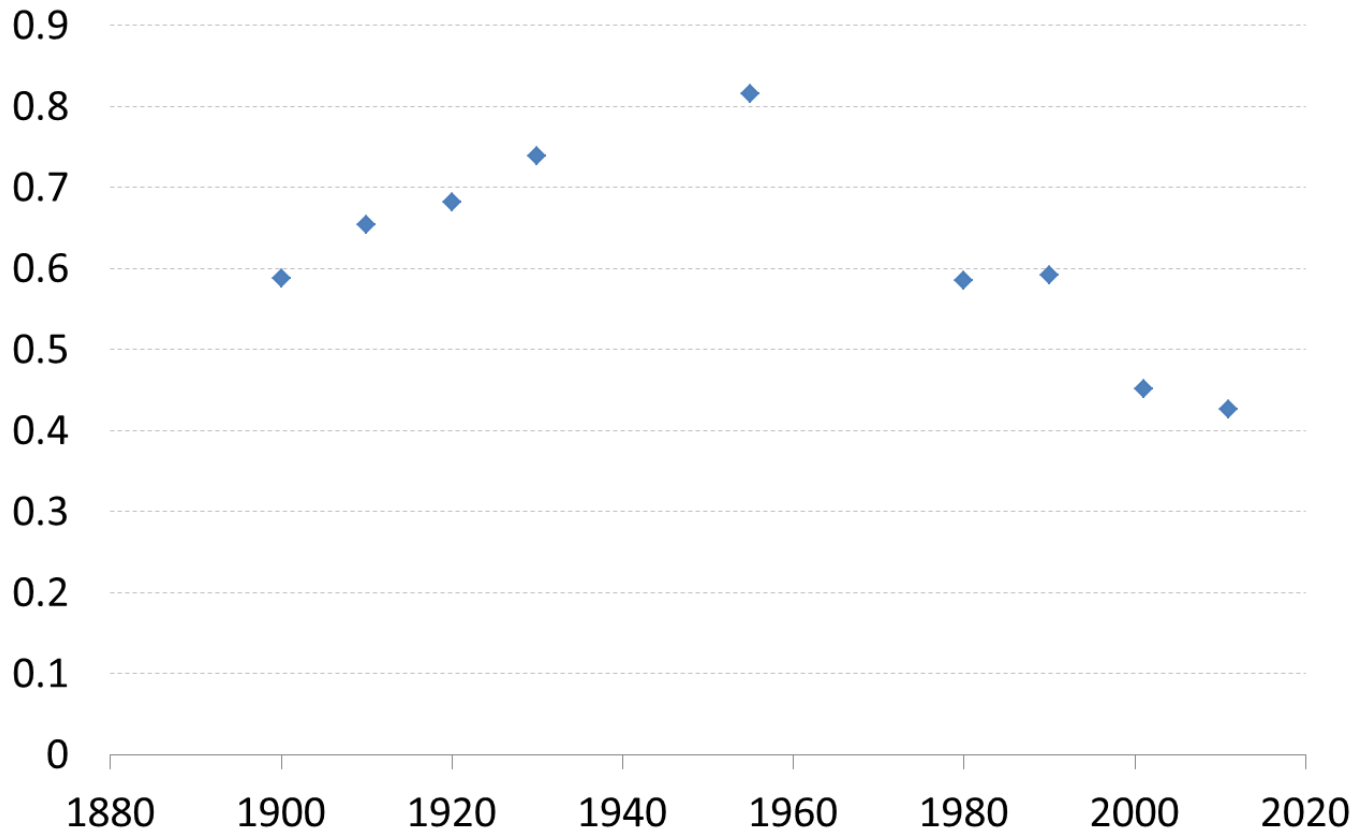


Source: Estimates by Peter Brierley from Religious Trends and other sources. 2015 figures projection

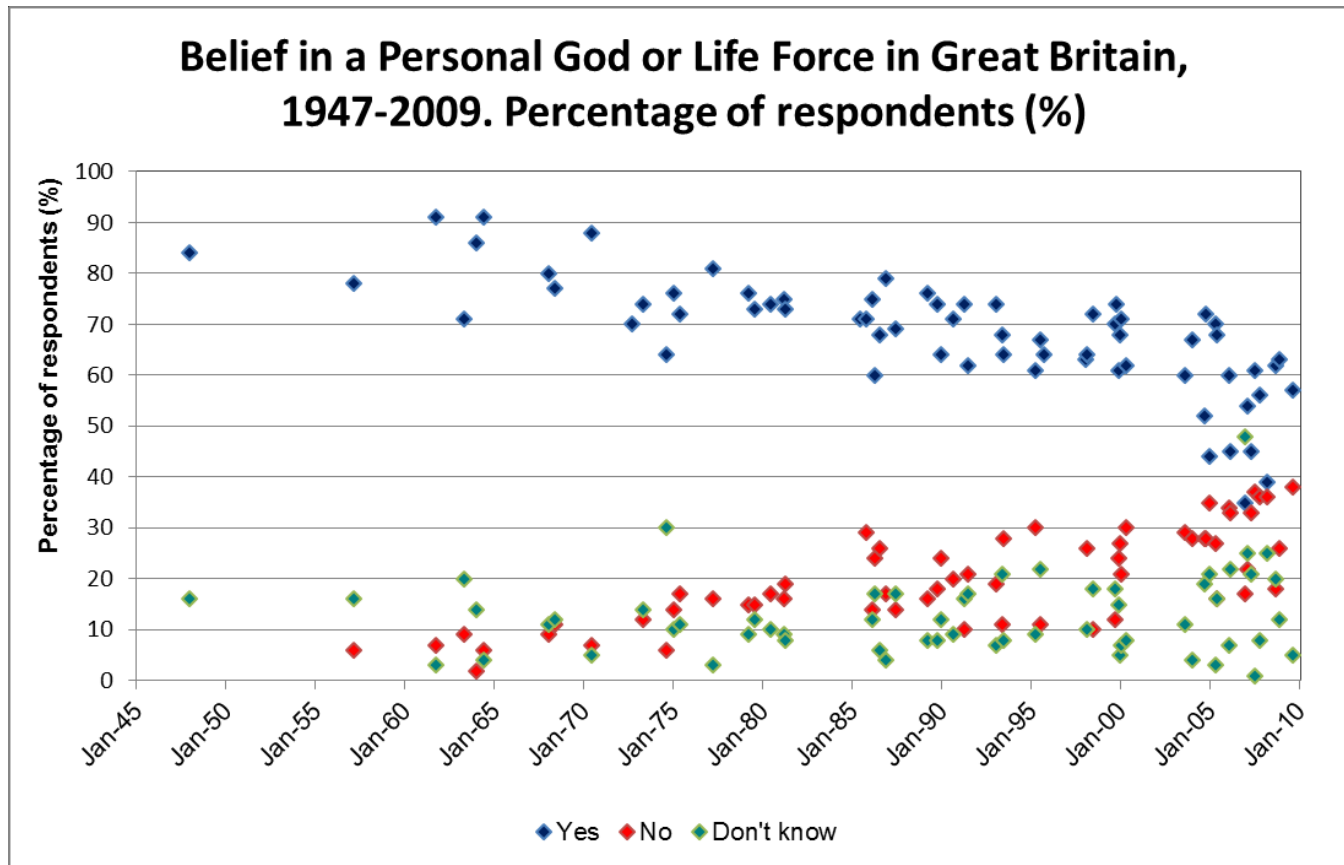
# Percentage of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus in UK population



# Percentage Jews in the UK population



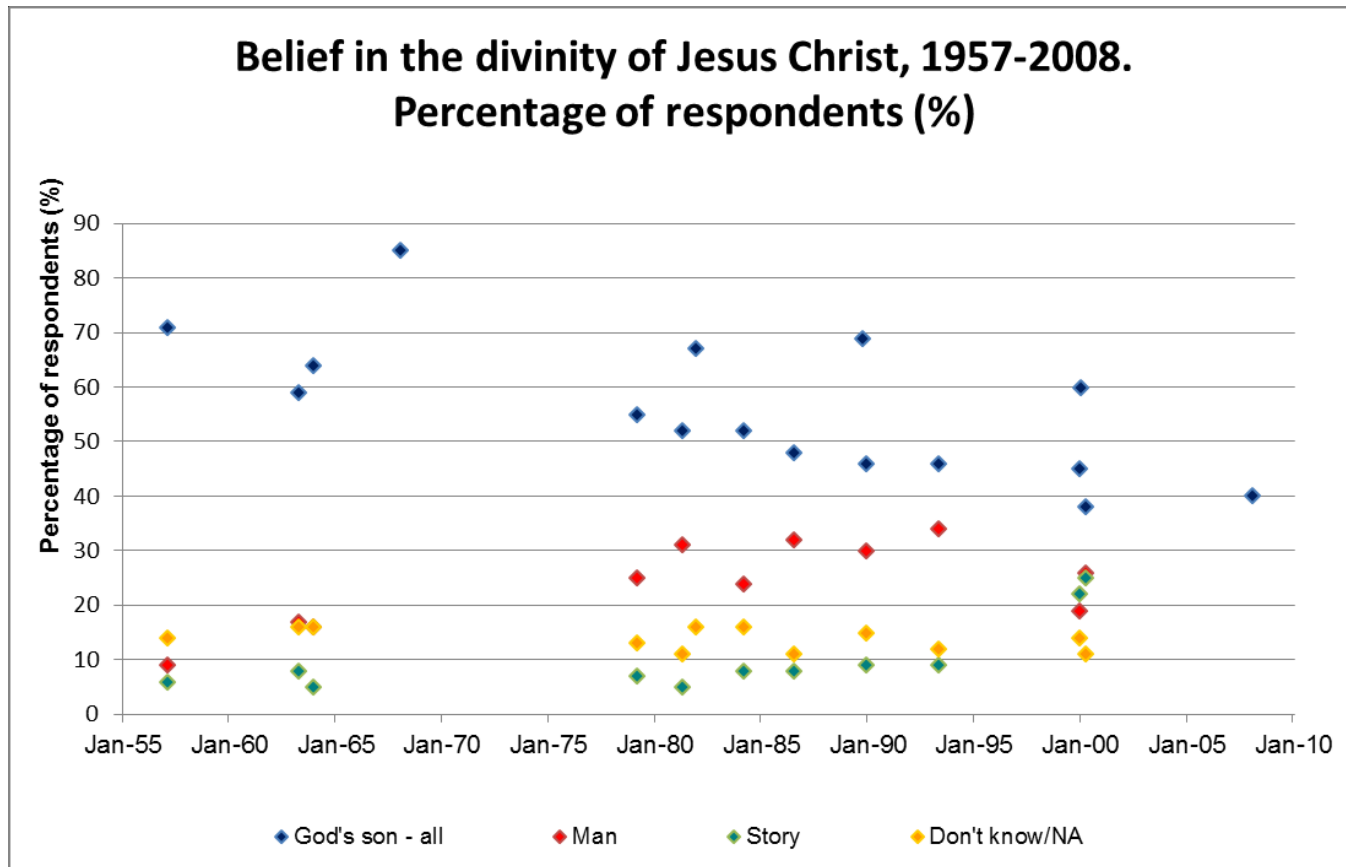
# Belief in a Personal God



Source: British Religion in Numbers. <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/belief-in-britain-1939-2009/conventional-belief/belief-in-god-divinity-of-christ-and-the-resurrection/>

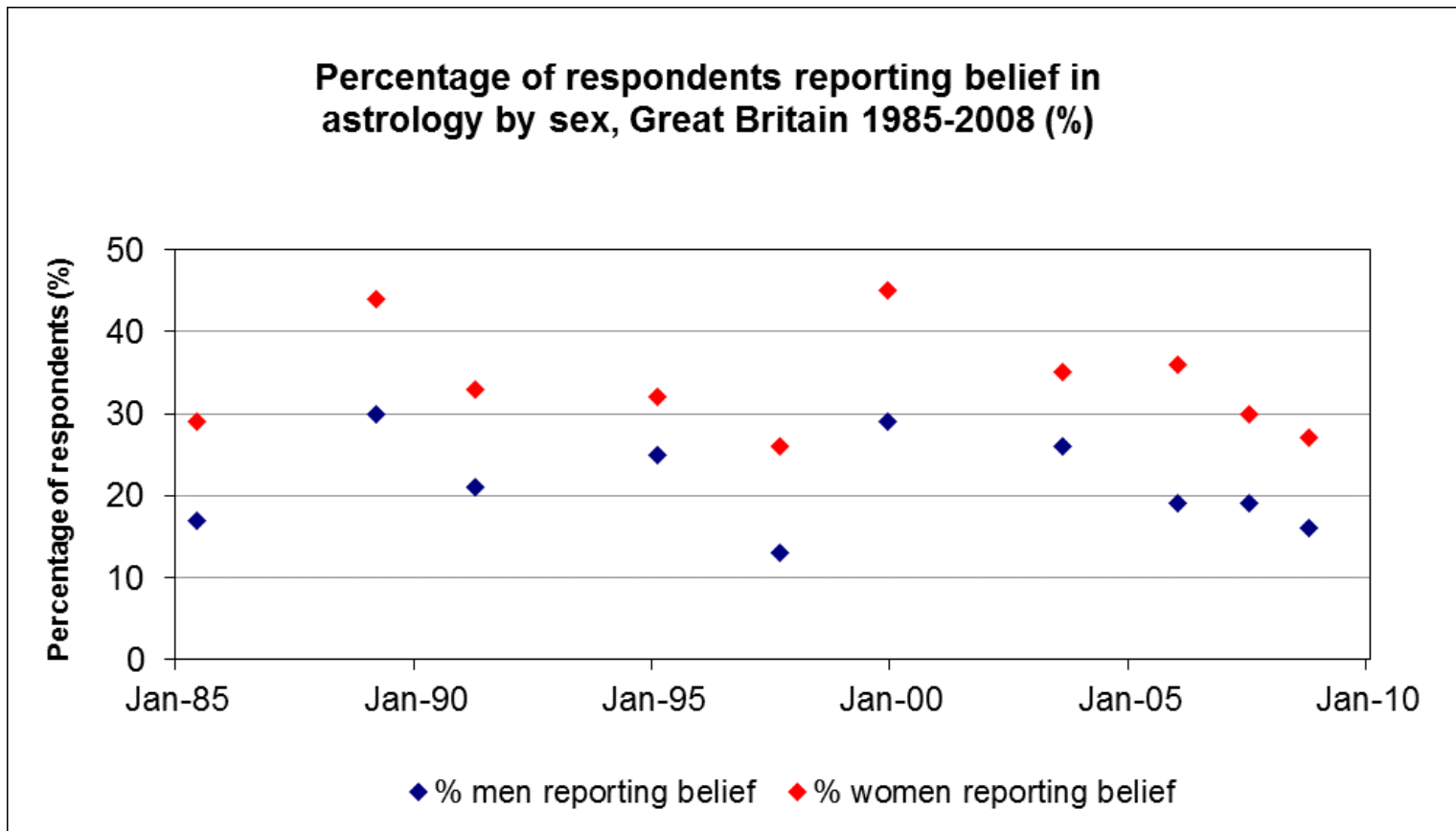


# Belief in the divinity of Christ



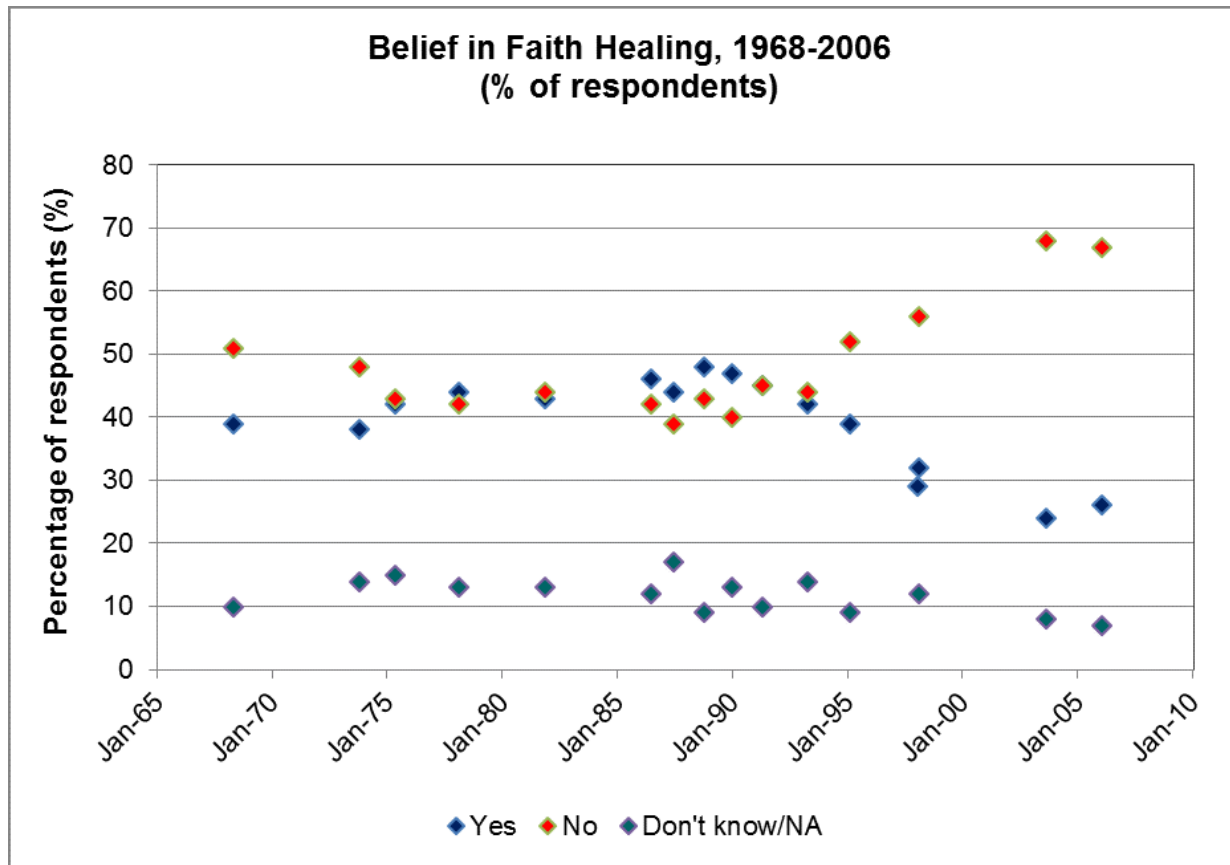
Source: British Religion in Numbers. <http://www.brin.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Belief-in-Divinity-Jesus-Christ-1957-2008.png>

# Belief in astrology by sex



Source: British Religion in Numbers. <http://www.brin.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Belief-in-Astrology-by-Sex-1985-2008-2.png>

# Belief in Faith Healing



Source: British Religion in Numbers. <http://www.brin.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Belief-in-faith-healing-1968-2006.png>

# Patterns of Secularisation

- Dominant Catholicism
  - Supported by elites but opposed by strong secular anti-clericalism
- Biggest declines associated with existence of state Protestant churches
  - Nordic countries, UK
- Dual societies
  - Strong Catholic and Protestant blocs accommodated by “pillarization” with precondition that national sovereignty issues resolved
    - Netherlands, Switzerland
- Strongest survival associated with
  - Cultural defence
    - Poland, Greece, Ireland
  - Cultural transition
    - USA

# How much piety was there in the past?

- Was there a past age of universal faith?
  - Almost certainly not
- Historical sources suggest considerable laxity, non-observance and gross ignorance of the basic tenets of faith
- Certainly there was a lot of heresy, folk-religion, superstition etc

# Some Useful Sources

- British Religion in Numbers <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/>
- Voas, D., Glendinning, T. and Bruce, S. (2006) 'New ways of believing or belonging: Is religion giving way to spirituality?' **British Journal of Sociology**, 57, 3, 399-414.
- Crockett, A. and Voas, D. (2006) 'Generations of decline: Religious change in 20th-century Britain.' **Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion**, 45,4,567-584.
- Voas, D. and Fleischmann, F. (2012) 'Islam moves West: religious change in the first and second generations.' **Annual Review of Sociology**, 38, 525-545.
- Voas, D. and Chaves, M. (2016) 'Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?' **American Journal of Sociology**, 121, 5, 1517-56