



BHA Briefing 2010: Religion, belief & volunteering

About the BHA

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity supporting and representing non-religious people who seek to lead ethical lives without supernatural or superstitious beliefs. Committed to human rights, democracy, equality and mutual respect, the BHA works for an open and inclusive society with freedom of belief and speech. We promote Humanism, campaign for an open society and a secular state, and work with others of different beliefs for the common good.

Humanists are atheists and agnostics who make sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values. We take responsibility for our actions and base our ethics on the goals of human welfare, happiness and fulfilment. We seek to make the best of the one life we have by creating meaning and purpose for ourselves, individually and together.

Our position

Our general position is that we want government and others to recognise the value of communities as a whole and the contributions that humanists, as well as religious people, make to their communities. We want communities where people of all different backgrounds and beliefs engage and work with each other for the benefit of the whole community. Only in this context can people be positively empowered to make choices about their lives.

This briefing note provides information, facts and figures about religion and belief in the UK, and specifically on the issue of religion, belief and volunteering.

Religion and belief in the population¹

The well-respected British Social Attitudes Survey 2010 found that **43% described themselves as having no religion**. In Britain, the proportion of those who profess 'no religion' has risen from 31% to 43% between 1983 and 2008.

Conversely, in 1983 66% identified as Christian, but by 2008 the figure has dropped to 50%. The proportion identifying as belonging to some other religion has risen over the same time from 2% to 7%.

Only 18% of the British population attend religious services at least monthly, and only 10% attend at least weekly. 62% of people in Britain never attend a religious service.

Those self-described as members of the Church of England consist of 23% of the population (40% in 1983). 49% of this group never attend services; only 8% of people who identify with the Church of England attend church weekly.²

¹ For more details, data and surveys on and relating to religion and belief, see <http://tinyurl.com/BHA-religion-belief-data>

² 'Religion in Britain and the United States', Voas, D. & Ling, R., 2009. In *British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report*, Park, A., Curtice, J., Thomson, K., Phillips., Clery E., & Butt, S., 2010.

Humanists volunteering

There are thousands of secular organisations who work tirelessly to improve peoples' lives at all levels of society. Non-religious people are often taking part in this activity but do not feel the need to do it in the name of being non-religious. Moreover, many non-religious people will also work for and volunteer their time on behalf of organisations and charities with a religious basis. Being less visible than specifically religious contributions to society, this can add to the myth that non-religious people do less community work.

We know that humanists take an active interest in community activity, evidenced by the over 90 humanist community groups affiliated to the BHA, the high number of BHA members who take part in the local provision of education in a voluntary capacity and the large number of people taking part in community cohesion initiatives on behalf of the BHA. Indeed, humanist beliefs may inspire an individual to become involved in community action or social change due to the belief that this is the only life we have and that, through social cooperation, quality of life can be improved for everyone.

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations' (NCVO) report *Faith and Voluntary Action* finds that:

'The role of belief and values in shaping the decisions and actions of individuals is not, of course, exclusive to religious faith. This is equally the case for other belief systems and values that are not related to faith, such as those linked to political ideologies or humanism.'³

'Faith' as motivator for action

Faith and Voluntary Action also finds that 'religious affiliation makes little difference in terms of volunteering', and when considering motivation for volunteering, further finds that 'Understanding how someone comes to volunteer is complex'. The report additionally concludes that **'faith' as a motivator for voluntary action is actually very difficult to prove, assess or measure.**

We would like all political parties to recognise and to support all people to make valuable contributions to their communities on an equal basis, with social action based on shared values and principles of co-operation, and not to make a fetish of faith in discussions of and policy on civil society.

Volunteering and charity: What do the statistics say?

Most of the voluntary and community sector is 'secular'

There are about 24,000 charities registered with the Charity Commission engaged in religious activity,⁴ whereas there are 162,000 charities registered in total.⁵ Hence about one in seven charities are registered as engaged in religious activity. While this is an underestimate of the number of religious organisations working in civil society – not all will be registered charities or registered as engaged in religious activity – this nonetheless shows that **the overwhelming majority of the voluntary, community and charity sector is secular in nature.**

There is little difference in volunteering between Christians and non-religious people

³ *Faith and Voluntary Action: An Overview of Current Evidence and Debates*, National Council of Voluntary Organisations, 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/2bqq8mk>

⁴ *Faith and Voluntary Action*

⁵ *Facts & Figures*, Charity Commission, 2010. <http://tinyurl.com/2aylqbc>

The *Citizenship Survey 2009-10* measures levels of civic engagement and formal volunteering in England. The Survey finds that 40% of the non-religious formally volunteer, compared to 41% of Christians and 26% of Muslims.

60% of the non-religious do some civic or voluntary activity, versus 60% of Christians and 45% of Muslims.⁶

Similarly, the *2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey* found that in England and Wales, 39% of those with no religious affiliation participated in formal volunteering, as did 39% of those who describe themselves as having a faith. And 68% of those with no religious affiliation participated in informal volunteering versus 67% of those who describe themselves as having a faith.⁷

The government report *Helping Out: A National Survey of Volunteering and Charitable Giving* finds that the level of volunteering for non-religious people is 55% and for religious people is 58%.⁸

This tells us that for both formal and informal volunteering, the proportion of people who volunteer and have a religious affiliation is similar to the proportion of people who have no religious affiliation.

Volunteering for what?

What the data on religious and non-religious volunteering do not give us is a proper breakdown of activity and important questions can also be asked about the nature of some faith-based voluntary activities. *Faith and Voluntary Action* states that:

‘We could not clarify the blurring of sacred and secular aspects of service: is the person who cleans the premises more a ‘volunteer’ than a person who takes a role in the ceremony of worship?’⁹

This suggests that much of what is counted as religious volunteering may be activities that are directly for the place of worship, such as arranging the flowers in a church, and not activities for the benefit of the wider community.

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⁶ *Citizenship Survey: 2009-10 (April 2009 – March 2010)*, England, Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010. <http://tinyurl.com/2cuneu4>

⁷ *Religion in England and Wales: findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey*, Home Office, 2001. <http://tinyurl.com/38lm4oy>

⁸ *Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*, Office of the Third Sector, 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/25r43td>

⁹ *Faith and Voluntary Action*