Thinking things through

i. When thinking about religious and non-religious worldviews in Britain, how helpful have you found the sociological methods and data?

ii. What patterns have you noted in the data? What explanations can you offer for these patterns?

iii. Look at the quotations below. Choose one or two of them to respond to. Write about how these quotations make you think, and how they affect your understanding.

What difference does a question make?

Comparing the questions in the Census and British Social Attitudes surveys, Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University points out that the Census option of generic ‘Christian’ leads to fewer people opting for ‘no religion’. When the BSA give more specific options (‘CofE’, ‘Catholic’, ‘Baptist’ etc.), more people opt for ‘no religion’.

Voas and Day suggest that the Census form implies that the religion question is really about country of birth and ethnicity, as it follows questions on these topics. They argue that because the question is positively phrased (‘What is your religion?’), with a simple tick box and list of religions (e.g. Christian/ Muslim/Hindu), this ‘invites the respondent to specify a communal background rather than a current affiliation.’

David Voas and Abby Day (2010) Recognising Secular Christians: toward an unexcluded middle in the study of religion (Association of Religion Data Archives)

Can we trust surveys?

People questioned about how much they go to church give figures which, if true, would add up to twice those given by the churches.


A review of methods of measuring religious involvement suggested that ‘the following “law” is at least semi-serious: a quarter of responses to any question on religion are unreliable.’


We cannot conclude from the fact that people tell pollsters they believe in God that they give the matter any thought, find it significant, will feel the same next year, or plan to do anything about it.

Thinking things through
Can we ever get the real picture of religious and non-religious belief?

Social life is not merely an aggregate of individual attitudes and behaviours and thus amenable to the survey research so beloved of positivists. It is a subtle, many-layered, shifting and constantly evolving entity, which cannot easily be broken down into straightforward, testable hypotheses.


At the end of the day, the word ‘fuzzy’ as applied to either religious or non-religious people is useful only as placeholder. It’s dangerous if it leads us to think there is something confused about the people to whom we apply the term. It’s we who study them who are confused – once our categories improve we can ditch the word. In the meantime, it’s a useful reminder that most people are neither thoroughgoing religious nor nonreligious ‘fundamentalists’ but dwellers in a more rich and variegated landscape somewhere in between.


Should we be asking questions about belief anyway?

Instead of asking religious or non-religious individuals what they believe, Dr Tim Stacey, of the universities of Ottawa and London, looks closely at how they live, talking about and demonstrating what really matters to them, and works back to what beliefs he can see motivating their actions. He particularly focuses on people involved in social action. His subjects are atheist, but Dr Stacey points out that they are influenced by non-existent beings: the memory of dead relatives, future generations, stories of heroes from the past – or even fictional characters.