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# Census stories: Bringing statistics to life in Milton Keynes



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#### Introduction

This free course, *Census stories: Bringing statistics to life in Milton Keynes*, aims to provide you with opportunities to reflect on contemporary religious identities, as well as the role of religious and secular communities in providing a sense of belonging, in our increasingly global, urban and multifaith society. During this course you will compare data from the UK national census, particularly statistical evidence on religion and ethnicity, with people's own stories. These stories include themes of identity, belonging and the sorts of practices (be these religious, spiritual or secular ritual practices) they engage in to celebrate life's big events, such as births and funerals.

The UK national census seems to confirm some scholarly predictions that we are witnessing a continuous and persistent decline in religious identity over time, a process which is known as secularisation. The 2001 census indicated that 72% of the population of the UK identified as Christian, yet the 2011 census showed that only 59.3% still identify as Christians. There has also been a corresponding growth in people who identify as 'not religious'.

But what does this mean? Are people in the 'no religion' category Christians who no longer practise, or people who practise but do not believe in God? Are they indifferent to religion altogether, or perhaps they are 'spiritual but not religious' – a category that is increasingly used by people to describe their religious identity, but is not captured by the census.

Of course, census data, like other types of quantitative survey data, cannot tell us the entire story – but they can provide us with very interesting perspectives over a longer time span, such as the past two decades since the UK census has begun to ask questions about religious identity.

This course will try to augment – and animate – the data, exploring people's experiences of religion, ethnicity, and migration in a diverse British city. Milton Keynes is a large multicultural town in South East England, a commuter hub for London, where multicultural communities are the norm. As a result, the town presents a great case study for the religious changes that have marked British society since the late 1960s – when Milton Keynes was officially established.

#### The structure of this course: three key questions

Many scholars preoccupied with religion claim that there is convincing evidence that religion in Britain is in fact finding new channels of expression, such as through a growing, global, and increasingly digital, contemporary spirituality for example. Thus, in order to go beyond the labels that people use to describe their religious or secular identities, this course will present people's personal accounts as a lens for considering three key questions:

- Who am I?
- Where do I belong?
- What do I do?

# **Learning Outcomes**

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the major recent demographic changes in religion and ethnicity in the UK as revealed in the national census
- understand the overlaps and complexities of religious and non-religious identities
- appreciate hearing a variety of perspectives and stories from people with very different life experiences
- confidently tell personally meaningful stories in relationship to larger social issues.



# 1 What can the census tell us about religion?

Before you start thinking through the course's key questions in more depth, watch this short film explaining how the census data can help us understand religious identity in Milton Keynes:





### 2 Census data discussion

Figures 1 and 2 compare the reduction in the number of people across England and Wales identifying as Christian, with the same statistic specifically in Milton Keynes.

The census data shows that the number of people who identify as Christians dropped by 12.4% between 2001 and 2011, nationwide. Those identifying as not religious increased by 10.3%, while the Muslim population increased from 3% to 4.8%.

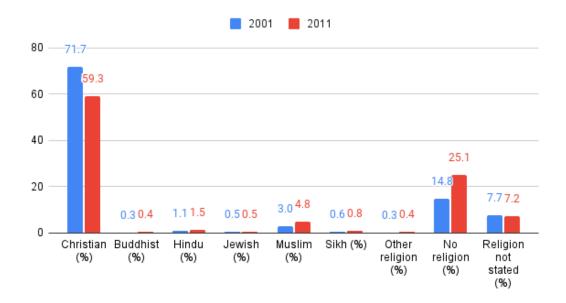


Figure 1 Religion in England and Wales

Milton Keynes is the largest town in Buckinghamshire and according to the 2011 census, the town has an average population of 230,000. Later statistics place the total number of Milton Keynes residents around 245,000.

Figure 2 shows that Milton Keynes largely follows national trends across England and Wales, with a slightly larger increase in those identifying as not religious.

Today, Milton Keynes has 6.5% fewer identifying as Christian than the national average, and 6.2% more non-religious. Yet the Jewish and Sikh communities are also smaller than the average.



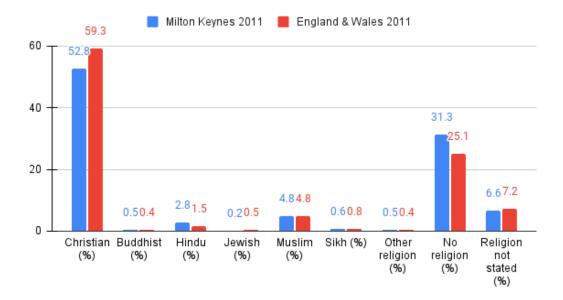


Figure 2 Religion in Milton Keynes and England & Wales, 2011

Milton Keynes in 2011 is less white than the national average. However, it is also less black. Asian and mixed ethnicity groups make up the difference, being higher than the national average.

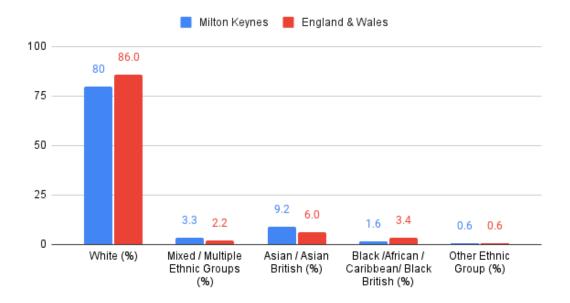


Figure 3 Ethnicity in Milton Keynes and England & Wales, 2011

The percentage of the population marrying has dropped steadily since the early 1970s, but this has actually started to level out since the last census.





Figure 4 Marriages in England & Wales, 1945-2019

Around the same time, nationwide, cremations overtook burials as the preferred form of final disposition. Today, the proportion is almost the reverse of what it was in 1950.

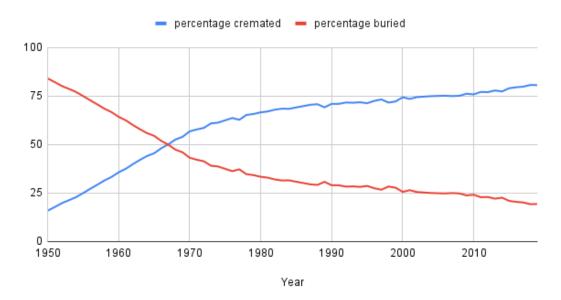


Figure 5 Burial and cremation in England & Wales, 1950-2019

The population of Milton Keynes has grown steadily. The high proportion of working age people suggests that a higher-than-typical proportion of the population are 'economic migrants' to the city.



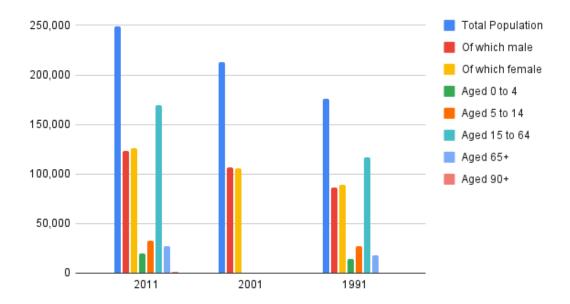


Figure 6 Population in Milton Keynes (please note: the age breakdown was missing from the 2001 census data)

The South East of England has the second-highest proportion of the population born outside the UK, taking over from the West Midlands during the 1990s. However, it is still below the average for England and Wales.

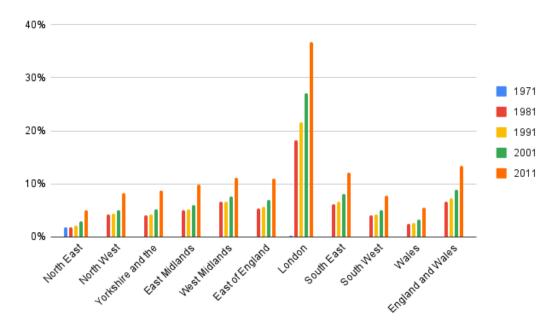


Figure 7 Resident population born outside the UK, 1971-2011



# 3 A closer look at Milton Keynes and its religious diversity

The new town of Milton Keynes was established in 1967 and brought together the existing smaller towns (Bletchley, Fenny Stratford, Wolverton and Stony Stratford) and villages in the area. The town incorporated more traditional elements as well as new urban design. For example, it was organised around a grid of roads that would allow for the flow of traffic, yet town planners rejected the tower blocks that had become the most visible structures in modern cities, instead setting a height limit for buildings both inside and outside the town centre. Milton Keynes has plenty of wild areas, grasslands, forests, lakes and an impressive river, the River Great Ouse, which forms its Northern border – although as a large urban jungle, Milton Keynes' biodiversity is reduced and further under threat due to the present ecological and climate crisis. In terms of its socio-economic profile, Milton Keynes was depicted by a 2016 community report as a 'tale of two cities' – this is because the town showed one of the starkest contrasts between affluent and deprived communities in the UK (Milton Keynes Community Foundation, 2016).

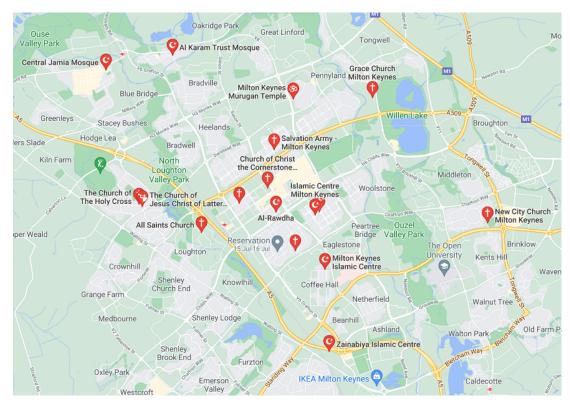


Figure 8 Religious buildings in Milton Keynes

As a town established in the 1960s, Milton Keynes reflects wider trends of religious diversity in the UK; the town has eight Islamic mosques, three Hindu temples, one Sikh Gurdwara and a Buddhist Centre, alongside its twenty or so Christian churches.

The diversity of church traditions reflects the internal diversity of Christianity; however, this also indicates something of the ethnic transformation of British Christianity since the 1950s through migration. There are, for example, various congregations which might be designated 'black majority' churches.



It was particularly after the 1960s that South Asians from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka began to arrive in significant numbers in the UK, as well as Europe and the US. By the 1990s there were hundreds of Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist temples in the UK, as well as Islamic mosques. Many South Asian immigrants understood the West to be secular. They often guarded against aspects of Western culture or, in some cases, tried to attract new converts. In this context immigration to the UK gave rise to the growth of diaspora religions, which are understood as 'groups that have a sense of being a minority, sometimes an oppressed minority, living in an alien culture at a distance from the old country' (Hinnells, 1996, p.11).



Figure 9 Church of Christ the Cornerstone, Milton Keynes



Figure 10 Peace Pagoda, Milton Keynes





Figure 11 Al-Rawdha Mosque, Milton Keynes

Around this time in the 1960s and 70s, many other traditions started to become established in Britain, often with direct links to immigrant communities from South Asia and Commonwealth countries, or influenced by Eastern beliefs and practices, such as yoga, meditation, reincarnation or karma. The New Age movement, which also experienced a rapid growth around this time, abounds in Eastern beliefs and practices, as well as eclectic influences from a great variety of ideas from around the world (for example, belief in 'ley lines' as some sort of spiritually charged network of arteries across the Earth, believed to have been recognised by ancient and pre-modern people as links between important constructions, from ancient megalith structures to medieval cathedrals). It is no wonder that, being planned in the late 1960s, Milton Keynes shows this New Age influence too, as the town grid was designed so that, at sunrise on the day of the Solstice, the sun is directly aligned with the main boulevard in Milton Keynes: Midsummer Boulevard!

Religious diversity has many distinct aspects; not only are there many religious traditions that have arrived in Britain through increased immigration, but there's also been crossfertilisation among religious traditions through living in close proximity with each other, often in newly established cosmopolitan urban areas, like Milton Keynes. Today, contemporary spirituality and a great diversity of newer religious traditions show some of the influences of the changes seen since the 1960s. The next activity is designed to help you reflect on this great contemporary diversity of religious identities, and the complexity of an individual's religiosity or non-religiosity.



## 4 Survey activity

The following activity aims to provide you with the opportunity to reflect on your own identity as well as the intricate nature of religious identities more broadly. The link below will take you to a short survey about your personal religious identity. Your answers will not be recorded or shared, and there are no judgements. It's a reflective exercise, designed to help you to think about religious identity in a different way.

If you don't feel comfortable doing this activity, it's fine to skip it and move on to the next section instead. But we think you'll find it interesting, and maybe even fun!

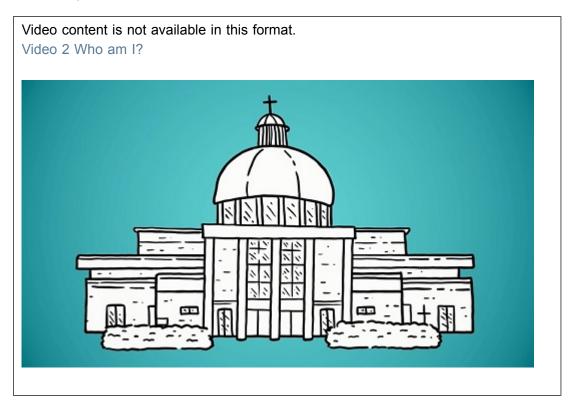
Click the following link to be taken to the activity. There will be a link back to the course at the end of the survey. Link to activity



#### 5 Who am I?

The census data gives us some important information about changing societal trends in religious identity, yet these numbers cannot always capture the in-between categories, and the ways individuals are likely to create their sense of identity and values, which result in the individualisation (e.g. personal spiritual practice) and pluralisation (e.g. Christian – Buddhist – Spiritual) that are taking place, particularly in a Western European context (Müller et al., 2012). Some scholars claim that religion is becoming more private or privatised as a result of our consumer society, in which the individual practitioner is encouraged to customise their spiritual experience by picking and mixing elements that make sense to them, rather than follow a religious path or belong to one religious community.

So, what kind of religious practices and rituals do modern, urban, plural, secularised individuals and communities engage in? As the census data shows, the ways in which we celebrate life and commemorate death are radically changing. Scholars sometimes refer to the rituals that accompany such big changes as 'rites of passage', given that in ancient and traditional societies rituals often involved crossing a boundary (the tribal or village boundary for instance) and the rituals were constructed and envisaged as a journey. This is particularly relevant in the case of funerary rites, which have been noted for their depletion and shrinkage with the transition to modern, urban societies. This does not mean that we modern humans care less about our departed loved ones. Philippe Ariès, a French historian, famously claimed that this reduction in the rituals that used to surround death in traditional communities is caused by, and implicitly is causing, an inability to deal with the death of our loved ones. So, what do we modern humans do about life's big transitions, and what does this mean?



Steve's reflection on his religious identity does seem to confirm scholarly views that traditional religious identities are not being 'transmitted' from the older to the younger



generations. While Steve was raised as a Catholic, he is not too sure about his own religious identity, and we can see his dilemma between maintaining a traditional Christian practice in his son's Christening, or adopting a more secular celebration of birth. Identity – 'who am I?' – is of course very much related to 'what do we do?', as will be seen in the next section.



#### 6 What do I do?

One category in the study of religion is 'lived religion' with some scholars attempting to understand what exactly religious people actually 'do' (not what we imagine they 'should' do), and how they live out and ritualise their religious identities. What do they do which makes them identify as Christians or Muslims? Or identify as 'not religious'?

In traditional communities this question may be easier to answer, because traditional religious practices would punctuate every aspect of one's life. For example, for a Muslim praying five times a day and going to their local mosque every Friday, their religious practice is very much a central part of their lifestyle. Reflect now on this topic of people being religious by virtue of the things they do, with a story from the first half of the 20th century, in Story Stratford, a village that would later become part of Milton Keynes.

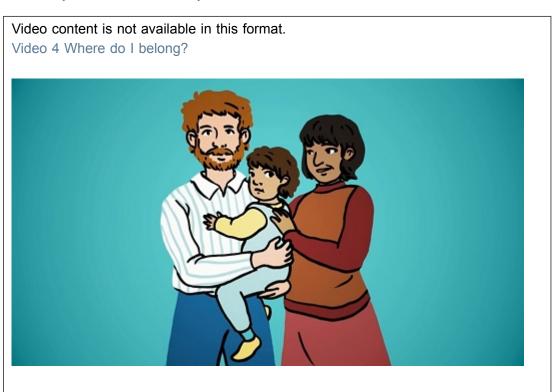


As you can see from Cecil's story, the church was not just a place where people would come to christen their children, but an integral part of the community life. It was a place where Cecil spent a lot of his time, whether to serve as an altar boy, or socialise, even ballroom dance! His identity as a 'churchman' is linked to him spending a lot of his time being part of a church community and doing things with this community. Do you think it is likely that Cecil's children, whether they might have continued to live in Milton Keynes or not, could have such an intimate relationship with their church or religious communities? What other communities may have arrived in Milton Keynes as times changed after the 1960s? You will reflect further on this question of belonging to a community in the next section.



### 7 Where do I belong?

Many would probably agree that having a feeling of belonging to a community is important. But what 'belonging' and being part of a community would have meant in more rural and local community settings has shifted significantly in our contemporary, globalised, mobile, digital, urban world. In our fast-paced society, we no longer belong to one local community only – a so-called 'community of place', perhaps embodied by the local church. Rather we belong to many 'communities of choice', or interest groups which are becoming increasingly detached from place and far more mobile, like online interest groups, or large international festival communities, such as Burning Man. However, research shows that having a sense of belonging is really important for people to become socially and politically involved. This is even more important among minority groups and new migrant groups, either living or arriving in large urban centres, as is the case with Milton Keynes in our case study.



Anita's story is also a story about different generations and their ethnic and religious identities. Anita's mother came from India, yet her parents were part of the Jehovah's Witnesses (JW), a religion which grew out of 19th century Christian movements in the United States. Anita's story shows that belonging to a group can expose one to exclusion from other groups. Being a Jehovah's Witness, Anita tells us, attracted some prejudiced views from people who disagreed with followers' beliefs and practices. Yet for Anita, the JWs offered a strong sense of community and belonging, support and hospitality.



#### Conclusion

In this course you have looked at two kinds of sources that help us to understand religious and non-religious change: the census data and stories. You have seen how these two kinds of data can complement each other, helping us to understand both better.

The census data gives us a 'big' story. It shows us, for example, that religious identity has been changing rapidly in our increasingly globalised society, particularly in fast-developing multicultural urban environments like Milton Keynes, where we find a high influx of newcomers and migrant populations. Indeed, Milton Keynes makes a fascinating case study of changing trends in religious identity and belonging in Britain, because this town shows the accelerated changes in the British religious and ethnic landscape since the 1960s, coinciding with the creation of this new town in 1967.

The census data shows the rise in ethnic and religious diversity in Milton Keynes. This includes diversity *within* Christianity, for example, the black majority churches. There is also the expansion of minority religious traditions, which is evident also in the town's rich religious architecture, with its many Islamic mosques and Hindu temples. Islam and Hinduism are two of the biggest minority religions in the UK, also according to census data nationwide. Alongside the growth of these larger minority religions, new religions have also been observed, as well as a rise of 'non-religion', which is perhaps the most statistically significant development of its type in recent decades.

We can both illustrate and complicate the 'big story' drawn from census data by listening to the individual stories of people (after all, the 'big story' of the census is ultimately a reflection – in some ways very helpful, but in some ways limited – of many hundreds of thousands of personal stories). This course's short animated stories provide a glimpse into the complicated issues of identity and belonging we, modern humans, must grapple with.

To complete the course, please take a few minutes to reflect on the following questions, brought to light by the census data, as well as Anita, Steve and Cecil's stories:

What kind of changes in religious identities can we see in modern, increasingly global, multicultural and multifaith societies, like Britain? How are religious and ethnic identities shaped by growing up between two or more cultures?

What might have been some of the challenges and opportunities encountered by children and young people from different backgrounds growing up in Britain since the 1960s, given the rapid growth of multicultural towns and cities? (You might consider, for example, young people growing up in diaspora religious communities, whose school friends might have known very little about their religion and culture.)

How does living in a plural, increasingly individualistic, multicultural society impact how people celebrate life's major events, like birth, marriage and death?

Congratulations on completing the course!



### Optional stories

You have now completed the course and earned your Statement of Participation. But if you would like to listen to a couple of optional, extended stories portraying religious identities from Milton Keynes, go to the next page.



#### **Further stories**

This is optional study material – three stories to help deepen your understanding of the wide variety of religious identities to be found (in Milton Keynes and everywhere else).

Audio content is not available in this format.



Optional story 1 Eileen

Audio content is not available in this format.



Optional story 2 Pushpa

Audio content is not available in this format.



Optional story 3 Irini

### References

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Milton Keynes Community Foundation (2016) *Vital Signs*. Available at https://www.mkcommunityfoundation.co.uk/files/4514/7819/4217/LONG\_REPORT\_Vital\_-Signs\_MK2016.pdf (Accessed: 16 September 2021).

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#### **Living Archive Milton Keynes**

Living Archive's creative community projects record, archive and celebrate the unique history and heritage of Milton Keynes. Their work collects, preserves and shares the stories of residents' lives, building a sense of place and using old memories to create new ones and bring communities together.

https://www.livingarchive.org.uk

#### Milton Keynes Community Foundation

Milton Keynes Community Foundation is an independent charity working for and at the heart of Milton Keynes. The charity connects people and resources to projects and ideas to create a positive impact and enduring solutions for our communities within Milton Keynes.

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