

Losing our religion?

Matthew McFarland, OFMDFM Research Branch

When the results for the 2011 Northern Ireland Census were launched, the assembled media wanted to know the answer to only one question when it came to religion: what was the split between Catholics and Protestants? In contrast to the rest of the UK, where the increase in secularism made headlines, very little attention was paid to the number who said that they had 'no religion'.

How religious are we?

In 2011,

183,200

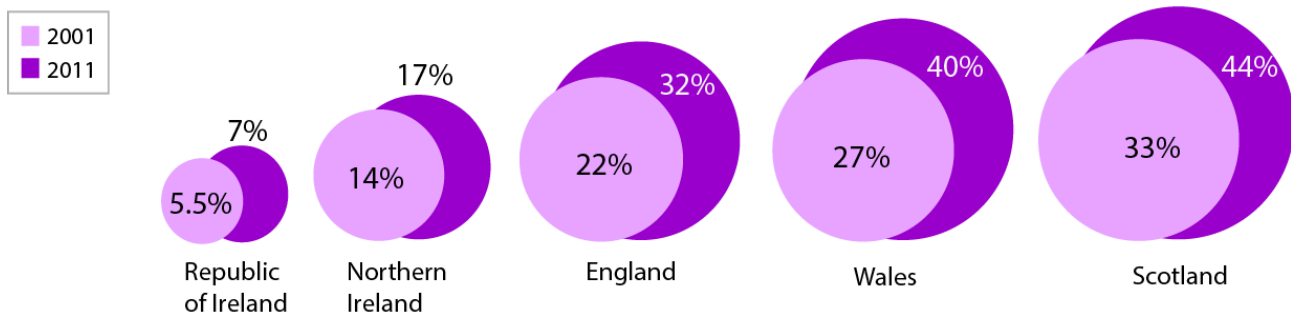
people in Northern Ireland said they had no religion

In total 1 in 10 Northern Ireland residents gave the answer 'None', when asked for their religion in the 2011 Census. Those of no religion were more likely to give their national identity as 'Other', had higher average qualifications, and were more likely to live in privately rented homes.

Are we becoming less religious?

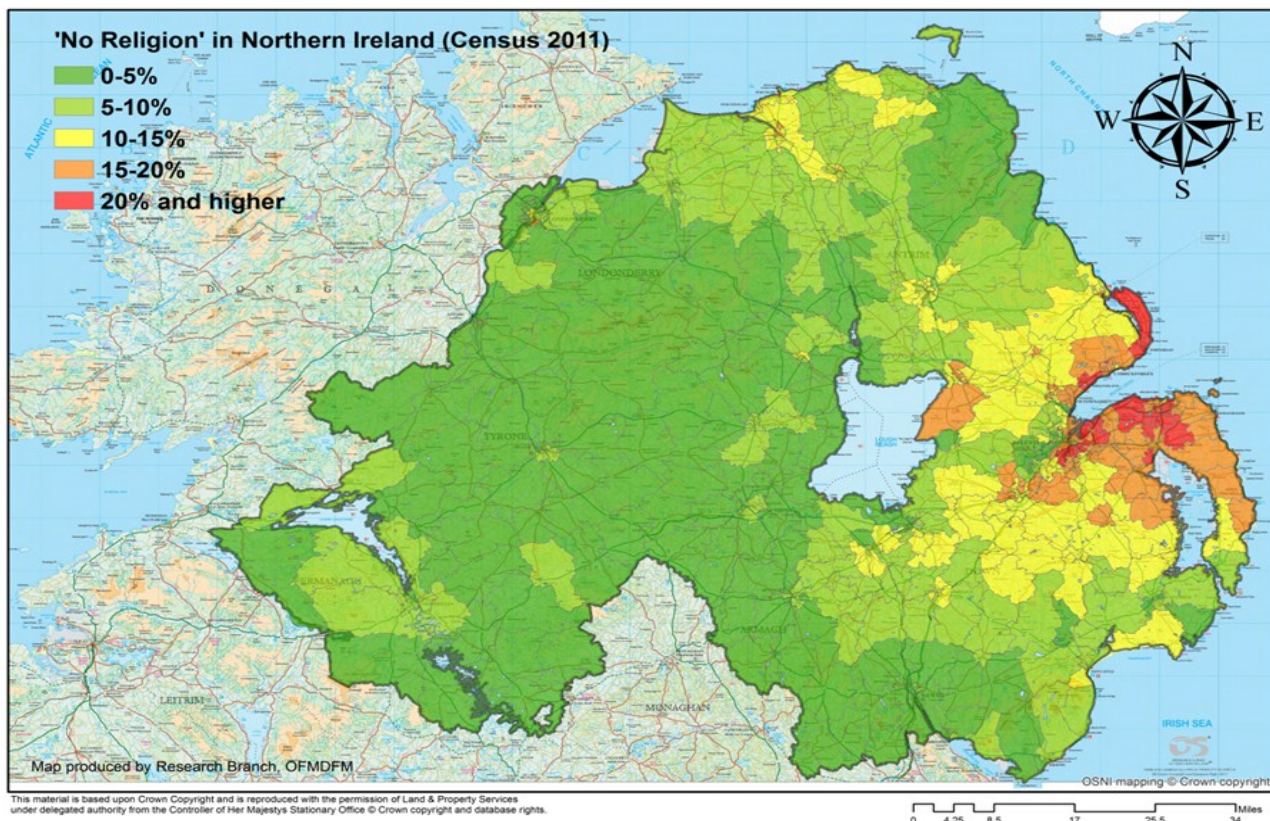
2011 was the first time that people in Northern Ireland were given the option of ticking a box which said 'no religion'. Therefore, whilst comparable figures are not available from previous censuses, it is possible to look at the combined figure of those who answered either 'no religion' or 'religion not stated' in 2001 and 2011 (*2002 and 2011 for ROI).

No religion/ Religion not stated



Northern Ireland remains the most religious region in the United Kingdom, with half as many people answering 'no religion/religion not stated' as the rest of the UK. In addition, there has not been as sharp an increase proportionally. Instead, NI mirrors the picture seen in the Republic of Ireland over the last ten years, albeit with a higher ratio of people stating 'no religion'.

The picture across Northern Ireland



The proportion of people stating 'no religion' is not evenly distributed across the country - there is a clear demarcation between east and west. The wards with the lowest number of those with no religion are Ardboe (Cookstown), Termon (Omagh) and Crossmaglen (Cookstown), each with less than one percent of residents stating that they have 'no religion'. The highest area was Harbour (North Down) with thirty percent.

The future

The chart shows the number of people reporting no religion by age group. Over half of those with no religion (55%, or 101,302 people) were under the age of 35 (for comparison, 46% of all people in Northern Ireland are under 35). If this increase in secularism among young people continues, natural demographic shifts mean that the number of people who are not identifying with either of the main religions in Northern Ireland will continue to grow.

