

Religion in Numbers



British Religion in Numbers is an online religious data resource. Numbers aren't just for statisticians. People want to visualise and understand data for work, for study, for general interest, or to settle a debate: *how large? how many? how typical?*

That's from the introduction to the British Religion in Numbers (BRIN) database, managed by the British Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences: <http://www.brin.ac.uk/> The database is itself an ongoing research project. And it's for use by researchers, who are weighing up questions like these –

- How secular, or religiously diverse, is Britain?
- Do people see religious and political identities as conflicting?
- How does religion affect lifestyle, health, and what opportunities are open to people?

It should be clear that the resource is useful to teachers as well as researchers (or illustrates how a teacher often needs to be a researcher). As it says, people need to use data for study purposes or to settle debates. Pupils are no exception, and teachers should ensure that the data we present to our pupils when teaching is up-to-date and accurate. BRIN provides a searchable database including government sources, opinion polls and faith community sources. There are figures, maps and charts, and guides to understanding the various data.

What we will do within the research area of RE:ONLINE is build, over time, a set of teaching ideas using different BRIN data, as resources for research-based teaching. Readers are also encouraged to explore BRIN, develop your own teaching ideas, or lesson plans, from it, and send them to Kevin@cstg.org.uk for inclusion in the set. You could also try out teaching ideas posted here and let us know how they have gone, perhaps in the form of a blog.

Teaching ideas

1. Representations of Muslims and Islam in the British media

The following is from the *Counting Religion in Britain* bulletin (number 74, November 2021) (page 7):

“In a 320-page report for the Centre for Media Monitoring at the Muslim Council of Britain, Faisal Hanif explores British Media’s Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018–2020). The methodology for the underlying research comprised daily monitoring, between October 2018 and September 2019, of 34 British media websites and 38 television channels using keyword searches, leading to the identification of 47,818 articles and 5,512 broadcast clips referring to Muslims and/or Islam, followed by analysis of each article or clip against five metrics to determine whether it was affirmative or not affirmative in nature. Almost three-fifths (59%) of the articles were found to incorporate negative references to Muslims or Islam, while 21% were judged antagonistic and 14% biased. In his conclusion, Hanif asserts that ‘a large section of the media still favours voices that echo colonial era tropes which see Muslims as dangerous fanatics, terrorists and misogynists whilst giving preference to voices which regurgitate these tropes.’ He claims not to seek any special treatment for Muslims; rather he wants journalists to depict them consistently as for other social groups. The report is available at: <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CfMM-Annual-Report-2018-2020-digital.pdf>”

- Your first task is to decide where to place this content in your curriculum and why. (Translating it into teaching material could be a very engaging and productive meeting agenda!) If including it in a unit about Islam, it might be best towards the close, for reasons that are given later.
- Secondly, it is important to give attention to the language use. Try to re-create the excerpt so that it meets the pupils’ needs. Remember that they don’t only need to grasp it straightaway. They need to be stretched and challenged by it, developing new or improved knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions. So, our suggestion is to leave some of the language as it is: e.g., ‘negative’, ‘antagonistic’, ‘biased’ are terms worth exploring with pupils.
- Thirdly, consider how to introduce the re-worked material. You could create a power-point slide and give a brief lecture, or a handout for pupils to go through in pairs or groups; whichever way, allow time for questions and discussion afterwards, until you are sure that all are clear about the content.
- That gives you the first broad part of a lesson (but adapt these suggestions as you see fit; you might begin with a quick ‘brainstorm’ about why the coverage of any group by the media matters, to establish the purposes of the lesson on secure grounds, before moving to the excerpt).
- The pupils could next move into a task focused on these figures: ‘Almost three-fifths (59%) of the articles were found to incorporate negative references to Muslims or Islam, while 21% were judged antagonistic and 14% biased.’ Can they prepare to explain the differences between ‘negative’, ‘antagonistic’ and ‘biased’, perhaps with examples?
- After some pupils have offered explanations for discussion, and when all are clear about the language and meaning, move into a plenary task. This could also form the basis of a homework write-up or reflective essay. It might be in two parts: first, comment on the researcher’s call for no special treatment

for Muslims; rather, journalists to depict them consistently as for other groups. Second, from what you learned about Islam and Muslims in this unit, what would you say to those negatively biased against them: what positive media stories should be told? You need to go into detail about people's practice of Islam, in their communities. Pupils could also be directed to the work of the Religion and Media Centre.

2. Depicting the ethnicity of Jesus Christ: what is acceptable?

See: <http://www.brin.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/No-75-December-2021-1.pdf>

The link is to the December 2021 edition of Counting Religion in Britain. Its first entry is about an opinion poll on what is acceptable when Jesus's ethnicity is depicted. The poll was an online survey by YouGov of a national cross-section of 1,714 Britons carried out on 14– 15 December 2021. These were the headline figures:

- 58% of the public think Jesus is usually depicted in images as a white person and 22% as Middle Eastern.
- When asked which racial group he could be depicted as being from, 68% believed Middle Eastern was acceptable, 63% white, 44% black, 40% as South Asian, and 37% as East Asian.

The questions were also put to a sample of 1,023 black, Asian, and minority ethnic adults on 8–16 December 2021. In this case:

- 60% felt it acceptable to depict Jesus as Middle Eastern. In a sub-sample of respondents who were Christian, the result was the same.

More details, including full data tables, can be viewed at:

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2021/12/23/what-race-can-jesus-be>

The linked article - Matthew Smith's What race can Jesus be? - contains the following paragraphs:

"The image of Christ as a man with white skin and blue eyes would appear to be at odds with what is likely, given the biblical account of his family hailing from the Middle East.

Nevertheless, Britons are far more likely to say they usually see Jesus being depicted as White (58%) than Middle Eastern (22%).

This is despite the fact that a Middle Eastern Jesus is the one that makes most sense to Britons. Two thirds (68%) say it would be acceptable to depict Christ as having Middle Eastern racial characteristics, compared to only 9% who disagree."

The article also gives age-related data. "There is a noticeable age difference on these two characterisations: while opinion is near identical across all ages for a Middle Eastern Jesus, younger Britons are less accepting of a White saviour (51% of 18-24 year olds, 61% of 25-49 year olds) than their elders (66-67% of those aged 50 and above)."

Some ideas for basing teaching on the research now follow.

- As with the representations of Muslims and Islam in the British media research, decide where to include the material in your curriculum. It could be in a topic on Christianity, Jesus, religion and the arts, or

religion and social or community cohesion.

- Within a lesson, it also has various possible uses (introduction, main task(s), plenary, or summary). In the outline given below, the idea is that pupils will be initially engaged by images rather than statistics.
- You could begin by presenting a series of images of Jesus, varying by ethnic or other appearance, and asking pupils to respond to each. Where is it from? What is the artist trying to convey? What else strikes you? Which is most likely to be historically accurate and why? In looking for images, you might start at Jen Jenkins's superb RE:engaging collection of (mainly) Christian iconography from different traditions pin.it/6AcFrY2 We are very grateful to Jen for this resource.
- Then introduce the YouGov poll, talking briefly through some headline data before giving pupils a more detailed datasheet to discuss in pairs or groups. Why do you think British people are much more likely to see Jesus depicted as White than Middle Eastern? Why is there a big difference between the Jesus most British people would expect to see and the depiction of Jesus that makes most sense to them? Why do you think younger people are less accepting of the idea of a White Jesus?
- Finally, take and discuss feedback of ideas from pairs or groups. This could precede a concluding discussion on why all this matters. Is it only a question of historical accuracy, or is more at stake? For Justine Ball, a dominant White depiction of Jesus "does not allow an opportunity for all children regardless of their background to see themselves in the teaching resources used and is something which suggests that a colonised curriculum is present in RE". See [Justine Ball, An approach to decolonising teaching about Jesus in primary schools](#).

Justine's piece describes her own research in this area and makes practice recommendations, including that we should not only consider what we present, but what we leave out; that Jesus's Jewish context should be referenced; and that "the artwork that teachers use should not only reflect the worldwide global nature of Christianity, but also reflect the multicultural nature of Christianity in the UK."