

Religion in Scotland’s Census 2001–2022

Fiona Tweedie

Rev Dr Fiona Tweedie manages Brendan Research, specialising in statistical and geographical analyses for Christian denominations, and is Statistician with the Church of Scotland.

Abstract

This piece presents the results from Scotland’s Census 2022, comparing them with results from the Censuses of 2001 and 2011. Noting a considerable rise in those of “no religion” and a fall in those belonging to the Church of Scotland, geographical patterns and an age breakdown are discussed. These figures indicate the scale of the challenge facing Scotland’s denominations.



Introduction

This brief article presents the results of the question about people’s religion from Scotland’s Census 2022.¹ Managed by National Records of Scotland (NRS), the Census is the ‘gold standard’ for such information; there are no comparable sources for such data at areas smaller than Local Authorities. There has been a census in Scotland every 10 years since 1801, except 1941. The 2021 Census in Scotland was postponed to 2022 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Census Day was set for 20 March 2022. Following technical work to deal with the lower-than-expected response rate, initial results were published in September 2023, and information about ethnicity, language and religion on 21 May 2024.²

¹ Scotland’s Census, <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/>.

² *Scotland’s Census 2022 – Ethnic group, national identity, language and religion*, <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/2022-results/scotland-s-census-2022-ethnic-group-national-identity-language-and-religion/>.

Further results will be published throughout 2025. All figures given are © Crown copyright 2024.



Questions used in the Census

The question about religion that is asked in the Census in Scotland is:

‘What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?’

It is a voluntary question, with responses: “None”, “Church of Scotland”, “Roman Catholic”, “Other Christian, please write in below:”, “Muslim, write in denomination or school below:”, “Hindu”, “Buddhist”, “Sikh”, “Jewish”, “Pagan”, and “Another religion or body, please write in:”. There follows a write-in section for additional details.

This question has been part of Scotland’s Census since 2001 with minor changes to the pre-set answers offered. In 2022, “Pagan” was included for the first time, as well as write-in details for “Muslim denominations or schools”. When referring to Census categories through-out this paper, they are placed in double inverted commas to distinguish them from the denominations themselves.

The question in Scotland’s Census differs from that used by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in England and Wales where the question has been, ‘What is your religion?’, and the three Christian answers are conflated into “Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)”.³ The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) ask ‘What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?’ and pre-set answers are: “Roman Catholic”, “Presbyterian Church in Ireland”, “Church of Ireland”, “Methodist Church in Ireland”, “Other, write in”, and “None”. If a respondent answers “None” they are directed to a further question, ‘What religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in?’ with the same pre-set answers.⁴

³ Office of National Statistics: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/>. Census question details: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/census2021paperquestionnaires>.

⁴ NISRA: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/>. Census question details: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-guidance-note-on-use-of-religion-question-outputs.pdf>.



Results

Details of the results from the Census are given in Appendix I. For the first time since the introduction of the question on religion, a majority (51%) of respondents said that they had “no religion”. This figure has been rising increasingly since 2001 when 28% said they had no religion, and 37% did so in 2011.

The numbers of those who said that they were “Christian” fell correspondingly, to 39%, from 65% in 2001 and 54% in 2011. Numbers of those belonging to other faiths were small. 2% said that they were “Muslim”, a slight increase from 1.4% in 2011 and 0.8% in 2001, and a further 2% belonged to another faith (1.1% in 2011; 1.0% in 2001). As it is a voluntary question, 6% of respondents chose not to answer, a comparable figure with earlier years (7% in 2011; 6% in 2001). The rest of this paper will concentrate on examining the “Christian” responses in more detail.



Christians in Scotland's Census 2001–2022

In Scotland's Census, unlike that of England and Wales, we have the opportunity to consider the denomination that Christian respondents belong to. Numbers and percentages are given in Appendix I, and are illustrated in Figure 1. The number of those belonging to the “Church of Scotland” has more than halved since 2001; 42% then said they belonged to the “Church of Scotland”, compared with 32% in 2011 and 20% in 2022. Conversely, figures of those belonging to the “Roman Catholic” Church and other Christian denominations show only a little decline; 13% say they belong to the “Roman Catholic” Church (16% in 2011, 16% in 2001), and 5% to “other Christian” denominations (6% 2011, 7% 2001).

However, the apparent stability of other denominations may mask internal shifts; the increase in people from Poland boosting the “Roman Catholic” figures while those for Scots might be declining; the increase in diaspora congregations reducing decreases in the figures for “other Christian” denominations.⁵

⁵ Sheila Akomiah-Conteh, Liam Jerrold Fraser and Fiona Tweedie, “A Future with Hope: Diaspora Churches in Scotland”, *Theology in Scotland* 31, no. 2 (Autumn 2024): 43–59, <https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v31i2.2805>.

Religion in Scotland's Census

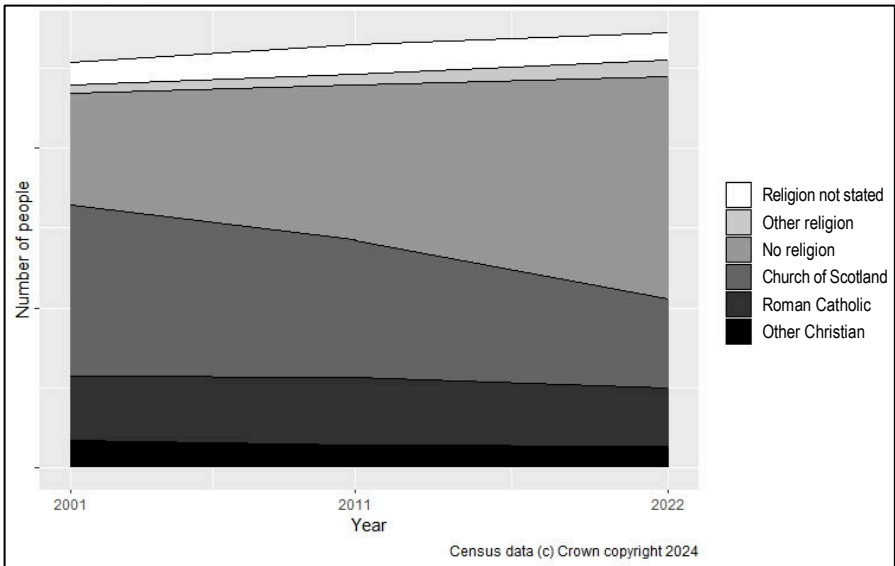


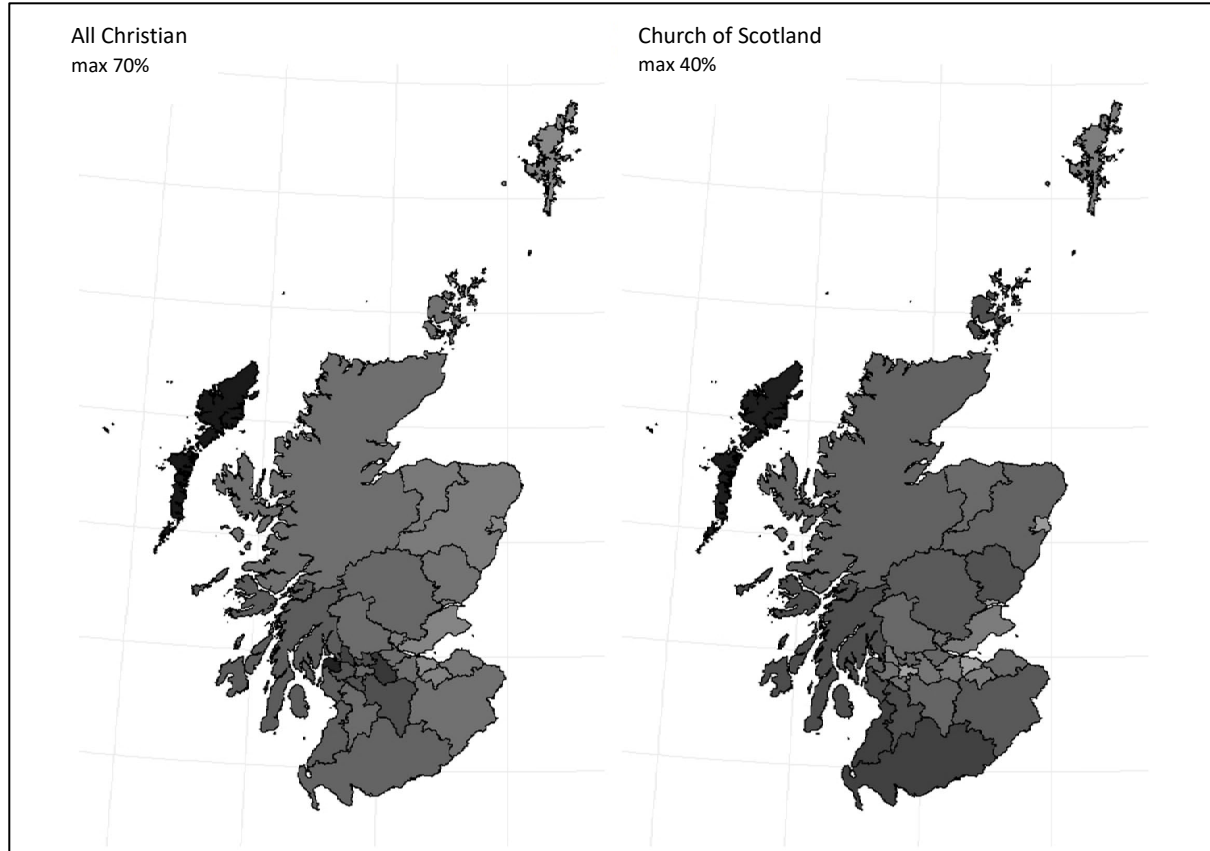
Figure 1: Scotland's Census results by year, 2001–2022



Where are Scotland's Christians?

We can consider the numbers of Christians in each Local Authority Area. These data are tabulated in Appendix II, and mapped in Figure 2 on the following two pages. Figure 2 contains four panels, each showing the percentage of people who are “Christian” (top left), “Church of Scotland” (top right), “Roman Catholic” (bottom left) or “Other Christian” (bottom right). The maximum value (shaded black) in each case is noted above the graph – the darkest areas in the top left panel are close to 70%, while for the lower right panel the left darkest areas contain around 20% of the population. Examining the top left panel in Figure 2, showing the percentage of “Christians” in each area, we find that Na h'Eileanan Siar is the Local Authority area with the highest percentage of “Christians” (64%). It also contains the highest percentage of those belonging to the “Church of Scotland” (35%; top right panel) and the highest percentage of those belonging to “another Christian” denomination (16%; bottom left panel).

Figure 1: Religion by Local Authority Area, Census 2022



Religion in Scotland's Census

Local Authorities with high percentages of “Roman Catholics” (lower left panel of Figure 2) make up the next three areas with high percentages of “Christians”: Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire all have over 50% of their people belonging to a “Christian” denomination. A third (33%) of those in Inverclyde, 30% in North Lanarkshire and 28% in West Dunbartonshire say they belong to the “Roman Catholic” church.

At the other end of the scale are urban areas such as City of Edinburgh (30% “Christian”) and Aberdeen City (31% “Christian”), along with the historically less-religious Shetland Islands (30%) and areas with a younger population such as Fife (31%) and Midlothian (32%). Only 14% of those in City of Edinburgh, and 15% of those in Aberdeen City and Dundee City areas belong to the “Church of Scotland”.

If we consider the geographical spread of different denominations, some striking patterns emerge. Those who say they belong to the “Roman Catholic” church (lower left panel of Figure 2) are highly concentrated in the central west area of Scotland, in Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire (all over 28%). Other areas such as Aberdeenshire and both Orkney and Shetland Islands have fewer than 5% of their people belonging to the “Roman Catholic” Church. In contrast, the “Church of Scotland” (upper right panel of Figure 2) has a much wider presence, with each Local Authority area having at least 14% and at most 35% of its people belonging to the “Church of Scotland”. It is strongest in Na h-Eileanan Siar (35%) and in the south-west (South Ayrshire – 29%; Dumfries and Galloway – 29%; Argyll and Bute, North Ayrshire, East Ayrshire – 27%). The Orkney Islands also have 27% of its people belonging to the “Church of Scotland”.

The pattern of those who belong to “other Christian” denominations (lower right panel Figure 2) masks a mixture of denominations and their presence across Scotland. The 16% of people in Na h-Eileanan Siar, and 8% in Highland are likely to belong to the Free Churches, while the 9% in the Shetland Islands are more likely to be Methodists. Diaspora churches tend to be found in urban areas, and the 5% in Glasgow City and Dundee City, 6% in City of Edinburgh and Stirling, 8% in Aberdeen City may illustrate their growth. In the south of Scotland, those belonging to “other Christian” denominations may look to the Scottish Episcopal Church or to the Church of England (6% in Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway).



How old are Scotland's Christians?

Census data on religion are also available by age band, tabulated in Appendix III and illustrated in Figure 3. While there are small changes in each group across the age bands, those under 34 are fairly stable. In these age groups around a quarter (26%) are “Christian”, 6% are of “another religion” and 63% state that they belong to “no religion”. Among older age groups, as age increases there is an increasing percentage of people saying that they belong to “Christian” denominations (33% of those aged 35–49, 47% aged 50–64, 62% aged 65–115), and a decreasing percentage of those of “no religion” (57%, 44%, 29%).

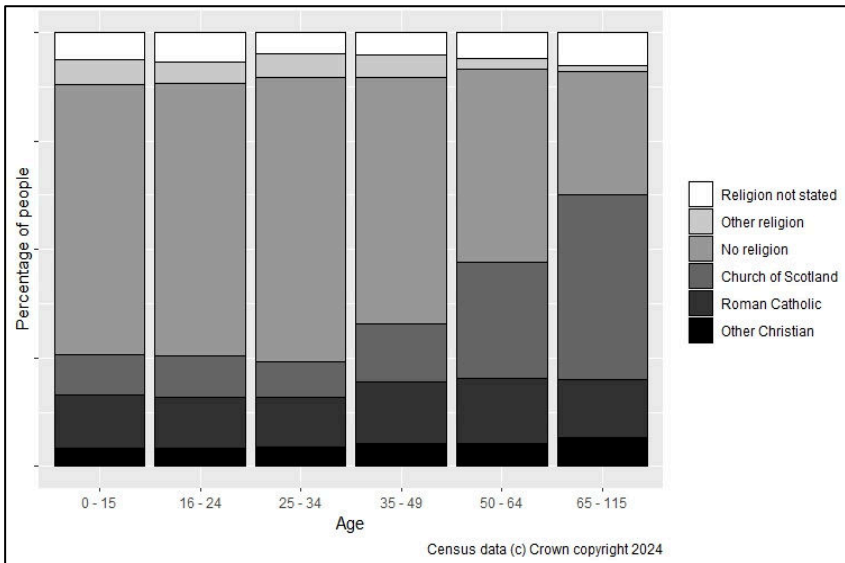


Figure 3: Denominations by Age Group, Scotland's Census 2022

Closer inspection of the denominational figures indicates that the larger percentage of Christians in older age groups is largely due to the increase in those who say they belong to the “Church of Scotland” (43% of those aged 65–115, 8–10% of those aged under 34); other denominations are fairly constant across age groups (the figures for

Religion in Scotland's Census

“Roman Catholic” are 13–15% of those aged over 35 and 12–13% of those under 35; and for “Other Christian” 4% under 35, 5–7% over 35).



Concluding remarks

The results from Scotland’s Census 2022 are unlikely to be a surprise. Denominational statistics have presaged the trends, if not the magnitude, of the figures. Arithmetically, many denominations show little change in their percentage representation across the last three censuses. However, this apparent stability is likely to mask shifts within, particularly driven through immigration.

The major change evident in these data is that of the large increase of those of “no religion” in the past 25 years. Arithmetically, and with the demise of a ‘folk’ or ‘cultural’ affiliation to the Church of Scotland, this has come at the expense of the national church.

The challenge for the churches in Scotland is to find ways to reach out to and engage the majority of Scots aged under 50, and the two-thirds of those under 35, who do not belong to a religion.

Appendix I: Results by Census Year

All data © Crown copyright 2002, 2013, 2024

Year	All people	Christian	Church of Scotland	Roman Catholic	Other Christian	Other faith	No religion	Not stated
2022	5,439,842	2,110,405	1,107,796	723,322	279,287	213,675	2,780,900	334,862
2022%		38.8%	20.4%	13.3%	5.1%	3.9%	51.1%	6.2%
Change since 2011	2.7%	-26.0%	-35.5%	-14.0%	-4.1%	57.1%	43.3%	-9.0%
2011	5,295,403	2,850,199	1,717,871	841,053	291,275	136,049	1,941,116	368,039
2011%		54.0%	32.4%	15.9%	5.5%	2.6%	36.7%	7.0%
Change since 2001	4.6%	-13.5%	-20.0%	4.6%	-15.5%	43.3%	39.2%	32.4%
2001	5,062,011	3,294,545	2,146,251	803,732	344,562	94,945	1,394,460	278,061
2001%		65.1%	42.4%	15.9%	6.8%	1.9%	27.5%	5.5%

Religion in Scotland's Census

Appendix II: Census 2022 Results by Local Authority

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Local Authority	Christian	Church of Scotland	Roman Catholic	Other Christian	Other Faith	No religion	Not stated
Aberdeen City	30.7%	14.6%	8.6%	7.5%	5.5%	58.0%	5.8%
Aberdeenshire	33.8%	23.2%	4.3%	6.3%	1.4%	59.0%	5.8%
Angus	36.0%	26.0%	5.7%	4.3%	1.4%	57.1%	5.5%
Argyll and Bute	42.8%	27.0%	9.2%	6.6%	1.7%	48.5%	7.0%
City of Edinburgh	30.1%	13.5%	10.1%	6.5%	6.9%	56.3%	6.6%
Clackmannanshire	34.0%	21.7%	8.1%	4.2%	2.2%	58.3%	5.4%
Dumfries and Galloway	40.2%	28.9%	5.5%	5.8%	1.5%	52.2%	6.1%
Dundee City	33.2%	14.6%	13.8%	4.9%	6.3%	54.6%	6.0%
East Ayrshire	38.1%	26.7%	8.1%	3.3%	1.5%	54.9%	5.5%
East Dunbartonshire	46.6%	23.4%	18.9%	4.4%	3.6%	43.3%	6.6%
East Lothian	35.0%	22.0%	8.1%	4.8%	1.8%	57.5%	5.7%
East Renfrewshire	45.6%	21.0%	20.6%	3.9%	9.5%	38.0%	6.9%
Falkirk	37.8%	22.7%	11.1%	4.0%	2.3%	54.5%	5.4%
Fife	31.2%	19.2%	7.2%	4.8%	2.3%	60.6%	5.9%
Glasgow City	38.7%	13.3%	20.7%	4.7%	11%	43.2%	7.1%
Highland	37.3%	23.4%	6.3%	7.6%	1.8%	54.3%	6.6%
Inverclyde	60.6%	23.7%	33.4%	3.5%	1.4%	32.2%	5.8%
Midlothian	31.8%	19.2%	8.6%	4.0%	2.3%	60.5%	5.3%
Moray	34.3%	22.1%	5.0%	7.2%	1.6%	58.1%	6.0%
Na h-Eileanan Siar	63.6%	35.3%	12.1%	16.2%	1.3%	29.9%	5.1%
North Ayrshire	42.5%	26.8%	12.2%	3.5%	1.5%	49.9%	6.0%
North Lanarkshire	53.6%	20.5%	29.9%	3.2%	2.4%	38.2%	5.7%
Orkney Islands	36.3%	26.7%	2.7%	6.9%	1.7%	56.3%	5.7%
Perth and Kinross	39.1%	24.7%	7.8%	6.6%	1.9%	52.5%	6.5%
Renfrewshire	44.0%	20.8%	19.1%	4.1%	2.9%	47.2%	5.9%
Scottish Borders	36.6%	24.9%	5.3%	6.4%	1.4%	55.3%	6.7%
Shetland Islands	30.4%	19.0%	2.8%	8.6%	1.5%	62.8%	5.3%
South Ayrshire	41.8%	29.1%	8.5%	4.2%	1.6%	50.4%	6.3%
South Lanarkshire	46.2%	23.0%	19.3%	3.9%	2.5%	45.4%	5.9%
Stirling	38.1%	22.2%	10.4%	5.6%	2.6%	53.1%	6.2%
West Dunbartonshire	50.4%	19.5%	28.2%	2.7%	1.7%	41.9%	6.1%
West Lothian	37.6%	19.8%	13.5%	4.3%	2.8%	54.1%	5.5%
SCOTLAND	38.8%	20.4%	13.3%	5.1%	3.9%	51.1%	6.2%

Religion in Scotland's Census

Appendix III: Census 2022 Results by Age Band

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Age band	Christian	Church of Scotland	Roman Catholic	Other Christian	Other Faith	No religion	Not stated
0–15	25.8%	9.2%	12.4%	4.2%	5.6%	62.3%	6.3%
16–24	25.5%	9.7%	11.7%	4.1%	5.0%	62.8%	6.7%
25–34	24.1%	8.1%	11.5%	4.5%	5.5%	65.6%	4.9%
35–49	32.8%	13.4%	14.2%	5.2%	5.4%	56.7%	5.1%
50–64	47.1%	26.9%	15.1%	5.2%	2.4%	44.3%	6.1%
65–115	62.5%	42.5%	13.3%	6.7%	1.3%	28.6%	7.6%