

## **Short summary**

# **Why Baby Boomers Turned From Religion: shaping belief and belonging, 1945-2021. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.**

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Baby Boomers caused Christian decline in the UK, Canada and most other countries in the Global north. They found, and raised their children with, different, and in their view better, morals than the Church-based version they experienced as children.

In the UK, they were the last generation to be routinely baptised, confirmed and taken regularly to mainstream, Anglican churches. Their parents raised them to be church-

attending, and yet questioning semi-conformists, enabling them to become ex-religious and to raise their Millennial children to be the least religious generation ever.

Why and how did that happen? Based on 55 interviews amongst Baby Boomer ex-Anglicans in the UK and Canada, and secondary data analysis carried out in 2020/21, this new research finds that Boomers captured the moral high ground as they rejected individualistic, racialised and classed forms of Christianity in particular and religion more generally.

Prof. Day's book has just been published by Oxford University Press: 'Why Baby Boomers Turned From Religion: Shaping Belief and Belonging 1945-2021'.

A key finding was that the Boomers' childhood church experience was 'a social thing' largely confined to Sunday school and with nothing reinforced at home. It was, as one Boomer said: 'more social than actually believing'. As for their experience of standard Anglican rites, a Boomer said:

Yes, I was baptised because, it was 'something everybody did'. I think everybody was. I say everybody, but you know what I mean, everyone who was white English middle class, that's what happened, basically. I was born in 1948 and I was christened when I was a few weeks old. And I was confirmed as well, which looking back at it, I find really bizarre, but I was.

Boomers generally were not heavily indoctrinated into Christianity. Their parents, it seemed, were already having second thoughts. As a Boomer said: 'I don't not recall any religious

behaviour at home: Maybe little pictures of Jesus on the wall but I think that was a souvenir from New York’.

Rather than leaving the church in a sudden act of defiance, most Boomers simply drifted away. It seemed there was nothing very much to anchor them in the first place. This reflects a larger societal turn in the 1950s towards a less authoritarian way of thinking, reinforced by media and the influence of every parents’ paediatrician, the ubiquitous and liberal Dr Spock. As another Boomer said: ‘it’s like asking why people don’t watch black and white TVs anymore like they did in the 50s. Colour came along and that was better’.

Boomers were part of the global trend towards university education in the 1960s, which meant many left home and enjoyed more variety and fewer rules. As a result, their non-religious outlooks only deepened, and many felt this was better, more authentic and more ethical than patriarchal church authority.

Boomers said that they concluded that religion seemed to focus on social control and community cohesion. University helped many crystallize their emerging non-religious identity: ‘I started reading Marx at the time,’ said one: ‘Yes, I lost god and found Marx’.

When asked about where they received their sense of moralities, they said this came from their homes, not from the Church. The following comments were typical: ‘It was not part of my church memory, but moral training was strongly part of my home memory. That was centred on kindness and equality, values I learned from my mother and grandmother’, said one Boomer. And another: ‘I think I was well brought up, with right and wrong, being kind to others, treat others as you want to be treated’.

One interviewee described her turn from religion as an ‘anti-Damascene’ moment when she realised that although she believed in many of Jesus’ moral teachings as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, she felt after that ‘it got messed up by Paul and then the church’.

Another Boomer said that it was hard believing in the ‘fairy tale’ of God’s existence because he really could not believe in the existence of such a deity: ‘if there was a god, wouldn’t he be kinder?’, he asked.

For another Boomer, it was the sense that people worshipped in a religion that somehow incorporated pain and punishment that ‘completely unglued me.’ That Boomer said that religion was ‘a medieval con that there’s something like an afterlife punishment’. As another described it, ‘I’ve rejected religion entirely: no god, no easter bunny’.

Although they rejected religion, many Boomers have experienced a sense of the presence of deceased relatives. Even atheists, it seems, see ghosts. And most simply accept this as a mystery of life to be experienced, accepted, but certainly not worshipped.

It was therefore unsurprising that turn away from religion continued, and they have raised their children in the same manner. This helps explain that generational shift away from Christianity that sociologists have noted during the past 70 years. Although that story has been told mainly through statistics, this book captures, more texture and insights through Boomers’ memories and stories.

The chapter themes are as follows:

### **Part 1: And in the Beginning was the End**

Chapter 1: Who are the Baby Boomers?

Chapter 2: Church: A Social Thing

Chapter 3: Enabling Ambivalence

Chapter 4. Teen Angst: Confirming doubts

## **Part 2: Believing in Leaving**

Chapter 5: Drifting Away, Fading Away

Chapter 6: Blinding Light on the Road from Damascus: Climbing the Moral High Ground

Chapter 7: 1960s Cultural Revolution: Sex and Sensibilities

Chapter 8: Adulthood and Acceptance, with Lingering Trails

## **Part 3: Shaping Belief and Belonging**

Chapter 9: Belief in Spirits: Extraordinary Relationality

Chapter 10: Belonging and Behaving

Chapter 11: The Next Generations: Raising the ‘Nones’

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