

Faith in a time of climate chaos: Religion and attitudes to climate change

Jonny Hanson, Gladys Ganiel and Emma Soye

Does religion contribute to how people understand and respond to climate change? The short answer is yes – and this matters, because religion can often be linked to climate change disbelief. In the UK, a 2024 survey by the Institute for the Impact of Faith in Life found that exclusivist Christians (those who believed their faith to be the only one true religion) were most likely to deny climate change, with 31 per cent agreeing with the statement ‘I don’t believe the global climate is changing’ (Institute for the Impact of Faith in Life [IIFL], 2024). The Theos (2024) think tank, drawing on data from the British Election Study 2015-2023, reported that Christians rank lowest in environmental concern compared to other religious groups or non-religious people. However, in contrast to IIFL, the analysis revealed a significant ‘practice effect’ among Christians: those who attend church regularly were more inclined to adopt environmentally friendly habits.

Similarly, in the United States (US), there is evidence of climate scepticism among white evangelical Protestants (Alper, 2022; Public Religion Research Institute [PRRI], 2023). In addition, Americans who say that religion is important

in their lives were more likely to be climate sceptics (PRRI, 2023). These findings align with Alper’s (2022) Pew study, which found that US evangelical Protestants were less likely to view climate change as a serious issue. Many justified this by saying there are more pressing problems in the world and that God ultimately controls the climate. Furthermore, some view recent natural disasters as signs of the ‘end times.’ This belief can contribute to climate inaction, as it frames environmental crises as inevitable or divinely ordained—making efforts to prevent or mitigate them seem futile.

Catholics’ greater concern about the climate may in part be driven by Pope Francis and his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home* (Francis, 2015). A 2024 survey conducted by the European Laudato Si’ Alliance and St Mary’s University found that among 283 Catholic organisations in 20 countries, 36 per cent reported that the encyclical had contributed to major changes in their work and 50 per cent will stay committed or increase their focus on ecology (European Laudato Si’ Alliance [ELSiA], 2023). A 2023 poll among American Catholics

found that only 33 per cent had heard of *Laudato Si’*, although those attending Mass weekly or more were 37 per cent more likely to know about it (Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate [CARA], 2024).

In Northern Ireland, a 2023 Savanta ComRes survey of the general population conducted on behalf of the Evangelical Alliance found that 77 per cent of Catholics and 64 per cent of Protestants strongly agreed/agreed with the statement ‘We need urgent and radical action from the government on climate change.’ (Evangelical Alliance, 2024). The same survey found that 65 per cent of the general population who identified as evangelical Christians strongly agreed/agreed with this statement. The Evangelical Alliance also conducted their own self-selecting survey of over 2,000 practising Christians in Northern Ireland. In that survey, around one half (49%) of practising Christians who identified as ‘evangelical’ strongly agreed/agreed that urgent and radical action from the government on climate change was needed, suggesting that Protestant evangelicals were indeed less likely than others to prioritise climate change action.

In addition, in 2023 the Presbyterian Church in Ireland conducted a climate change survey among its members, receiving nearly 1,200 responses from 209 congregations (Presbyterian Church in Ireland [PCI], 2024). It found that 71 per cent of respondents were concerned/very concerned about climate change; 75 per cent agreed/strongly agreed that a biblical

understanding of faith underpinned their concern for the environment; and 68 per cent agreed/strongly agreed that their actions contribute to climate change. It is worth noting that the survey may have attracted responses from people who were already concerned about climate change, rather than the more sceptical within Presbyterian ranks.

This Research Update therefore explores relationships between religious identification, religious upbringing, religious practice and climate change in Northern Ireland, using data from 1,199 adults participating in the 2024 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey. This included 383 respondents who identified as Catholic, 193 as Presbyterian and 144 as Church of Ireland.

Belief and disbelief

When it comes to recognising human causes of climate change, Northern Ireland is one of the most sceptical regions in Europe. The 2023/24 European Social Survey (ESS) found that, on average, across European countries 91 per cent think that climate change is caused at least equally by natural processes and human activity. In contrast, the 2024 NILT survey found that 85 per cent of Northern Ireland respondents thought that this was the case – a figure higher than only Slovakia (79%) and Lithuania (83%) from the ESS (Hayward and Hanson, 2025: 2).

This previous analysis of the NILT data found that those who identified as Unionists, (Brexit) Leave voters, and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) supporters were more likely to be sceptical about the human causes of climate change and less likely to favour action to address it (Hayward and Hanson 2025). While Hayward

and Hanson did not consider religious affiliation or practice, it should be noted that Protestant identification often overlaps with unionism, voting Leave and support for the DUP. More broadly, when considered as a single group, those who identified with a religion were much less likely to say that climate change is caused mainly or entirely by human activity (54%) than those who did not identify with a religion (75%). These findings suggest that religious belief can be associated with climate change disbelief. Yet there was considerable attitudinal variation within those who identified with a religion, as the remainder of this Research Update discusses.

Concerned Catholics, sceptical Presbyterians

There were differences in attitudes about climate change by religious identification (Table 1), with Catholics emerging as the most concerned and Presbyterians as the most sceptical. When asked ‘Do you

think climate change is caused by natural processes, human activity or both?’, 62 per cent of Catholics chose ‘mainly or entirely by human activity’, followed by 56 per cent Church of Ireland, 49 per cent ‘other denomination/religion’ (hereafter ‘Others’), and 38 per cent of Presbyterians. Others is a catch-all category including some smaller Protestant and evangelical subgroups as well as non-Christian religions. Because of the diversity of this group, generalisable conclusions cannot be drawn about it, but it is included in this section for comparison. Also for comparison, respondents of no religion were included. Their response, at 75 per cent, was notably higher than any of the religious categories, though the gap narrowed when data were included from those who chose ‘caused about equally by natural processes and human activity’.

Table 1: Belief that human activity causes climate change entirely, mainly, or equally to natural causes, by religious identification (%)

	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian	Other	No religion
Caused mainly or entirely by human activity	62	56	38	49	75
Caused about equally by natural processes and human activity	27	30	42	25	17
Total	89	86	80	74	92

Catholic concern and Presbyterian scepticism were also clear in a suite of questions related to climate anxiety, climate action, and trust in scientific experts (Figure 1). Presbyterians stood

out for their distrust of scientific experts, with only 47 per cent agreeing that such experts can be trusted to tell the truth about climate change, compared to 75 per cent of Catholics. Again, those

claiming no religion were also included for comparison, with their attitudes broadly similar to the attitudes of Catholics across each of the six response categories.

Figure 1: Strongly agree/tend to agree with climate change responses, by religious identification (%)



Identification versus upbringing

The NILT data also show that people who currently identified with a religion were slightly more likely to be sceptical about climate change than those who

were raised in that religion (Table 2). At the same time, the pattern of concerned Catholics and sceptical Presbyterians holds true for religious upbringing: those raised Presbyterian were still less concerned and more sceptical than those raised Catholic. This suggests

that patterns of attitudes and beliefs associated with religious upbringings, including towards climate change, can persist even when those holding them no longer identify with that religion.

Table 2: Belief that human activity causes climate change entirely, mainly, or equally to natural causes, by religious upbringing and identification (%)

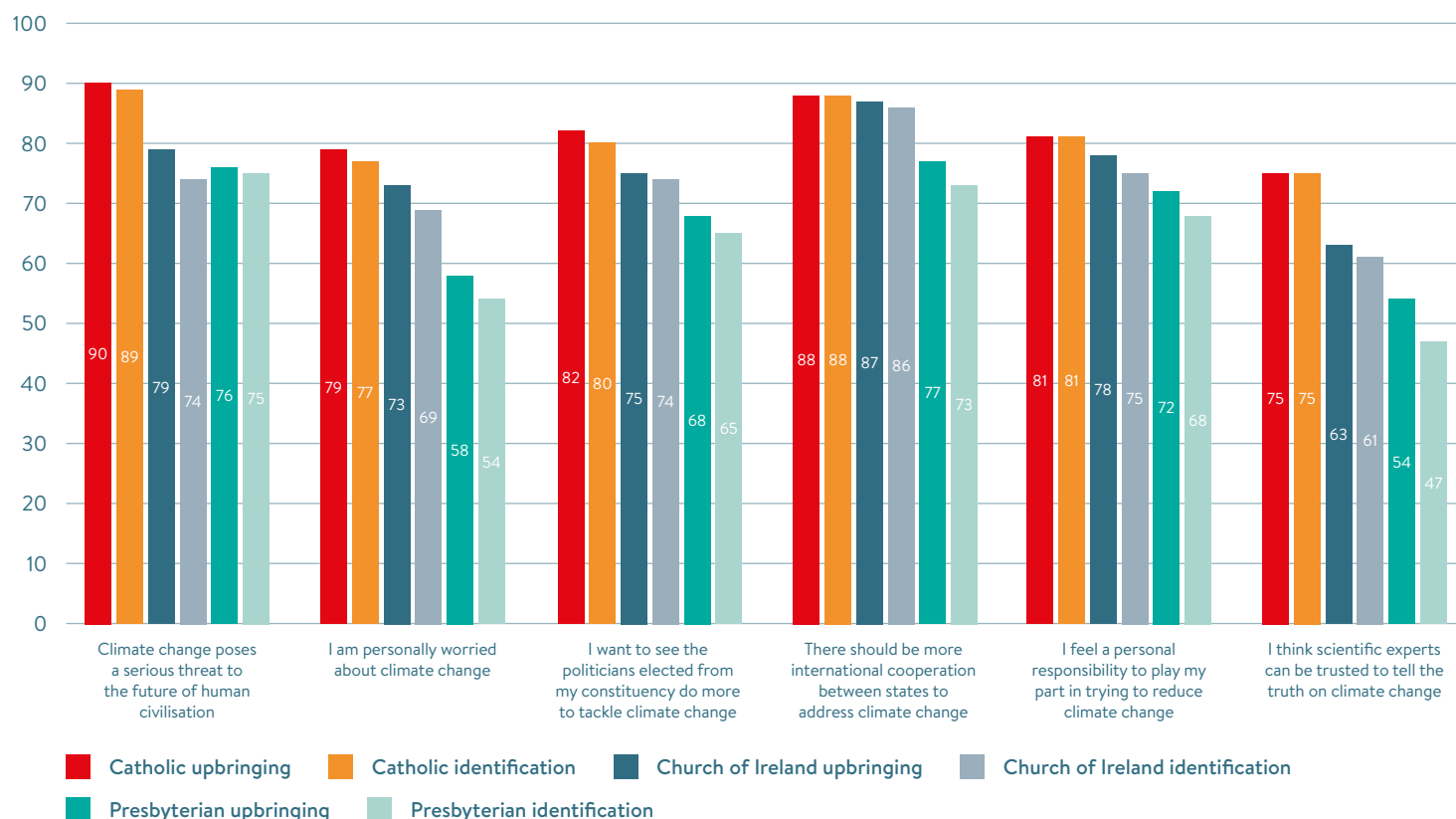
	Upbringing			Identification		
	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian
Caused mainly or entirely by human activity	66	56	50	62	56	38
Caused about equally by natural processes and human activity	24	32	33	27	30	42
Total	90	88	83	89	86	80

The results for responses to climate change tell a similar story but, again, the differences between identification and upbringing were quite small (Figure 2). Compared to current religious identification, there was a slightly higher association between religious upbringing and the view that climate change poses

a serious threat to the future of human civilisation. People who had a religious upbringing but no longer identify with that religion were more likely than those with a current religious identification to have personal concerns about climate change and to want to see locally led

political action on the issue. Religious upbringing also trumped current identification on seeing the need for international cooperation for climate change, feeling a sense of personal responsibility to reduce climate change and trust in scientific experts.

Figure 2: Strongly agree/tend to agree with climate change responses, by religious upbringing and identification (%)



Religious practice and climate change

Religious identification—such as selecting Catholic, Anglican, or Presbyterian on a survey—is a relatively weak measure of religiosity. Religious practices, like

attending services, provide a stronger indication of religious commitment. The most religiously committed—those who attend services at least weekly—were more sceptical about the human causes of climate change (Table 3). Forty-nine per cent of weekly attenders said

that climate change is caused mainly or entirely by human activity, followed by 50 per cent of monthly attenders, 57 per cent of annual attenders, and 57 per cent of less than annual attenders.

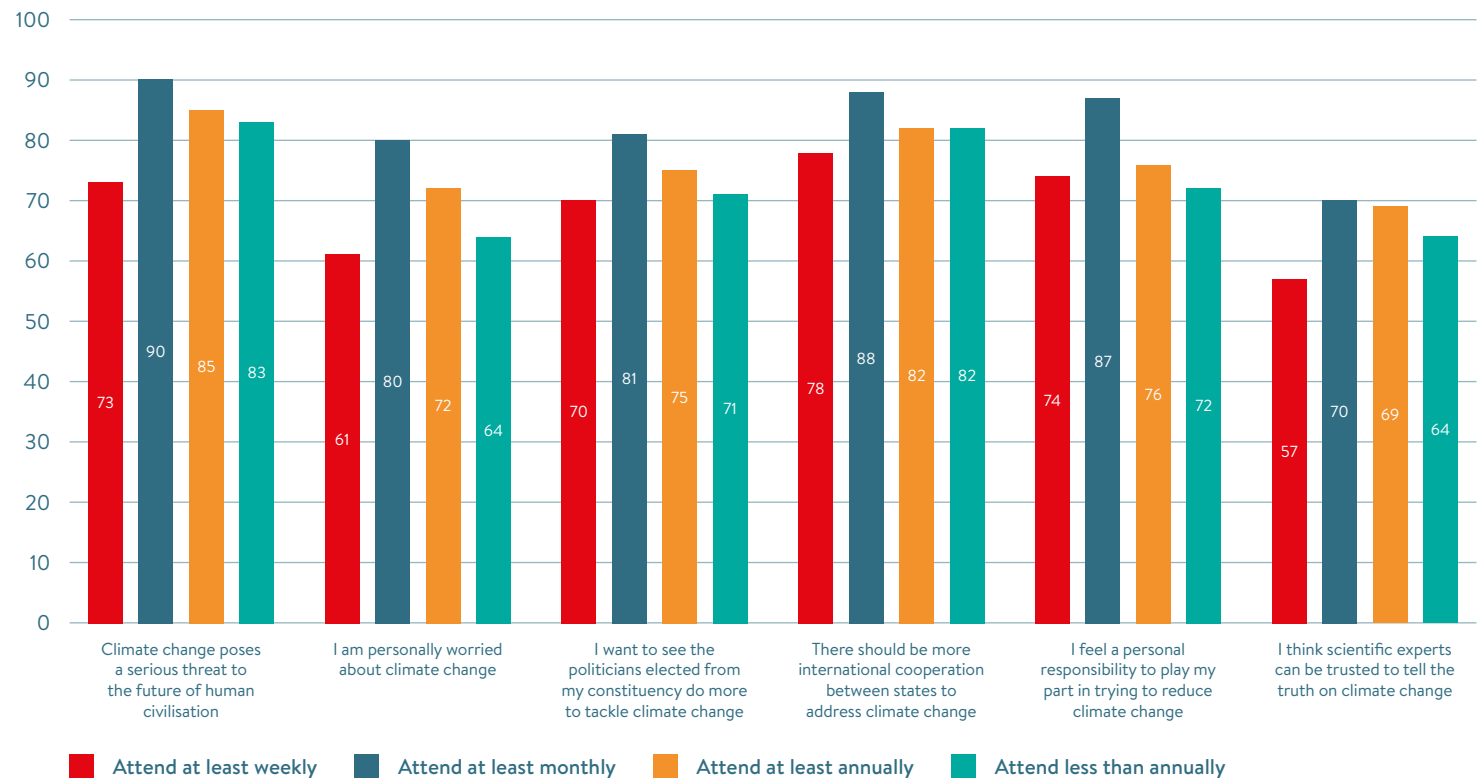
Table 3: Belief that human activity causes climate change entirely, mainly, or equally to natural causes, by religious service attendance (%)

	Attend at least weekly	Attend at least monthly	Attend at least annually	Attend less than annually
Caused mainly or entirely by human activity	49	50	57	57
Caused about equally by natural processes and human activity	31	34	31	28
Total	80	84	88	85

Responding to the questions related to climate anxiety, climate action, and trust in scientific experts, weekly attenders also demonstrated less worry about climate change, less personal responsibility to address it, and much less trust in scientific experts (Figure 3).

These results contrast with Theos' (2024) findings in Britain, where more frequent religious practice motivated climate action. But given research from other contexts, the scepticism of weekly attenders is not surprising.

Figure 3: Strongly agree/tend to agree with climate change responses, by religious service attendance (%)



Conclusion

Northern Ireland reflects broader international patterns linking religion and climate change attitudes. Catholics were the most concerned about climate change, the most likely to attribute it to human causes, and the most trusting of scientific expertise – findings that may be influenced by global Catholic leadership on ecological issues. In contrast, Presbyterians showed the highest levels of scepticism, the lowest trust in scientists, and the least enthusiasm for action, echoing patterns associated with

evangelical Protestantism elsewhere. Strong religious commitment, indicated by weekly attendance, was linked with lower levels of concern and reduced support for action on climate change. At the same time, those raised in a religion expressed greater concern than current adherents. In a time of mounting climate chaos, these findings suggest that urgent engagement with religious communities is necessary to address climate change in Northern Ireland.

Key Points:

- Religious identification and practice overlap with more scepticism about the human causes of climate change and less concern about and commitment to climate action.
- Those who identify as Catholics were more likely to recognise human causes of climate change, trust scientific experts, and support strong climate action. Protestants, especially Presbyterians, were more sceptical, less trusting of scientists, and less supportive of action.
- People who currently identified with a religion were slightly more likely to be sceptical about climate change than those who were raised in that religion, though the Catholic-Protestant, and especially Catholic-Presbyterian, concern gaps remained.
- At least weekly attendance at religious services was associated with more scepticism, less trust in scientists, and lower prioritisation of climate action.
- Urgent engagement with religious communities is necessary to address climate change in Northern Ireland.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2024, 1,199 people aged 18 years or over took part.

NILT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt



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