

# personal beliefs – a survey

Reflecting on TFM's recent personal beliefs survey.

As part of its mission activity over thirty-plus years, *Through Faith Missions* (TFM) has used a street survey on personal beliefs. The survey questionnaire itself has changed little over that time. Its purpose is to uncover what people think about God generally, and about Jesus specifically. As a questionnaire used in a broadly evangelistic setting, TFM has acquired a unique insight into 'where people are at' spiritually, and how some things have changed in the past two decades, yet others remain broadly consistent.

In TFM's 2023 May 'mission' to Wolverhampton, responses to the survey were, overall, consistent with responses elsewhere. One purpose of the survey is to encourage conversation, albeit TFM 'missioners' do not exhaustively discuss and explore each question – that's not the purpose of the survey. If nothing else it would mean completion of each survey would consume at least half an hour, and this is hardly ideal – albeit it does occasionally happen! 'Missioners' are led by what people want. Generally the survey takes about five minutes. The survey's final question asks people whether, **if they could know God personally, would they be interested?** Responses provide an opportunity for people to expand the conversation more widely if they wish. TFM 'missioners' have available a copy of the useful little booklet *"Knowing God*

*Personally"* (Agape) and are happy to leave it with people who'd like it, or use it as a basis for further immediate discussion. Where appropriate, prayers were offered and/or follow-up arranged.

### Five questions – myriad answers!

Overall, people seem to appreciate the Survey as it helps crystalize thoughts (and sometimes encourage respondents to reconsider) about the eternally transcendent. More specifically, it helps them consider what they truly believe about Jesus. Sometimes partnering local churches use survey results within subsequent preaching and teaching, providing a local link of high relevance, and an opportunity to explore what people are actually saying.

### Learnings

A few 'obvious' conclusions can be drawn, albeit some are surprising. To the question 'what do you think about God' nearly half still understand God as being a *personal* God. What, in turn, they mean differs between individuals, but broadly – in discussion – it appears that folk hold on to the generic view that God does indeed exist and that He desires to know us, individually, and to befriend us. If you add Q1 responses (b) and (c) fully sixty percent accept the concept of "God".

What might we conclude tentatively from this? People are made in the image of God (Genesis 1: 26–27), so broadly 'mankind' knows that there is a transcendent dimension, and a transcendent Person. What they do with that knowledge varies, but they do know ..... To deny God ultimately is foolish. (Psalm 14:1) – not a mark of superiority. To that extent atheist Richard Dawkins ("The God Delusion") still has his work cut out; in Wolverhampton only 14 per cent state that God does not exist. People who say that are usually older, white, and middle class. In that sense they do not represent the future ...

### End of life?

Here, a variability of 'beliefs'. The Eastern

## Survey questions and Wolverhampton 2023 responses are summarized below:

### 1. What do you believe about God?

a	Just a force	5
b	A distant being	12
c	A personal God	48
d	Non-existent	14
e	Something else	21

### 2. What do you believe happens at the end of our lives?

a	We die and that's it	11
b	We return to earth in another form or as another person	18
c	We all go to heaven	15
d	Some people go to heaven and others not	34
e	Not sure	18
f	Something else	4

### 3. What do you believe about Jesus?

a	He didn't exist at all	6
b	He was an ordinary man and nothing more	8
c	He was a prophet and a messenger from God	30
d	He is the only Son of God	41
e	Something else	15

### 4. Have you ever had a spiritual experience or prayed about something?

a		72
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### 5. If you could know God personally, would you be interested?

a	No	16
b	Yes	40
c	Not sure	28
d	Something else	16

idea of **reincarnation has seeped into people's consciousness**. This may reflect inwards migration and the advance of Buddhism and Hinduism as cultural forces in the UK. I doubt the number would have been more than 2% just one hundred years ago. Today it stands at 18%.

The most popular response is that 'some go to heaven and others to hell', at 34%. Perhaps surprisingly, fully 15% indicate 'universalism' (everyone goes to 'heaven') which remains a popular, if rather sentimentaized answer to the 'problem' of the eternal destiny of the determined God-opponent. What remains remarkable is that so many still understand in some sense, the need for and reality of judgment – at 34%.

**Instinctively people still know there is a final reckoning to come**, and that a holy and just God cannot be overruled by rebellious humans. We are made in the image of God ...

#### Jesus?

It was mainly middle-aged white folk who claim "he didn't exist at all", suggesting that this cohort has backed itself into a spiritual and intellectual corner from which it cannot emerge unscathed. This view remains very much a minority one, at just 6%. By adding the percentages for sub-questions (c) and (d) **we find a commanding 71% who recognize in Jesus something spiritually dramatic and dynamic**, with still 41% stating Jesus to be "the only Son of God". What they understand by that remains open to conjecture, ranging from normative Christian insight, to some folk-memory of their grandparents' beliefs. Yet in this decidedly post-Christian and supposedly "secular" Western society, that 41% hold this belief is encouraging to genuine Christians.

#### Everyone prays sometimes

Question four encourages folk to share if they want to: 'have you ever had a spiritual experience or prayed?' That fully 72% acknowledge prayer, may be surprising. Within our UK population,

taken in aggregate, perhaps 5% (author's guesstimate) have a true saving faith in Jesus. A figure of 72% acknowledging prayer is perhaps surprising – and possibly encouraging. It may suggest, again, a folk memory and perhaps also the pull of the human soul made in the image of God.

What people pray about – and to whom they pray – are indeterminate factors! I recall on one TFM mission an out-and-out atheist acknowledging – sheepishly – "everyone prays sometimes, don't they?!" This is almost certainly true, but we need to remind people that the prayer of a righteous man availeth much (James 5:16) and that God is not obligated to answer, or even to 'hear' the prayer of the determined atheist – the impenitent sinner. That He graciously does so, on occasions, speaks greatly of His mercy and His philial love to all mankind. Answered prayer is a mercy, not a right ...

#### Are you interested?

Question five asked 'If you could know God personally, would you be interested?' 16% answered "no" – surely reflecting the broad atheism of our society. Remember, an atheist is not so much someone who does not believe. A true atheist is someone who hates and opposes God. It is the author's impression that those who most readily opted for this answer were older, white and middle class – perhaps a self-satisfied cohort that thinks it has "made it" in this life and managed successfully without God, thus far. They forget that the **RMS Titanic** made it four-fifths across the Atlantic, "safely thus far", until its fateful encounter with a large piece of ice!

That 40% state they 'would be interested' remains encouraging, especially for those engaged in evangelism. Quite often in Wolverhampton TFM 'missioners' gave out the "Knowing God Personally" booklet. What people make

of these booklets is often difficult to say; we pray they take time to read them and to respond by seeking God. **A few were happy to pray with 'missioners' on the street to receive Jesus as Lord and as Saviour**. Wonderful stuff! Others were happy to receive intercessory prayer. TFM are always happy to engage "where people are at" and where they feel their needs are.

Yet still 28% remain unsure. Whilst this might seem surprising (surely everyone would recognise they have an a-priori personal interest in knowing God) yet the figure is encouraging, suggesting that a big slice of our population would be willing to seek God **if only someone would show them how!**

#### In conclusion

The good folk of Wolverhampton are surely representative of the broader UK population. In countrified areas, as opposed to large conurbations, it might just be that sentiments and life experiences are sufficiently distinct to render minor differences to survey responses. But the numbers revealed above speak accurately enough for the whole UK. For Christians there remains much work to be done, but overall sentiments out there "on the street" are not as hostile as one might imagine. People still want to know about God, but are unsure the right steps to take.

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