

Germany, religious situation 2025

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According to the statistical publications of the DBK (German Catholic Bishops' Conference)¹ and the EKD (Protestant Bishops' Conference)² on the number of their faithful in Germany, the 2024 surveys indicate for the first time that the number of people claiming to be atheists will overtake those claiming to be Christians (Catholic or Protestant). The concept of atheism is undoubtedly complex to define, and undoubtedly encompasses a number of different positions (from outright atheism to agnosticism, to a faith with some doubts or perplexities), but in Germany, for the purposes of the regulations on the payment of Kirchensteuer, the church tax, anyone who does not declare himself a member of a specific religious confession is automatically classified as an 'atheist', not so much on the basis of an express declaration of atheism, but in the sense that he declares that he does not belong to any religious confession to which the church tax must be paid).

Having said that, the statistics show that 47% of people are atheists compared to 45% of people belonging to the Catholic and Protestant Churches. However, if we add Christians (Catholics and Protestants) to Muslims, Jews and members of other minority religious denominations, the total number of believers is 53%.

The trend, however, is clearly negative for Catholicism and Protestantism, which have fallen from 26,817,000 (DBK) and 26,613,000 (EKD) in 2000 to around 19,769,000 and 17,980,000 today.

Since, however, the data on religious affiliation in Germany are not differentiated on the basis of citizenship, other statistical studies have found that this year's overall figure, which caused such a stir, is also due to the counting of Ukrainian refugees, 64% of whom declare themselves to be atheists (a 20% actually atheists and 44% believers in God but not adherents of any institutional religious denomination) 33.5% Orthodox (including the faithful of the Moscow Patriarchate, those of the Kiev Patriarchate and those of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church), and the remaining 2.5% belonging to another religious faith (Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Roman Catholic Church, Protestant Churches, Jews and Muslims).

¹ <https://www.dbk.de/presse/aktuelles/meldung/kirchenstatistik-2024>

² <https://www.ekd.de/ekd-veroeffentlicht-mitgliederzahlen-2024-89315.htm>

There is also a growing distinction between practising Muslims (those who respect the five pillars of Islam) and cultural Muslims, i.e. people who, while claiming to be of the Islamic faith, admit that they do not follow the Koranic precepts or regularly attend a mosque.

The Statistical Office of the EKD (Protestant Churches) has drawn up a breakdown of the faithful into four categories:

I) The devout believers: the practising believers are firmly anchored in society

13 per cent of the German population belongs to the devout group, of which 14 per cent come from West Germany and nine per cent from East Germany; this type of orientation is characterised by a church-oriented religiosity, which is relevant to their respective world of life; the devout are socially integrated above average, usually have a relatively high school education and are well-positioned economically, have a high level of trust in social institutions and traditions; the average age is 54, the highest of all four types of religiosity.

II) Distant believers: they know what it is all about, even if you do not see them in church

A quarter of the population in Germany can be assigned to the group of the distant believers, of whom 27% are from West Germany and 13% from East Germany; in this group one cannot detect a closer social connection with institutional church structures; the people in this group are able to speak competently about their religion, even if they do not hide that they have questions, doubts and a personal idea of who or what God might be for them; the average age is 50.

III) Lay people versus institutional confessions and traditions

Fifty-six per cent of the German population belongs to the secular group, of which 73 per cent are East Germans and 53 per cent are West Germans; the members of this group state that religion plays no role in their lives; the average age of the secular is relatively low, at 47 years; for 68 per cent of the secular, self-realisation is important: in no other group is this percentage higher.

IV) The alternative, minority denominations

Six per cent of the German population falls into this category, which is characterised by a high acceptance of religious orientations away from the institutional churches; the members of this group value social commitment rather little and tend to have a low school education; they value creativity and self-realisation.

In general, however, according to DBK data, in 2024 an average total of 6.6 per cent of Catholics participated in church services on 'Counting Sundays' (with a range in dioceses of 4.5 to 14.4 per cent), while in regional Protestant churches, the percentage of participants in worship was 2.3 per cent.

Minority denominations: there is also a decline in the number of Jews: while there had been a gradual increase in numbers since 1990, reaching a record number of almost 108,000 Kirchensteuer worshippers

in 2006, a gradual decline began immediately afterwards, with only 90.550 people of the Jewish religion. Similarly, the New Apostolic Church is also affected by a gradual decline in the number of worshippers in Germany, which according to the latest figures now stands at 104,000; likewise in the case of the Methodist Church, whose three districts in Germany spiritually minister to 43,000 worshippers.

Among the reasons for the decline in numbers, besides the gradual disappearance of older believers, only partly replaced by new believers due to the demographic crisis, is the *Kirchenaustritt*, the formal declaration of withdrawal from the religious denomination to which one belongs. This is partly due to different reasons for the faithful of the Catholic Church and those of the Protestant Churches: former Catholics are more determined or more pronounced and multifaceted than former Protestants in their assessments of the importance of their reasons for leaving: For the former, the most frequently cited reasons are: ‘because I find the Church not very credible’ (83%), ‘because it did not protect children and people in need of protection from sexual abuse’ (82%) and ‘because I do not agree with some of the Church’s statements’ (76%), in fourth and fifth place come the reasons: ‘because I do not need religion in my life’ (64%) and ‘because I can believe even without a Church’ (58%).

Among former EKD evangelicals, on the other hand, the most important reasons cited were criticism of the clergy regarding sexual abuse (74%) and alienation: ‘Church not credible’ (68%), “I don’t need religion” (60%), “faith works without church” (52%), “faith is meaningless” (52%), ‘I don’t care about the church’ (46%); an identical 63% among the former EKD evangelicals also cite the desire to save church tax as the reason for their *Kirchenaustritt*; These withdrawals, however, occurring mainly among the younger age groups of the faithful, have a limited effect on the finances of the DBK and the EKD, compensated by the increasing payments of the older faithful with higher incomes.

The importance of distinguishing administrative registration in a religious denomination from personal belief in the teachings of the same religious denomination is underlined by a joint DBK-EKD statistical survey last March, according to which even among Catholics and Protestants there is a certain percentage of the faithful who, while remaining registered with the Catholic and Protestant Churches, declare themselves to be atheists: 13% of Catholics and 16% of registered Protestants: from this it appears that indeed, adding only the *de vera fide* faithful and not also those *traditionis causa*, in Germany, despite the indefatigable pastoral zeal of the EKD and DBK (culminating most recently with the *Synodaler Weg*), the population is today in a large majority purely and simply atheist.

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