

The 2011 Census: Initial view on content for England and Wales

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY
POSSIBLE CONTENT OF 2011 CENSUS:
CONSULTATION RESPONSE
TO THE OFFICE OF NATIONAL STATISTICS.
AUGUST 2005

Call for responses on <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/consultations/2011Census.asp> (but this may since have been removed).

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Topic or classification

Ethnicity identity and religion

If responding about a classification, which topics are required to derive it?

1. Why is the information required?

The National Secular Society is the longest established (1866) and best known organisation representing the non-religious of all strands UK-wide.

Unless otherwise specified, comments below relate solely to the section of 2001 Census or the Census consultation on religion and belief.

Recommendations are in bold.

1.1 Establishing a detailed picture

A much more accurate and detailed picture needs to be established about the nation's beliefs than was the case in 2001 because:

- a) The Government is committed to introducing faith-based welfare and increasing the proportion of religious schools, which will entail substantial capital expenditure. Whatever the Society's views on the merits of such policies, a much greater understanding of the religious landscape is needed to ascertain the extent to which such changes are appropriate, and to the extent that they are adjudged appropriate, to plan them in an evidence based way. The necessary information for resource allocation could in our view only adequately be achieved from surveying the whole population, allowing detailed geographic subsets to be extracted.
- b) Anti-discrimination regulations were introduced in 2003 for employment (Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003) and are in the course of being introduced for goods and services (Equality Bill 2005). A far more detailed analysis is needed of the religious and belief profile of the nation to assist with resource allocation in connection with the implementation and monitoring of these and other related Equality measures.
- c) Over recent decades, the emergence of identity politics has changed the way in which the Government and those in minority ethnic groups relate to each other. Many who had previously regarded themselves primarily as belonging to geographic identities now prefer to be addressed as part of a religious minority. Such evolving complexities require the Government to have a much more detailed picture of the relationship between the two types of identity. In particular much more needs to be known about the extent to which particular minority ethnic groups

identify with and practise the predominant group religion. Detailed geographic information would also be useful to central government in this aspect.

d) Measures to assess, analyse and alleviate ethnic and religious tensions can only be aided by unambiguous consistent and detailed information. What we are recommending should assist in this process.

e) The Home Office's own Citizenship Survey¹ published in 2001 concentrates on religious adherents but provides scant information about the significant proportion who are not. That such a survey was commissioned underlines the importance the Government places on having comprehensive information about the population's religion, albeit it seems, at least at the time this report was commissioned, that the Government was less concerned to learn about the significant proportion without a religious belief, even as a control group. We hope that any further Citizenship Survey shows a more even-handed approach. Having a much smaller number of respondents, difficulty was experienced in obtaining accurate information about ethnic and religious minorities, as random sampling techniques did not select sufficient respondents for the information to be used with confidence. Instead, rather less refined techniques had to be resorted to. It may be possible to reduce the need for such less refined techniques to an extent by asking more detailed questions in the Census.

1.2 Problems with the methodology in the 2001 Census for England and Wales

Prior to the 2001 Census we formally opposed the questions of religion being included, and we continue to do so for the next Census, on two principal grounds:

(a) religion or belief is a private and sensitive matter and it is an intrusion of privacy for the state to collect such data in a manner which requires this information to be given to or by the head of the household for completion on the form.

(b) The statistics arising from the method used would give a grossly exaggerated picture of religious adherence, especially in England and Wales. As the head of household is likely to be

¹ Religion in England and Wales: findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (Home Office Research Study 274) <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors274.pdf>

older than the other householders, he/she is more likely to be religious², and more likely to record the religion/belief as he would like it, and perhaps even thinks it may be, rather than it actually is. This is likely to apply even more so to minority religions households, as those from minority religions regard their religion as much more fundamental to their identity³. **We make a recommendation in 7.2(c) below on a method of minimising this distortion.**

The wording of the question in England and Wales “What is your religion?” is imprecise to the point of being unprofessional. It is distinctly at odds with the acknowledgement on the Office for National Statistics’ own website, which states⁴: “The way in which people answer questions on religion is very sensitive to the exact question wording. This is particularly true for people who have a loose affiliation with a religion. *Slight differences in question wording can produce large differences in the proportion of people who say they are Christians or have no religion*, although the proportion of people from other religions tends to be more stable.”

The 2001 wording “What is your religion?” also compounds the potential for overstatement by only giving the option, unless they refuse to answer, of being a particular religion or none. Ticking the “none” box will be regarded by many respondents with no involvement with Christianity as being tantamount to saying they are without any cultural or moral values – not, presumably, the aim of the question. The vast majority with this concern will tick the “Christian” box as they will have been brought up in a — however nominally — Christian society where, for example, the provision of a daily act of mainly Christian worship remains a legal requirement in maintained schools. Other “cultural Christians” will tick the “Christian” box, because Christian or CofE is regarded in practice as the default option on forms for admission to hospital or when joining the armed forces.

² “Levels of religious affiliation were higher for women than men, and for those of middle and older ages. This pattern is most noticeable within the Christian and Jewish faith communities.” Home Office Research Study 274 Religion in England and Wales: findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (Page viii)

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors274.pdf>

³ “Only 20 per cent of respondents felt their religious beliefs to be an important part of their sense of self-identity. However, this proportion was significantly higher for members of minority ethnic groups.” Ibid (Page vii).

⁴ Office for National Statistics Religion data for Great Britain

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=984&Pos=&ColRank=2&Rank=448>

Evidence bearing out the above

The objections about the methodology resulting in exaggerated figures for religious affiliation (and consequent significant understatement of the number of non-religious) is borne out by comparison with other surveys, in particular:

- a) comparisons with the more detailed figures for Scotland with those for England & Wales. More details are given in the response to question 5 below.
- b) Appendix 1 gives a selection of alternative studies showing much lower percentage figures for Christianity which when taken in total bear out the reasons given above why the Christian proportion resulting from the 2001 England and Wales Census was exaggerated.

1.3 Implication of above problems for the 2011 Census

Unless any changes are made, the above problems remain for the 2011 Census, and for the following reason we think the distortions will increase. We are convinced that a significant proportion of those without any religious faith who chose “none” in the 2001 Census will opt in future Censuses for “Christian” in order to identify themselves as culturally Western in order to differentiate themselves from the minority faiths whose visibility is becoming more evident. This will yet further exaggerate the Christian numbers.

Negative Recommendation

For the reasons given above, we consider that it would be preferable to withdraw a religious question altogether if the only alternative was the England and Wales 2001 religious question “What is your religion?”.

On the other hand, we agree that on balance the question should be asked if the changes we detail below to the question are adopted for future censuses.

Positive Recommendation

We acknowledge, however, that, having embarked on religious questions throughout the United Kingdom, Government agencies are unlikely now to abandon collecting data on religion in any part of the United Kingdom, so we are seeking to make the case for questions to be asked which will enable more accurate and realistic statistics to be produced.

We still however object to questions of religion being addressed to the “head of household” on the grounds that belief is a private matter, and are convinced that collecting data in this way is

highly likely, we contend, to result in the views of other household members being distorted or misrepresented.

In the 2001 Census the Scottish questions came the nearest to being comprehensive and accurate by acknowledging the statistically significant distinction (both qualitatively and quantitatively) between the subjects' religion of upbringing and their religion at the time of the Census, and asking about both. This double question has enabled research to be undertaken which has given a much better understanding of religious belief and adherence in Scotland, such as that carried out by Prof Steve Bruce and Tony Glendinning at the University of Aberdeen.

In general, we therefore recommend adoption of the 2001 Scottish model of asking about religion, firstly,

“What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?” followed by “What religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in?”

This would also make comparisons across the UK more simple and open.

We would however urge one small modification. As is shown below, a former Cabinet statistician Dr Peter Brierley, acknowledges the off-putting nature of the “none” answer for the non-religious in the English Census.

We would therefore ask that these questions be asked in a more open and less intimidating way. This can be achieved by splitting each question into two stages:

1 a) Do you belong to any religion, religious denomination or body? (yes/no).

1 b) If “yes” “What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?”

Then

2 a) Were you brought up in any religion, religious denomination or body? (yes/no).

2 b) If “yes” What religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in?

The second question in the Scottish model used the phrase “do you belong to”, which in our view is an absolute minimum test to obtain an answer that has any legitimacy in terms of current religion, as opposed to the religion of upbringing (which is of much less significance).

3. We strongly advocate a further question, 1c) “Are you a practising member of your religion?” (yes/no).

If a question along these lines were regarded as excessive, the first question should revert to “**what religion do you practise?**” as being a more specific question which identifies those for whom religion is a relevant force in their lives. This is surely an important, probably the most important question to be asked in this area, and indeed we would suggest it if, regrettably, it was decided that only one question were to be asked.

We are aware that suggestions will have been made for a more detailed breakdown of religious denominations/sects. We do not particularly oppose these, provided the much simpler “practising” question is also included.

We emphasise the need for a consistent, relevant model for collecting data on religion and belief across the UK.

2. Why is this information required for small population groups and/or small geographies?

As noted in 1.1(a) above: “The Government is committed to introducing faith based welfare and increasing the proportion of religious schools, which will entail substantial capital expenditure. ... The necessary information for resource allocation could in our view be only adequately achieved from surveying the whole population, allowing detailed geographic subsets to be extracted.”

Geographic information is also needed or highly beneficial for items 1.1 b) to 1. e) above, as well as providing a more accurate picture of the actual geographical distribution of religion/belief in England and Wales if the Scottish style questions are adopted for the whole of the UK.

3. What assessment of alternative sources of information has been carried out? What would be the impact of using the next best alternative?

An irregular but frequent sequence of private surveys on religion and belief system have been and will continue to be commissioned from reputable organisations such as MORI, often by the media. They have exposed serious discrepancies with past national statistics. A study of these discrepancies should help improve the quality and value of the national statistics.

In the Appendix some examples are given of other surveys which show a much greater proportion of non-religious/non-believers.

4. Which other topics, if any, are required for multivariate analyses together with this topic?

5. Why is it important that this information is available for the UK as a whole?

No meaningful comparisons can be made between the different parts of the UK when (as was the case in 2001) substantially different questions are asked. We have seen the contention made in print several times that, based on figures in the Census, Scotland is less religious than England (and sometimes, Wales).

This confusion extends to official documents. The official Chief Statistician in Scotland observed in a report⁵ that: “Results from other UK Censuses suggest that people in Northern Ireland, England and Wales are more likely to identify with a religion than those in Scotland. Around 86% of people in Northern Ireland and 77% of those in England and Wales report having a religion, compared with only 67% of people in Scotland. *However, it is difficult to make a direct comparison since there was only one question asked in England and Wales*

⁵ANALYSIS OF RELIGION IN THE 2001 CENSUS, Summary Report, Office of the Chief Statistician. February 2005, ISBN: 0-7559-3912-3 (Page 7) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00398.pdf>

‘What is your religion?’ as opposed to the two separate questions which were asked in Scotland”. (Our emphasis)

Other compelling evidence (borne out by anecdotal evidence) points strongly to the opposite conclusion: people in England and Wales (but admittedly not in the much less populous Northern Ireland) are much *less* likely to identify with a religion than those in Scotland. Total Church attendance in 2000 was 11.9% in Scotland, but only 7.3 % in England and 7.7% in Wales. Church membership figures for 2000 were 19.6%, for Scotland as against 7.6% and 9.8% for England and Wales respectively. Each membership figure was lower by around 0.4% in 2001, so the figures for each country remained almost identical relative to each other. Figures for minority faiths would add about 3% for England⁶ and lesser percentages for the other countries of the UK.

6. Will this information ensure continuity with previous Censuses?

Our proposals for the Scottish questions to be adopted throughout the UK will ensure uniformity throughout the UK and continuity in Scotland. Continuity with England and Wales could be achieved broadly if the existing figures were regarded as the religion of upbringing, as we think is broadly appropriate.

⁶ UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 4 2003/2004 Ed Dr Peter Brierley Tables 2.21, 2.24, 4.2 and 10.6 Publ by Christian Research 2003 ISBN 1-85321-149-4 (3% estimate based on 1.6 million membership for minority faiths in England with a population of around 49 million – sourced from the tables shown above in this footnote.)

7. Do you have any other comments relevant to this consultation?

The 2001 England and Wales census figures gave an unnecessarily exaggerated picture of the extent of religious belief given on the official website “focus on religion” for the reasons noted in response to Question 1.

7.1 Inappropriate Presentation

We will be making a formal complaint that this inbuilt overstatement has been compounded by inappropriate presentation of the data on the official www.statistics.gov.uk website:

The Scottish “religion of upbringing” statistics, rather than current religion, were used in the synthesis of UK statistics⁷. We note that the decision to opt for “upbringing” rather than “belonging” gave the highest possible percentage of Christians and the flawed logic of this is displayed in the underlined passage in the footnote⁸.

We also note with regret that the use of such figures did not give rise to the title of the table to be renamed or subtitled “religion of upbringing”, even though this is what it would most approximate to, given that it is well established from other surveys that Scotland is more religious than England and Wales.

Indeed, this view is not only endorsed by the official Chief Statistician in Scotland, but he indicates that this view is borne out by investigations by the Office of National Statistics (for England and Wales)⁹: “Investigations by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggest that the responses to the question in England and Wales are most likely to reflect peoples’ religion of upbringing¹⁰ rather than whether they are currently practising in any faith. Thus it is probably more informative to compare the results from the rest of the UK with the response to the

⁷ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/ci/nugget.asp?id=954>

⁸ The 2001 Census in Scotland asked two questions on religion: current religion and religion of upbringing. Neither of these was the same as the Census question asked in England and Wales. The 'religion of upbringing' question produced very similar results to England and Wales 2001 Census data and therefore data from this question has been combined with England and Wales data in the Focus on religion report to produce overall figures for Great Britain. Source:

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=984&Pos=4&ColRank=1&Rank=176>

⁹ ANALYSIS OF RELIGION IN THE 2001 CENSUS, Summary Report, Office of the Chief Statistician. February 2005, ISBN: 0-7559-3912-3 (Page 7) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00398.pdf>

¹⁰ (Ibid Footnote 2 “Investigations were carried out comparing the responses to the religion question in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) with those from the England and Wales Census. The LFS asks people to list their religion, even if they are no longer practising. The proportions responding to each category are very similar to the proportions in the Census suggesting that the England and Wales Census question was completed in relation to religion of upbringing rather than current religion.” <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00398-11.asp>

Scottish question on religion of upbringing which shows 74% reporting having been brought up in a faith.”

As set out in the final table in the Appendix (Analysis of Religion in the 2001 Census (Scottish figures, from the Scottish Executive) there is a substantial difference between the upbringing and belonging. *There is therefore a significant distortion of the England and Wales figures in overstating religious affiliation and substantially understating the No Religion figure. The table suggests the non-religious figure should probably be over a half higher, in fact 57.2% higher.*

In our view, there is no entirely satisfactory method of compiling UK figures while such inconsistent bases remain for the different countries, but it is preferable for the Scottish “belong to” figures rather than religion of upbringing to be used in compiling all UK totals, and for it to be acknowledged that the figures in total represent tend to religion at upbringing rather than current religion.

We also noted that on another ONS website page¹¹ in the *Focus on Religion* series the percentage figures are based on the population excluding those who did not state their religion. We recognise that this was done to aid comparison with the Labour Force Survey where there was not an option not to state religion, and accept that the ONS has not sought to put forward the higher resultant percentages for religions in any other context.

Nevertheless, for the reasons shown below, we consider both the adjusted Census percentages and the LFS percentages to be distorted. We hope that the LFS figures can in future be collected giving a not stated option, as without this we believe that the religious figure will be overstated and the non-religious figure materially understated. We offer two pieces of evidence to support this contention:

(i) Former Cabinet Office statistician Dr Peter Brierley, Executive Director of Christian Research, which publishes the authoritative *Religious Trends* wrote to me on 8 August 2005 by email: “I write to confirm that in my opinion the many who didn't answer the Religion question in the 2001 Census are very likely to be those with no religion, and simply couldn't be bothered to tick the (rather definite) ‘No religion’ box. They will therefore include agnostics, and perhaps a few folk, like Jews, who might be afraid to declare their religion (like some Catholics

¹¹ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=984&Pos=4&ColRank=1&Rank=176>

in N Ireland).” I approached Dr Brierley because he has also expressed a similar view in a newspaper article.

(ii) In the British Social Attitudes Survey 2001, by the National Centre for Social Research, respondents were asked: “Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?” While only 1% Refused/did not answer, 41 % said “none”. (Sources are shown in Appendix.)

We recommend that if the “not stated” figure is eliminated in tables, it should be combined with the “none” figure and described as “none/not stated” or “none” with an explanatory note along the lines given above by Dr Brierley.

On the other hand, we are not aware of any ways in which the methodology used or presentation of figures has caused the population’s religion to be understated.

7.2 Other points

Consultation document 2011 census

(a) **Ethnicity identity and religion (point 3.5) p11**

From previous samples and surveys over recent years, one third of the UK population do not profess to any religion, but do follow strong moral and ethical beliefs. A more accurate title would be 'belief system', rather than religion (or in addition to). Or are we to exclude this one third of the population from the survey?

(b) **Socio-demographic context**

Re: 13 Conclusions

- a. If the Internet is to be used to collect information, will it be possible to ensure data security, and to counter the possibility of false entries being used to skew the final statistics in this sensitive area of religion?
- b. If the Internet is used, then does that mean that sample sizes will be significantly bigger, and so results more accurate?

(c) **A general point on head of household completion**

The use of additional detailed 'infill' sampling used in the last census, in the 'Ethnicity identity and religion' category raised cause for concern, and questions of bias in data (e.g. as referred to in 1.2 (b) above with questions only addressed to the 'head of household', where the views of other household members can be misrepresented). Can this approach be avoided in the 2011 survey?

We strongly recommend using IT solutions to enable input by individuals rather than heads of households, provided security is sufficient to eliminate distortion of legitimate data, completion of data on behalf of others by impostors or data being submitted in respect of fictitious individuals.

APPENDIX

A selection of alternative studies showing much lower percentage figures for Christianity

**1. British Social Attitudes Survey,
National Centre for Social Research
Belonging to a religion, Great Britain, 2001¹²**

Religion	%
Church of England / Anglican	29
Catholic	11
Other Christian	14
Other faiths	4
None	41
Refused/did not answer	1
OVERALL	100

2. MORI - British electors source (Base 4,270) – Source: The *Tablet* 21 May 2005 page 4.
4. Share of the Vote

RELIGION	% of Adults
Catholics	11
Other Christians	56
All Christian	67
Other religions	8
None	24
OVERALL	100

3. World Values Survey 2000¹³

According to a study by the Swedish-based World Values Survey conducted in 2000, 55% of people in Britain “‘never’ or ‘practically never’ attend church”. Britain had the 2nd highest (after France) percentage of people in this category of the twelve western European countries surveyed.

4. National Centre for Social Research 2004 :*Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12 to 19 Year Olds*¹⁴

Nine in ten respondents described themselves as white. Five per cent were Asian, two per cent Black, and three per cent of mixed origin.

¹² Source: British Social Attitudes Survey, quoted in UK 2003 (London: TSO 2002), Table 15.1 Answers to "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?"

¹³ Source: World Values Survey ChurchgoingInWeurope.doc

¹⁴ 2.2.3 Ethnicity, religion and national identity (ISBN 1 84478 291 3)

A third of young people described themselves as belonging to a religion, with the majority, just over a quarter, belonging to a Christian religion. *Two thirds did not regard themselves as belonging to any religion*, an increase of ten percentage points in as many years (from 55 per cent in 1994 to 65 per cent in 2003).

5. Religion in England and Wales: findings from a 2001 Home Office Survey

(Home Office Research Study 274 <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors274.pdf>)

This last example does not refer specifically to the percentage of Christians, but it shows how low religious belief is ranked in determining identity.

Table 3.1 (extract): “Which of the following things would say something important about you, if you were describing yourself?”

[Ranking]	Factors	%
1	Your family	71
2	Kind of work you do	48
3	Age and life stage	42
4	Your interests	41
5	Level of education	32
6	Your nationality	29
7	Your gender	21
8	Level of income	20
9	Your religion	20

6. University of Manchester, Centre for Census and Survey Research – Study by Dr David Voas and team: *The British Household Panel Study and Key Issues in Religious Changes*¹⁵ published August 2005

“Religious belief is declining faster than attendance at services in the UK, according to a new study funded by the ESRC which found that parents’ beliefs, practices and affiliations have the biggest impact on children.

“The catchphrase ‘believing without belonging’ - found in much European research over the past decade - is wrong, at least in its usual interpretation, says a team led by Dr David Voas of the University of Manchester.

“Far from religious belief being relatively strong and robust, fewer people now have real faith than passively 'belong' to a religion. While ethnic minorities are increasingly important to religious life in Britain, the trend for them is similar, albeit from a much higher starting point.”

¹⁵ http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2005-08/esr-fap081505.php Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council Economic & Social Research Council Contact: Becky Gammon becky.gammon@esrc.ac.uk tel 01793-413 122 Text selected is extracted from ESRC press release.

7. ANALYSIS OF RELIGION IN THE 2001 CENSUS (Scottish figures, from the Scottish Executive)¹⁶ **Table 1.2: Current Religion and Religion of Upbringing – All People**

	Religion of Upbringing %	Current Religion %	Increase or decrease	Relative increase or decrease %
Roman Catholic	16.98	15.88	-1.10	-6.48
Other Christian	8.38	6.81	-1.57	-18.74
Buddhist	0.09	0.13	0.04	44.44
Hindu	0.12	0.11	-0.01	-8.33
Jewish	0.15	0.13	-0.02	-13.33
Muslim	0.83	0.84	0.01	1.20
Sikh	0.13	0.13	0.00	0.00
Another Religion	0.17	0.53	0.36	211.76
All Religions	74.12	66.96	-7.16	-9.66
No religion	17.53	27.55	10.02	57.16
Not Answered	8.35	5.49	-2.86	-34.25
All no relig./ Not Answ'd	25.88	33.04	7.16	27.67

In broad terms, as demonstrated in 7.1 above, the % difference figure also represents the degree of distortion resulting from the use of what approximate to religion of upbringing figures to be current figures, as we consider to be the case for England and Wales.

As shown, in the case of “No religion”, the figure should be 57.16% higher.

¹⁶ *Analysis Of Religion In The 2001 Census* Summary Report Office of the Chief Statistician (of the Scottish Executive) February 2005 **Source** <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00398.pdf> The NSS has calculated an additional new final column which expresses the change which has taken place between ‘religion of upbringing’ and ‘current religion’ as a percentage of the upbringing column. We have also added positive and negative signs to the penultimate column and emboldened and enlarged some figures add emphasis.