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Census 2021 outputs: content design and release phase proposals

Submitted by email to: census.outputs@ons.gov.uk

This submission is made by the National Secular Society (NSS). The NSS is a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. We uphold the universality of individual human rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture.

We welcome this opportunity to respond to the Office for National Statistics' consultation on the census 2021 outputs.

We acknowledge that over the decades, the census question on religion and belief, and subsequent reporting on the findings, has changed many times to reflect the UK's rapidly-changing religion and belief landscape. However, one aspect has not changed – the question, and subsequent outputs, continue to refer to "religion", rather than "religion or belief". This is despite the fact that other surveys consistently show the UK population is increasingly irreligious.

We therefore call for outputs on the Census 2021 to refer to "religion or belief" where possible and appropriate. We also call for the 'religion question', and subsequent outputs, in all future censuses to be phrased in a manner that is inclusive of the nonreligious.

The question "What is your religion?" is not inclusive of the nonreligious because it assumes that all people do, or should, have a religion. It may even implicitly suggest that it is desirable to have a religion, and that those who do not have a religion are somehow deficient or less valued.

We believe the wording of the question leads to inaccurate figures on how many people in England and Wales do or do not belong to a religion, as the question encourages a bias towards individuals answering that they have a religion, rather than not. Other surveys using less biased wording (for example, NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey asks "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?") consistently record higher levels of people responding that they have no religion than the census:

- 52% of British people have no religion. The figure has risen from 48% since 2015 and 31% since 1983. (NatCen, 2019 <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-36/religion.aspx>)
- Just 27% of people in the UK believe in a god or gods. (YouGov, 2021 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/trackers/brits-beliefs-about-gods>)

- 60% of Brits do not think religion is important in their lives. This has increased from 39% in 2006.
(Pew Research Center, 2020 <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/20/the-global-god-divide/>)
- 70% of 16- to 29-year-olds in the UK say they have no religion and 59% say they never attend a religious service. (European Social Survey, 2018
<https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/europe-s-young-adults-and-religion.aspx>)

The government's own testing of census questions confirms that the wording of the religion question distorts the data. In test surveys for the previous census, the question "Which of these best describes you?" increased the proportion saying they had no religion compared with "What is your religion, even if not currently practising?", followed by a list of religions.

Census data is one of the most important data sources for policy-makers. If the number of nonreligious people is inaccurately recorded by the census due to its biased question on religion, this will translate into policy-making that is not aligned with the religion and belief make-up of the population. It is already the case that religious interests are over-represented in policy-making – for example, in the House of Lords, where 26 seats are reserved for Anglican bishops. Census data that suggests more people belong to a religion than not means the views and needs of the nonreligious are marginalised even further.

The treatment of religion and belief in the census is also out-of-step with equality law. The Equality Act 2010 establishes that "religion or belief", not simply "religion", is a protected characteristic. Both the wording of the law and case law clearly establishes that non-religious people are entitled to equal protection from discrimination and other unfair treatment as religious people. The wording of the Census question is not in line with equality law by implying that people are religious by default.

We therefore call for outputs on the Census 2021 to refer to "religion or belief" where possible and appropriate.

We also call for the 'religion question', and subsequent outputs, in all future censuses to be phrased in a manner that is inclusive of the nonreligious.