

British Humanist Association

Examples of misuse of Census 2001 data on religion

(Revised: January 2011)

The question ‘What is your religion?’ was first included on the Census in 2001. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) had to justify this inclusion by making clear why the data that this question will create will be of particular use in the creation of policy and legislation. ONS claimed this data could be used in a number of fields, including resource allocation, meeting legislative requirements, policy targeting, working with ‘faith communities’, identifying and tackling discrimination, meeting equality targets, and policy development.

In order for the Census data to be able to be used effectively in these areas, it must be reliable: that is, it must measure what it is supposed to measure. However, the way the religion question is worded on the Census means that the information is *not* reliable: it appears to measure religious belief, but actually measures something much weaker, more like cultural affiliation. We can tell this because other surveys, which word the question differently, give the result that there are many more non-religious people. For example, whereas the 2001 Census only measured 15% of the population as non-religious, the British Social Attitude Survey conducted in the same year measured over 40% to be so. Indeed, even the ONS has admitted that the religion question is an inadequate gauge of religious belief, stating that ‘[w]e [the ONS] acknowledge that the Census question does not measure religious practice and that for some user needs (particularly service planning) a measure of practice may be more useful’.¹

The problem, then, is when the data from the religion question in the last Census is used incorrectly to justify policies as a statistic about religious belief or practice rather than cultural affiliation. Incorrect use of the Census data in this way would likely lead to non-religious people being excluded from some community initiatives; they may be disadvantaged by the disproportionate allocation of resources to those perceived as religious, and they may not be included fully in democratic processes and civic engagement. Furthermore, misuse of the data could lend support to various policy initiatives which

Here, we give a number of examples of when the Census data has been misused in exactly this way.

1. Chairwoman of the Conservative Party and Government Minister Baroness Warsi², when addressing the Bishops of the Church of England, used the data to argue that the role of faith in Britain is on the increase. She went on to argue that the new Government does “do God”, will “defend people of faith” and that the previous government failed to “create policies to unleash the positive power of faith in our society” because of anti-religious prejudices.
2. Rt. Hon. Hazel Blears³ included the statistic that “more than three quarters of us in the UK consider ourselves to have a faith” in a foreword to the Labour Government’s ‘interfaith strategy’. This suggests that the Census data had a major part in the rationale for creating the interfaith strategy, which was accompanied by £7.5 million in funding from the Government. However, using the Census data on religion in this way means that resources will be unfairly allocated to the religious community.
3. The Labour government Minister Rt Hon Stephen Timms⁴ outlined the then Government’s position on religion, using the Census data to justify wide and varied resources being allocated to religious groups, as

1 Letter from the Office for National Statistics to the British Humanist Association, 11th April 2008

2 September 2010

3 CLG – ‘Face to Face and Side by Side. A framework for partnership in our multi faith society’. July 2008 – see <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/898668.pdf>

4 <http://faithaction.net/resources/Keynote%20Address.doc>

well as the growing influence of religion on the state, on the basis that the Census data ‘proves’ the central place of active religious belief and practice to the vast majority of the nation.

4. The Census data was relied upon by the Labour Government in serving their aim of opening up wide areas of the public service to contracts with religious groups. Mr. Jim Murphy⁵, then Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform, said in a speech in Manchester “[T]here is not an entirely secular solution to achieve social cohesion in our communities. . . I believe faith groups can play a pivotal role in delivering success in welfare reform over the next decade.” The Census is, in effect, being used to justify a less secular and more sectarian approach to government and governance in a worryingly undemocratic way. Even if the Census data did record that 80% of the population were deeply religious and this was their primary identity (as the Minister suggests in his use of the data), it would still be hard to justify this level of privilege.
5. The DCSF report ‘Faith in the System’⁶, uses data on religion from the Census to illustrate ‘need’ for such schools and to justify further provision: “Census figures show that in 2001 there were 5,098,930 Christian children, 376,340 Muslim children, 62,237 Sikh children, 33,292 Jewish children and 82,952 Hindu children aged between four and 15 in England . . . The Government recognises the aspirations of these and other faith communities to secure more schools and school places to offer education in accordance with the tenets of their faith.” Census data on religion are not suitable for this use, given that they say nothing about practice, belief, belonging, whether religion is an important part of identity, whether people would rather have religious-targeted rather than inclusive, ‘neutral’ services (education) and so on.
6. The Lord Bishop of Manchester⁷ used the Census data in support of the “need” for “spiritual content in broadcasting”, claiming that “the regulator must support broadcasters who are seeking peak time for high-quality religious and spiritual content.” He also cites a Guardian editorial, which claims that “the census figures are reminders that religion in general, and the church in particular, are not marginal anachronisms doomed to terminal decline in modern society. On the contrary they seem to be remarkably resilient and enduring parts of the social order”.
7. Rt. Hon. Jack Straw MP⁸, the then Leader of the House of Commons, used the Census data in support of religious organisations carrying out public functions. Specifically, he used it to align himself with the “position of the vast majority of this country, 70 per cent of whom declared themselves to be Christian in the 2001 census, and there are many who subscribe to other religions”. People’s views on secularism (favouring separation of church and state) cannot, of course, be derived from their religious affiliation, identity or practice.
8. During a debate over the Patient (Assisted Dying) Bill, The Lord Bishop of St Albans⁹ claimed: “A number of noble Lords have referred, in passing, to us living in a secular society. It is one of those phrases that goes unchallenged. I simply suggest, again in passing, that the most recent census figures would indicate that, yes, of course fewer people attend and practise their belief in specific religious buildings, but the levels of belief and spirituality in our nation are huge. To describe us as secular is simply not accurate.”
9. In discussing the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, the Lord Bishop of Durham¹⁰ refers to the ‘fact’ that “it is Jesus himself, not some power-hungry demigod of the same name, who stands at the heart of the faith professed by over 70 per cent of people in our country and whose strange presence continues to haunt and challenge our culture in ways that many understandably find disturbing but to which we on these Benches do our best to bear witness.”

5 <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/aboutus/2007/19-02-07.asp>

6 DCSF (2007) Faith in the System. The role of schools with a religious character in English education and society. London: DCSF

7 Lords Hansard, 22 May 2003

8 Question in the House of Commons, 25th January 2007

9 Lords Hansard, 6 Jun 2003

10 Lords Hansard, 5 Mar 2008

10. During a debate on faith communities, Lord Bishop of Chester¹¹ cited the Census data as a preliminary to the question “Does the Minister agree that the need to consult the faith communities is one of the key priorities of the 21st century?” The Census data are used here to seek a privileged position for ‘faith communities’, based on the false assumption that the data record active participation in the community and wider society on the basis of faith. The Government has in practice given faith communities just such a privileged position.
11. In a discussion over multiculturalism, Lord Alton of Liverpool¹² defended the role of faith in the public sphere. He claimed, against secularism, that to separate people into what ‘defines them as citizens’ as compared to “what defines them as people” would lead to “systematic alienation and greater fragmentation, not to cohesion”. He used the Census data in defence of this claim.
12. During a debate on the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, Baroness O’Cathain¹³ used the Census data in defence of the statement that “the Church of England has been duped”. She also reminds “your Lordships that the Coronation Oath, the Monarch as defender of the faith, the establishment of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, together with the blasphemy law, constitute an explicit denial that Britain is a secular state.”
13. Hampshire County Council uses Census data on religion as a source of County demography. This data is used to create a demographic profile of Hampshire and “each service can then draw on this to assist with service planning”.
14. Derbyshire County Council uses the Census data for predicting potential service provision needs of its residents, “cultural/religious issues can be important in things such as personal care services for example”. The Council also use the data for its community cohesion initiatives.
15. Wandsworth Borough Council uses the Census data for demographic overviews of the Borough and as a baseline for Equality Impact Assessments.
16. The City of London Police ‘Faith Equality Scheme’¹⁴ presents the Census data with no provisos. Data from the Census are used to ‘tailor’ services to the local population based on religion. This is despite the fact that the data merely aim to measure affiliation/identity and not religious activity or involvement in the religious community. Resources are allocated directly based on the Census data.
17. The Croydon Borough Council includes the data from the religion section of the 2001 Census to give a demographic overview of the Croydon area.

In examining these examples, one can bear witness to the many ways in which the Census data has been misused in policy making. To present the data as a statistic about religious belief rather than cultural affiliation is to misrepresent the beliefs of people living in England and Wales, and to gives disproportionate bias to those who actually have religious belief.

11 Lords Hansard 22 October 2003

12 Lords Hansard for 7 Jun 2007

13 Lords Hansard for 5 Mar 2008

14 City of London Police. Faith Equality Scheme. February 2007