

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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CONTENT OF THE 2011 CENSUS

Details have recently been released of the questions it is intended will be asked in the 2011 Census in the UK.

The proposed content has still to be approved by Parliament, but if all goes according to plan, the 2011 Census will include a voluntary question about people's religious adherence, but there will be no questions about income or sexuality.

The format of the question on religion will be similar to that used in 2001. The question will ask: What is your religion? The following response options will then be given:

No religion

Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)

Buddhist

Hindu

Jewish

Muslim

Sikh

Any other religion, write in

If instead of ticking the 'Christian' box, adherents to particular Christian groups 'write in' the name of their association or denomination, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which conducts the Census, will automatically add them into the 'Christian' category, if it is clear that the group comes within the ONS's broad definition of 'Christian.'

Although it is the only voluntary question, in 2001 the religious question was answered by 92.29% of respondents in England and Wales. Under the headings given above, these broke down as follows:

	%		%		%
No religion	14.81	Jewish	00.50	Buddhist	00.28
Christian	71.75	Muslim	02.97	Sikh	00.63
Hindu	01.06	Other religion	00.29		
				Total	92.29

Some of those who chose not to answer the religious question are also very likely to come within the ONS definition of 'Christian,' which would make the 'Christian' figure – by whatever definition the respondents might use to justify placing themselves in that category – even higher.

Given that no-one was compelled to answer the question, let alone to tick the 'Christian' box, the proportion of people claiming a 'Christian' allegiance is remarkably high, and can be used to show the government and other authorities and influential institutions and agencies that there is nothing disproportionate about recognising a national Christian ethos and adopting assumptions consistent with Christianity.

The topics of income and sexuality were thoroughly considered for inclusion in the 2011 Census, but in the end the ONS came to the conclusion that too many people would either not answer these questions reliably or would ignore them, or it would deter them from completing the Census return at all. A pilot project in 2007 showed that where an income question was asked, 2.7% more people failed to respond to the survey at all, and 9% of those who did respond ignored the income question.

A trial survey in Scotland in 2006 resulted in one in seven people failing to answer a sexuality question. As this number of defaulters far outweighed the number of respondents who declared a non-heterosexual orientation, it meant that the survey results were all but useless.

Rod Badams

The above was published in The Bulletin [March 2009]

Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.