

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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WHAT THE 2011 CENSUS IS ABOUT TO REVEAL

Fears that the 2011 national census may show a steep decline in the proportion of the British population claiming to be 'Christian' are likely to prove unfounded, in spite of an advertising campaign by the British Humanist Association.

Compared with the findings of the 2001 census, there will be a modest drop in the numbers professing to be 'Christian,' but two-thirds of the population will still be stating Christianity as their religion, compared with the 71.8% for whom this was the case in 2001.

What will be significant in the 2011 census figures when they become available will be an increased number of Muslims – up from 2.8% in 2001 to perhaps 4.2%, and a rise in the number claiming to have no religion – up from 15.1% to perhaps 20.4%.

How do we know all this, before the census, due on 27 March, has even taken place?

The answer is found in a briefing paper just published (Spring 2011) by the Equality and Human Rights Commission entitled *Religion or Belief*. The author, Dave Perfect, is a member of the EHRC Research Team. In producing his findings, he has made use of a wide range of available statistical data, some of it as recent as 2009-2010. The figures which measure the population of Great Britain by religion are annual to 2008-2009, and I have extrapolated these for a further two years in order to arrive at estimates of the possible 2011 census figure.

To evangelical Christians, who represent a tiny percentage of the current UK population, the claim by millions of adults to be 'Christian' seems anomalous. The anomaly is borne out by the fact that although two-thirds of adults in Britain claim to be 'Christian,' a 2010 survey shows that only 37% believe there is a God. Consequently, something like 30% of the population, which represents about 18 million people, are claiming to be 'Christian' without even believing in God. Only 32% of those claiming to be 'Christian' said that they actively practised their religion in any way.

Nonetheless, there is clearly something which prompts people to tick a box marked 'Christian' when in the 2001 census they had the alternative of ticking a box marked 'No religion' and even of

not answering the question at all. Whether it is a desire to identify with the country's religious heritage, or with the faith of their grand-parents, we cannot know. But it must mean something, and Christian witness today needs to build on that.

There are several other matters of interest in Mr Perfect's briefing paper.

The percentage of those believing there is a God has declined in Britain from 51.7% in 1991 to 41.8% in 2008, a net loss of about six million 'believers' in 17 years. Most of the current 'believers' claim that they have always believed, but figures are also given for those who were not originally 'believers' but have come to believe. These figures have remained more constant – 5.9% in 1991, 4.2% in 1998 and 5.1% in 2008. Conversely, 12.1% in 1991 stated they had lost the belief they once had, compared with 11.6% in 1998 and 15.2% in 2000.

Brighton and Hove is far and away the most secular place in the country, as many as 42% of its population claiming to have no religion. The next highest, Kingston upon Hull and Bath and North Somerset, only have 30% professing no religion. In contrast, 93% of the people of Slough have a religious affiliation. In all the local authority areas of the North-East and North-West of England, more than 80% claim a religious affiliation.

Internationally, there are huge variations in the belief patterns across Europe. France has most secularists, 40% of the population indicating that they 'do not believe there is any sort of spirit, God or life force.' In Britain this figure is 25% and in Italy only 6%. In the Czech Republic, only 16% believe there is a God, compared with 94% in Malta, 37% in Great Britain and an EU average of 51%.

The detailed breakdowns of the statistics derived from the 2011 census are not expected to be available until 2013.

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