



Census 2021 – Questioning the Question

 Office for National Statistics

census 2021

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What is your religion?

The census asks: [What is your religion?](#) The census first asked this question in 2001. This question is to find out whether people are affiliated to a religion or not.

Some people are not happy with this question on the census. Why do you think this might be?

Why do some people disagree with this question?

The British Humanists think the question about religion is a [leading and biased question](#) because it asks 'what' your religion is, assuming you have a religion. They think it encourages people to tick they are religious because it 'maximises the religious nature of people'.

Another survey called the British Social Attitudes survey collects data about religion and asks: Do you have a religion? Yes or no

What is the difference between these two questions? Which do you think is a better question?

Why does this question matter?

Answers to this question help your community by allowing local and central government to better plan services and set aside resources for your area. The NHS and local authorities can use this information to help plan and monitor services for local people from a wide range of religious backgrounds. This could include policies on hospital chaplains and public information. Your answer will help public bodies to identify discrimination or social exclusion based on religion and work to stop it from happening.

The data is treated as if people really mean it. It is used by service providers (education, health, housing LAs) to provide new services. It is even used to help decide what religions and worldviews should be taught in RE lessons.

Why does keeping the question the same matter?

It preserves the information about people's identity between each census. Changing the question would mean the previous data would not be comparable. This may affect planning of services and resources. The only change to the question between 2001 and 2011 was 'none' in 2001 to 'no religion' in 2011.

What do you think? Do you think the question should be changed?

Why do some people tick they are religious in the census when they are do not believe or practice a religion?

Some people might not believe or practice a religion but they still consider themselves to be affiliated to a religion because of culture or ethnicity, or because of their upbringing.

What do you think? What are the reasons why people might tick 'yes' to religion?

Here are some examples of reasons. Were there any that you didn't have? Are there any that surprise you?

- Cultural or ethnic affiliation (connection).
- Upbringing, they were raised that way.
- Family affiliation (connection).
- Children go to a religious school.
- The census is done by household so one person fills in the same for everyone.
- Attend a place of worship sometimes for weddings, funerals or special festivals.
- They are unsure or don't know if god exists or not so they might as well say they are religious (Pascal's Wager).
- Mis-conception that Humanism is a religion.
- Don't want their family to find out they are not religious.
- Some people don't believe in god, but are spiritual.
- Some people wrongly associate specific religions with colour of skin.
- Some people put other things they are concerned about as a religion e.g. climate concerned, veganism

Deeper questions

Who decides if someone is religious or not?

Does someone have a right to decide if they are religious or not?

What does it mean to be religious? What does it mean to lead a religious life?

If you were carrying out a survey in your school about religion and worldviews, how would you design a question to find out about religion and worldviews?

E.g. Do you follow a religion? Do you follow an organised religion? Are you a member of a religion? Are you religious? What religion are you? Do you belong to a religion? What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to? What is your religion or belief? What is your religion or worldview?

For further information about the development process for the question about religion, please see this document from the [Office for National Statistics](#).

Concept activity

What does it mean to be affiliated to a religion – which words are closest in meaning to the word affiliate?

Synonyms – join, connect, unite, associate, align, attach, belong, follow, practice, join, sign-up, enrol, band together, assimilate, enter, relationship



This resource has been produced by Jane Yates.