

Atheist Ireland

7 Dargle Road
Drumcondra, Dublin 9
3 November 2017

To Marcella Joyce
Census 2021 Consultation
Central Statistics Office



Consultation Process for 2021 Census – Religion Question

Dear Marcella,

Thank you for our discussion regarding input from Atheist Ireland into the consultation process for designing the 2021 census. We look forward to taking part in the discussions of the subgroup of the Advisory Group that will be addressing the Religion question.

The religion question as currently formulated results in misleading statistics, because:

- The meaning of the word religion is subjective.
- It is the only census question that asks people about their internal beliefs, as opposed to objective facts about them or about their behaviour.
- The question gives more emphasis to religious beliefs than it does to nonreligious philosophical convictions.
- The question begins with a leading question, 'What is your religion'. This assumes that the person has a religion, and it is more likely to result in people writing down a religion even if they are not religious.
- The question lists the names of certain religions as check-box options. This prejudices the answers in favour of the listed options over options that are not listed.
- As a further prejudice, the options that are listed are ordered in the sequence of the most frequently given responses from the previous census. However, when 'No religion' is the second most frequent answer, it does not appear in second place in the following census.

Key Recommendation

- You have already designed the question on the Irish language in a way that captures objective facts about people's behaviour. This means that you already have a workable formula that can be adapted to the question of religion.

Overall Recommendations

- The religion question should begin by respecting that some people would prefer not to reveal their religious or nonreligious philosophical beliefs.
- The census should not be asking people about their internal beliefs. The initial question should be do you practice a religion, not do you have a religion. This will result in statistics that are both more objectively accurate, and more useful for the civic planning purposes that the census results feed into.
- The question should have a lower age limit, like you already have with the question on speaking Irish. It is not meaningful to ask if infants or very young children are religious or practice a religion.

Recommendations on Listing Selected Religions

- The question should not list the names of certain religions as check-box options, as this prejudices the answers in favour of the listed options. Instead it should just be a write-in box where people can write in their religion. This would of course have resource implications in counting the answers, but the sensitivity of this topic can justify this.
- If the question does list selected religions as check-box options, then it should list religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Other) and then have a write-in box for denominations (Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyya, etc).
- If the question does list selected religions as check-box options, then the order in which they appear should be randomised.

Recommendations on Question about Philosophical Practices

- We are undecided on the merits of including a question on practicing philosophical world views that are not related to religion. The advantage is that the census would respect equally the existence of religious and nonreligious philosophical world views. The disadvantage is that the census question should measure practice not belief, and nonreligious philosophical world views tend to involve fewer formal practices.
- We will be happy to discuss this in more detail with the subgroup of the Advisory Group.

At this stage, we believe that these would be the best questions to ask about religion:

RELIGION

This Question is optional

Do you practice a religion?

Answer only if aged 6 years or over

- **Yes**
- **No — Go to next census question**

If Yes, what religion do you practice?

- **Write in your answer**

How often do you practice this religion?

Mark the boxes that apply

- **Daily, within the home**
- **Daily, outside the home**
- **Weekly**
- **Monthly**
- **Less often**

Yours sincerely,

Michael Nugent
Chairperson,
Atheist Ireland