

British Humanist Association

Examples of misuse of Census 2001 data on religion¹

(Revised: September 2010)

In advance of the 2001 Census the Office of National Statistics (ONS) identified user needs relating to the inclusion of the topic of religion². These included resource allocation, meeting legislative requirements, policy targeting, working with 'faith communities', identifying and tackling discrimination, meeting equality targets, and policy development.

The requirement was for high quality, accurate and reliable information on the actual religiosity practice and needs of service users. None of this information can be garnered from the data produced by the 2001 Census.

The Labour Government itself, at the highest levels, made it clear that the Census data on religion cannot be used in the context of legislative measures. In its response to the consultation on the Equality Bill, it said:

We welcome the strong support for these proposals. We believe that it is right to harmonise the definition of indirect discrimination to refer to an apparently neutral "provision, criterion or practice" which puts or would put people of the claimant's group at a particular disadvantage. We believe the concept of "a particular disadvantage" entails a more flexible test than hitherto. It opens up the possibility of expert evidence or witness evidence being used rather than detailed statistical analysis to show particular disadvantage to a particular group of people. This is important for strands such as sexual orientation and **religion or belief, where reliable statistics are not available**, and where there are issues of privacy involved in gathering data which might provide statistics.³

Despite this recognition of the inadequacy of the data, it is clear that ministers, public authorities, members of both Houses of Parliament, civil servants and others use the Census data on religion in a number of ways – interpreting them incorrectly and basing policies and actions on those misinterpretations.

¹Emphasis is added in quotations throughout.

²Office of National Statistics. Information paper. The 2011 Census: Assessment of initial user requirements on content for England and Wales – Ethnicity, identity, language and religion. March, 2006

³The Equality Bill – Government response to the Consultation, July 2008.

Examples of this are set out below – evidence that, for example, local authorities use it for meeting equality and diversity requirements and for allocating resources. Indeed, it is shown below that a rationale behind the previous Government’s ‘interfaith’ strategy and the accompanying £7.5 million in funding from the public purse (following on from a previous £12.5 million) is the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government’s understanding, from the Census, that around 80% of the population of England and Wales have an active ‘faith’, and mix with others of the same religion in the community.

The Census data on religion measure cultural identification (and even then very crudely). To use such data in order, for example, to allocate resources or to extend to religious people and organisations privileged opportunities to influence and shape government policies for everyone in society, on the basis that they represent a group whose size has been seriously exaggerated, has potentially very serious consequences.

According to other, more accurate social surveys⁴ which do not ask a single and leading question such as the Census’s ‘What is your religion?’, people who identify as non-religious make up (at least) nearly half the total population. Indeed, if you look at actual religious practice, current Church attendance stands at just 6.3% of the population⁵ - and is declining year on year. The under-representation of the non-religious, together with the widespread misuse of Census data on religion as if it measured actual belief, practice or needs stemming from a religious position, is a serious issue. It is likely to lead to non-religious people not being included fully or at all in 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.

Resource allocation and policy targeting

Public authorities, including many local authorities and central government departments, seek to use the Census data on religion in order to plan and allocate resources, such as housing, health services, and so on. In fact, the ONS assessment of user need requirements⁶ showed that a resource planning and allocation need was high on the agenda for respondents. Yet as ONS acknowledges, the data on religion collected from the Census 2001 are not appropriate for those uses:

We 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.⁷

Even so, many service providers present Census data on religion without qualification with the implication that it describes practice, beliefs or belonging. Cabinet Ministers use Census data on religion to formulate policy and to allocate resources and funding.

Coalition Government

⁴See, for example, Social Attitudes Survey 2010

⁵Christian Research (2005) *The 2005 English Church Census* - <http://www.eauk.org/resources/info/statistics/2005englishchurchcensus.cfm>

⁶op. cit.

⁷Letter from the Office for National Statistics to the British Humanist Association, 11th April 2008

When addressing the Bishops of the Church of England in September 2010, Chairwoman of the Conservative Party and Government Minister Baroness Warsi stated that...

And right here in Britain, despite what many say, religion is certainly not going away.

Not only did up to eighty per cent of British people say that they had some kind of religious belief in the last census but there is evidence to show that religious attendance actually seems to be rising.

...the relationship between state, faith and society got out of kilter. We urgently need to put that right – and that means starting by doing three things. First, we need to understand the current state of faith in Britain. Second, we need a richer recognition of the Anglican and wider faith-based contribution to society. And third, we need to draw the right conclusions for policy, especially when it comes to voluntary action, social cohesion and the Big Society.

Here, Baroness Warsi is using the stated levels of religious belief in the British population to justify an increase in the role of faith in Britain. The speech also saw Baroness Warsi state that the 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. This example suggests that the Coalition Government will keep misrepresenting the statistics like the previous Government did, as can be seen in the examples elsewhere in this document.

Department of Communities and Local Government

The Foreword by Rt Hon Hazel Blears MP to the Labour Government’s ‘interfaith strategy’ begins:

According to the 2001 census, more than three quarters of us in the United Kingdom consider ourselves to have a faith.⁸

This is a clear statement that a major part of the rationale for creating the interfaith strategy is based on the Census data – yet the data have been badly interpreted to yield a highly misleading understanding of the Census figures on religion.

First, the then Secretary of State states that the Census figures convey ‘faith’, as opposed to identifying with a religion (or not). ‘Faith’ is extremely difficult to define but it is clear that in this context it refers to a current and active belief in the supernatural, which is clearly not captured by the question ‘What is your religion?’

Second, using the Census data on religion in this way means that resources will be unfairly allocated to the community – this strategy is accompanied by £7.5 million in funding from the Government. Not only will those receiving funding and assistance be the tiny minority of the country who not only practice a religion but consider themselves to be part of a ‘faith community’ (a figure of less than 10% rather than the 80% suggested by the Government in the interfaith strategy), it will seriously disadvantage those who are non-religious (under-counted in the Census) and those who have a vague cultural affiliation to a religion but do not believe nor belong while, at the same time unfairly privileging the small minority of

⁸CLG – ‘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>

the population who are actively religious.

In the preceding consultation the Department stated:

Britain today is a multi faith society with people of many different faiths and beliefs and none living, working, and learning together. Faith is important to the social identity of many UK citizens, with over three-quarters of respondents to the 2001 Census identifying themselves as having a religious faith⁹.

Here they presented the Census data in a way that can only be understood as referring to citizens' religious active beliefs ('having a religious faith'). Clearly this is a misrepresentation of the Census 2001 data which is supposed to measure 'affiliation and identification' and 'does not measure practice'¹⁰ or actual beliefs.

As CLG is the Government department with responsibilities for all communities, including 'faith' communities, it is concerning that it takes such an inaccurate position in relation to Census data on religion. It uses such a position to inform policies and funding. See, for example, the above discussion of the 'interfaith' strategy.

Minister liaising with faith groups

Another useful example is the extract below¹¹ from a Labour Government Minister, where he outlines the then Government's position on religion, using the Census data to justify wide and varied resources being allocated to religious groups, as 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.

Today we can recognise that faith is at the heart of the identity of many people in modern Britain – and it defines their place in society. Around the country I meet more and more people who are not only happy to associate themselves with faith, but for whom it is an essential part – the key element in – their identity. **Almost 80% of people identified with one of the faiths in the national census**, after we overcame fierce resistance in Parliament to including a question about faith – but more than that it is increasingly the basis for people's values and their actions.

And faith is no longer being ignored. Archbishops and bishops are no longer harmless old fogies – they provoke intense public debate. Things have changed and they continue to change-and thank God that they have. And by the way, faith is a great starting point for politics. To the surprise of many – and the dismay of some – faith is flourishing in today's Britain, its influence now growing.

⁹Communities and Local Government (2007) "Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side": A framework for inter faith dialogue and social action'. Consultation, December 2007

¹⁰Letter from the Office for National Statistics to the British Humanist Association, 11April 2008

¹¹Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP speech ("Money Well Spent") to FaithAction National Conference, 26 February 2008: <http://faithaction.net/resources/Keynote%20Address.doc>

In Government, we see it as a key opportunity to advance goals which we, and the faith communities, share. Faith concerns – for the vulnerable, for social cohesion, for family life – are also our concerns. And **in Government we are acting to support faith communities, not least through the Office for of the Third Sector and in the launch of this support resource in FaithAction; but in many other initiatives too.**

When he became Prime Minister in June, **Gordon Brown appointed me Labour Party Vice Chair with responsibility for faith groups, and Government adviser on faith.** We are committed to:

- listening to faith communities;
- to seeking their help in shaping Government policy;
- to partnering with faith groups on shared goals;
- but also to celebrating your presence and saying thank you for the work you are doing in every community in the land.

And while faith will always be deeply personal, we are also seeing more and more that faith is the impulse and motivation for invaluable public activity – for community and social engagement.

Even this short excerpt from a speech by the Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP shows how the Census data on religion is being used by Government in its policy and wider work. The description of the Census figures is followed by statements that ‘faith’ is incredibly important to a growing number of people, that it is ‘flourishing’. Yet, as above, this is clearly a misinterpretation of the Census data. A possibly very loose, cultural or familiarity-based identification with a religion (as will make up a considerable proportion of those who ticked the ‘Christian’ box) emphatically does not mean ‘faith’ is important to people, that it is central to their identity¹² or that it should be taken into account or influence government in particular and specific ways.

What this short excerpt also suggests, again coming directly from the rationale of the (incorrect) interpretation of the Census data as meaning that four out of five of the population have an active faith which is ‘at the heart of’ their identity, is that faith groups are elevated to a high and privileged status in Government. This is clear through the specific appointment of a ‘Government adviser on faith’, the partnership working with faith groups, encouraging the influence of faith-based interests on Government policy and a number of initiatives targeted at faith groups.

As mentioned above, only a proportion of those who consider themselves to be in some way religious would also consider themselves active in a faith community. Therefore, most people who might identify themselves as belonging to a religion (which is also not measured by the Census) will be disadvantaged by Government policy aimed at self-identified (and often unrepresentative) religious communities.

Moreover, it is the non-religious population who are disadvantaged most as a group and as individuals by such interpretations and use by Government of the Census data. For example, the Government’s focus on faith and its socio-political importance as directly ‘supported’ by the Census data on religion leaves out the non-religious. They are vastly under-represented and therefore rarely considered. There is no Government adviser on non-religious beliefs, the Government does not seek to any significant

¹²See Study 274: Religion in England and Wales: findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey

extent to engage with the non-religious in the community nor does it seek partnership with non-religious representative organisations. Nor does the Government say 'thank you' for the work of humanists in every community in the land.

If the Government, like the Equality and Human Rights Commission¹³, used a more accurate measure even of identification rather than active practice then it would be hard to see how such privileges for and attention to 'faith' could still be justified, particularly in the context of the present disadvantageous position and lack of recognition of non-religious people. The Social Attitudes Survey 2010 found that the numbers of those who identify themselves as having no religious beliefs, or non-religious beliefs such as Humanism, is not much less than those who identify as Christian (43% and 50% respectively), while those who identify with non-Christian religions make up just a tiny minority of the population (7%).

Contracting out public services to religious organisations

The Census data were undoubtedly also relied on by the Labour Government in other aspects of their policy that were unprecedentedly favourable to religious groups. In particular, their aim was to open up wide areas of the public service to contracts with religious groups. The employment service is a front runner; even NHS dentistry had been mentioned as an ambition in a Church of England report. This policy is illustrated in two quotations from Mr Jim Murphy, then Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform. In a speech in Manchester on 19th February 2007 he said:

I have asked my Department's Commercial Director to develop a centre of expertise within the procurement team working with the Third Sector, to specifically cover the needs of faith-based groups. . . I want to make sure that access to contracts for faith groups can be on an even footing with all other private and voluntary sector organisations who wish to compete to deliver our services. And I hope that a commitment from the Government to build up knowledge around the specific needs of faith groups illustrates our desire to achieve this. . . . [T]here is not an entirely secular solution to achieve social cohesion in our communities. It can not be done without the partnership of all faith-based groups. . . I believe faith groups can play a pivotal role in delivering success in welfare reform over the next decade.¹⁴

Two months later he answered a Parliamentary Question as follows:

Mr. Philip Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what methodology his Department uses to assess the contribution of faith-based groups to the delivery of welfare and the preparation for work in the UK; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. Jim Murphy: The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has many valuable links with faith-based organisations, as with other parts of the voluntary and community sector. Faith-based organisations work with the Department in policy development, as members of consultative groups; as partners with local communities, particularly where

¹³ e.g. Equality and Human Rights Commission (2008) *Fairness: A new contract with the public*. Manchester: Equality and Human Rights Commission

¹⁴ See <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/aboutus/2007/19-02-07.asp>

they are disadvantaged in the labour market; and suppliers delivering welfare and employment services under contract to the Department.¹⁵

The Census data on religion are therefore being used by Government to justify an inflated influence of religion in politics up to the highest level in a way that will reshape our institutions and influence everyone in the community, regardless of their beliefs. 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. In fact, the Census data on religion, as the ONS itself admits, greatly underestimate the number of non-religious people in England and Wales – but they suggest something quite different, with the result that Government generally and its communities work in particular has been badly targeted, on a false evidence base, producing policies which are based on assumptions that are highly unrepresentative both of the range of beliefs and of their importance to individuals.

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

An example of central government's use of Census data on religion for resource allocation and service provision is the increasing provision of schools with a religious character ('faith schools') in the maintained sector. The DCSF report 'Faith in the System', uses data on religion from the Census to illustrate 'need' for such schools and to justify further provision:

The Government recognises that in relation to the overall size of their populations there are relatively few faith school places in the maintained sector available to Muslim, Sikh and Hindu children compared to the provision available for Christian and Jewish families. **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 School Census from 2005 showed that there were 1,710,400 pupils in maintained Christian schools, 1,770 pupils in maintained Muslim schools, 14,670 pupils in maintained Jewish schools and 640 pupils in maintained Sikh schools in England, while the first maintained Hindu school is due to open in September 2008. **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.**

...

Accordingly, the Government welcomes the contribution that schools with a religious character make to the school system – both as a result of their historical role and now as key players in contributing to the more diverse school system with greater opportunities for parental choice that we seek. **The Government remains committed to supporting the establishment of new schools by a range of providers – including faith organisations – where local consultation has shown that this is what parents and the community want, and where this greater diversity will help to raise standards.**¹⁶

Both the way the Census data on religion is presented in the above extracts and the service provision commitments drawn from that data are problematic. Using numbers rather than percentages makes it

¹⁵ Commons Hansard 16 Apr 2007: Column 257W.

¹⁶ DCSF (2007) Faith in the System. The role of schools with a religious character in English education and society. London: DCSF

difficult to see proportionately how many children there are coming from different religious backgrounds. The fact that figures for those children with no religion are not given problematises this further: it is discriminatory and gives the impression that there may not be children from non-religious backgrounds. It therefore fails to take into account both the diversity of children's beliefs and the interests of the non-religious in terms of service provision.

Further, the Census data on religion in the above document are taken as evidence of need for 'faith schools' in the maintained sector. Yet, the Census data on religion are not suitable for such 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. To misuse the Census data in this way has clear and real consequences and influences national policy to a great extent.

Office of National Statistics

Analysis of 2001 Census data on religion on the ONS website and the way the data is presented shows clear misuse of the data. For example, in the section in the 'Focus on Religion' report¹⁷ on religious populations, there is no indication here that what is measured is affiliation. In fact, it is 'religious groups' that are referred to and in two cases specifically to 'belonging'¹⁸. As research makes clear, 'belonging' is not the same as an affiliation.¹⁹

In the 'Ethnicity' section of 'Focus on Religion', the wording is misleading and seems to be referring to practice and belief – and not affiliation. For example, unqualified statements, ambiguous in meaning, are made, such as 'South Asians and Black Africans were the most religious' and 'Being religious was also related to country of birth' (p5).

It is not only extremely worrying that the ONS itself fails to convey data accurately, it perpetuates the misunderstandings by others about what the Census data on religion means.

Local Authorities' Use of Census Data

Local authorities use the Census data, for example, for allocating resources and meeting equalities initiatives. Much of this is not easily accessible as it is not often published on their websites or in written material. Therefore, the scope of use is not simple to assess. Some examples (from direct email communication with local authority equalities and diversity officers) give an indication of the types of use of Census data on religion.

- 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'.

¹⁷Office of National Statistics (2004) 'Focus on Religion'. October 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/4vcf4e>

¹⁸'About one in 20 (5 per cent) of the population belonged to a non-Christian religious denomination' (p2); 'In England and Wales, 151,000 people belonged to religious groups which did not fall into any of the main religions' (p2).

¹⁹Voas, D. and Crockett, A. (2005) 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging'. *Sociology* 39 (1), p11-28

- 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.
- Wandsworth Borough Council uses the Census data for demographic overviews of the Borough and as a baseline for Equality Impact Assessments.

These examples give some indication of the range of uses for which local authorities employ the Census figures on religion. These include, but are not limited to: allocating and adapting services according to religion; mapping the religious profile of the community; developing community cohesion initiatives; meeting and assessing diversity and equality targets.

The Census data on religion would appear to be unsuitable for any of these uses. Public services adapted to needs or requirements arising from religion would likely require data which measures accurately religious practice. If the Census figures on religion fail even to reflect religious (as against cultural) affiliation, especially in terms of the overrepresentation of Christians and the under-representation of non-religious people, then they are arguably unsuitable for giving a demographic overview.

The use of Census data on religion for meeting local equalities and diversity targets is a matter of great concern. To use data which may only measure identification (probably inaccurately) and certainly does not measure belief, practice, belonging and so on in order to meet policy objectives is potentially very seriously damaging to the community. The distorting effects on employment and methods of service delivery are potentially alarming.

Even more concerning is that some local authorities may pick and choose what data they use on religion from the Census. The example of Buckinghamshire County Council below is from its 2008 corporate plan, where they simply list the four ‘main religions’ in the county according to Census data. Might this data, without detail of other religions or those of no religion, be used for service planning as well as demographic profiling?

Main religions

- Christian – 73% of the population
- Muslim – 4% of the population
- Hindu – 1% of the population
- Other – 1.1% other religion.”²⁰

What is clear from the above examples is that there are real risks of inaccurately targeted services and policies. In terms of the non-religious specifically, their under-representation in the Census figures means that they are especially likely to be overlooked by local authorities, that they will suffer serious disbenefit should, for example, proportionately too much funding be allocated to religious groups to their exclusion. An example of this would be the funds allocated to community cohesion initiatives. As discussed earlier, a rationale for the allocation of millions of pounds of government funding for ‘interfaith’ work – a central part of the community cohesion strategy at local, regional and national levels – is the misinterpreted but oft repeated Census figure that suggests that around 80% of the population are actively religious and that religion is an important part of their identity.

²⁰Buckinghamshire County Council ‘Fact sheet: Buckinghamshire and the local community areas’ - see http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/bcc/get/assets/docs/corporate_plan/Appendices.pdf

Most local authorities present the demographic figures on religion as fact, with no explanation of what they mean. One of the most important misuses has been in the local summaries of Census data prepared by each local authority. Although it is impossible to know precisely which decisions these documents had an effect on, it is safe to assume that these statistics will be used daily by local policy makers across the country for several years. Even where there are documents or footnotes outlining the issues to be considered in interpreting the census data (as in Bristol's Guidance for Bristol census users²¹), these frequently do not mention any problems with the religion question. None of the first 8 results on Google (search: council census religion) have any explanation at all of how the figure was reached, or what it does and does not represent.

There is clearly a widespread problem across local authorities even in the basic presentation of data. Without explanation of what the figures on religion mean or refer to they are at best meaningless but could be interpreted in a number of ways, such as referring to practice or belief in god(s). Worse, a simple presentation of the figures can be misleading, if they are done as by Harrow Council (such as Harrow's census summary²²), where they are given as a statement of fact, coupled with no supplementary guidance, and the summary simply states "47.3 per cent of Harrow's residents are Christian" without qualification.

These kinds of presentation of data are problematic. If they are used by the public or others simply for information they are misleading. The figures published by local authorities may be used by organisations based on religion or belief wishing to bid for funding or resources or for increased stakeholder engagement, on the basis of their 'representation' in the local population. This may lead to over-representation by Christian organisations and under-representation by non-religious organisations. Routinely and consistently those with no religion, including those who hold nonreligious beliefs such as Humanism, are in fact excluded from community cohesion initiatives and therefore from any benefit - financial or social - from the resources devoted to that work.

City of London Police, 'Faith Equality Scheme'

This equality scheme represents the Census 2001 data on religion in an unacceptable – but not uncommon – way. The scheme 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.²³

Use of data in Parliament

Frequently in both Houses of Parliament the Census data are interpreted as meaning something other than identification – and therefore it is used to justify a political position or particular legislation, with far-reaching consequences. Here are some examples.

- **Communications Bill**

²¹http://www.bristol.gov.uk/ccm/cmsservice/stream/asset/?asset_id=743104&

²²http://www.harrow.gov.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=658&pageNumber=2

²³City of London Police. Faith Equality Scheme. February 2007

The Lord Bishop of Manchester: . . . The importance of religion and spirituality was, as noble Lords well know, illustrated by the national census, for which religion was deemed sufficiently important by the Government to have its own section. It was helpful to have the full details of that census made available to noble Lords in published form last week.

I remind Members of the Committee that the census showed that 71 per cent of the population marked themselves as Christians; 3 per cent as Muslims; and 3 per cent as other faiths. In other words, **nearly 80 per cent of the nation in the Government's census, and from the privacy of their own homes, deliberately chose to associate themselves with religion and spirituality.** And as the newly published report shows, the largest age group responding to the religion question was aged 25 to 49. Niche times and niche broadcasting alone cannot provide for the appetite of this age group and that of the general population for spiritual content in broadcasting. The regulator must support broadcasters who are seeking peak time for high-quality religious and spiritual content. . . .

But perhaps the Government are using the pluralist argument as a cloak for an underlying secular agenda. For how does all this square with the fact that, **in the privacy of their homes, 72 per cent of the population noted their religion as "Christian" in the census. Of course they are not all in church;** but almost all of those 42 million have a radio and a television. Incidentally, the British Social Attitudes Survey had predicted that 40 per cent would put down "no religion". In fact, only 15 per cent—8 million—did so. An editorial in the Guardian on this matter said:

"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".

From these Benches, we seek to ensure that that remarkably resilient and enduring part of the social order has its rightful place in this Bill. We will press for the strengthening of protections for public service broadcasting—and especially that part of its remit that reflects the strength and diversity of the nation's cultural and religious richness. We will press for moves to strengthen standards of taste and decency; and we will press for the remaining disqualifications on religious ownership to be lifted.²⁴

The Census data are referred to here to suggest that as 72% of the population are Christian, therefore public service broadcasting should be censored ("strengthen standards of taste and decency") in line with the views of the church, and that more programmes should be religious. The Census data on religion do not measure practice, nor do they measure belief or 'faith', but rather attempt to measure affiliation/identity. As the Census data on religion do not measure religiosity as such, it cannot be inferred from them that the majority of people would prefer greater religiosity in, and greater religious ownership of, broadcasting.

- **Religious Faith in London**

²⁴House of Lords, Hansard, 22 May 2003

The Lord Bishop of London: . . . The Christian Churches alone organise in London 6,500 social action projects in every borough. We do not operate as a special interest group; we are players and partners. Week after week, 600,000 Londoners, drawn from every borough, age and racial group, participate in worship. **The recent census revealed that 75 per cent of Londoners declared a religious faith and three-quarters of them said that they were Christians.**²⁵

This example shows how the Census data are used in debates to imply a much greater religiosity of local areas than there is. To declare, for example, a 'religious faith', certainly implies an active belief in the supernatural, rather than what could have been for most simply recording a loose, cultural identification with the Church of England, for example.

- **Religious Organisations carrying out Public Functions**

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Is not it time for a debate on the role of religious organisations when carrying out public functions? While I hope that we all accept that religious organisations are capable of doing good work in the provision of public and welfare services, surely if the Government simply said that when in receipt of public funds or under public organisation those organisations should provide such services without discriminating against clients and employees and without proselytising, we could settle the matter once and for all and have clarity. The Government might thereby avoid the unfortunate mess from which I hope that they will extract themselves soon.

Mr. Straw: I do not mind having a debate on the issue. We had a pretty intensive debate during the passage of the Human Rights Act, and I agreed to amendments to try to accommodate the position of religious organisations, particularly the Christian Churches. Without referring to the current controversy, I know that the hon. Gentleman is a secularist, and **I respect his views, but his is not 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.** He is against faith schools; I am not. We have a long tradition of faith schools in this country. His position, which is partly the Liberal Democrat position, is not ours. I am happy, however, to debate all of that.²⁶

In his response to Dr Harris's question, Mr Straw uses Census data on religion to confuse religious identity with a political identity, suggesting that Christians and others who 'subscribe' to religions are not secularists. People's views on secularism (favouring separation of church and state) cannot, of course, be derived from their religious affiliation, identity or practice.

Yet it is clear that the Labour Government – at the highest levels – used and misrepresented the Census data on religion to further their policies, which were not secular in nature. This is problematic for a number of reasons, such as enhancing the perceived legitimacy of the then Government's position and

²⁵Lords Hansard, 28 April 2004

²⁶Parliamentary question from Dr Evan Harris MP to the then Leader of the House, Jack Straw House of Commons - 25th January 2007

policies, and leading to misallocation of resources and public services on the basis of an assumed religious 'need' for such goods, such as faith schools.

Below are three more short examples from Hansard of how the Census data on religion is interpreted as related to spirituality, active faith and practice, religious identity and so on.

- **Patient (Assisted Dying) Bill [HL]**

The Lord Bishop of St Albans: . . . 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.²⁷

- **Communications Bill**

The Lord Bishop of Manchester: . . . The importance of religion and spirituality was, as noble Lords well know, illustrated by the national census, for which religion was deemed sufficiently important by the Government to have its own section. It was helpful to have the full details of that census made available to noble Lords in published form last week.

I remind Members of the Committee that the census showed that 71 per cent of the population marked themselves as Christians; 3 per cent as Muslims; and 3 per cent as other faiths. **In other words, nearly 80 per cent of the nation in the Government's census, and from the privacy of their own homes, deliberately chose to associate themselves with religion and spirituality.** And as the newly published report shows, the largest age group responding to the religion question was aged 25 to 49. Niche times and niche broadcasting alone cannot provide for the appetite of this age group and that of the general population for spiritual content in broadcasting. The regulator must support broadcasters who are seeking peak time for high-quality religious and spiritual content.²⁸

- **Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill**

The Lord Bishop of Durham: . . . Rather, what we need is protection for groups, communities and individuals who are at risk. We look to this Government to provide that as they have said. Some people are vulnerable in this respect. Public order is vulnerable when there is gratuitous and inflammatory material. Therefore, I hope it is clear that in supporting the government amendment I am not for one minute colluding with the mood towards secularism, liberalism or any such agendas. I am grateful for assurances on this subject. Actually, if paradoxically, I am doing my best to work through the implications of 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

²⁷Lords Hansard for 6 Jun 2003

²⁸Lords Hansard for 22 May 2003

our culture in ways that many understandably find disturbing but to which we on these Benches do our best to bear witness.²⁹

These examples illustrate the ways in which the Census 2001 data on religion are often conflated with belief and spirituality, whereas in actual fact the data say nothing about religious faith or spirituality or any other aspect relating to belief or practice.

This misrepresentation of the data implying that the population in England and Wales is strongly religious and spiritual is used to influence the direction of legislation passing through Parliament (sometimes with success). This is clearly problematic and leads to undemocratic decisions being made along the lines of increasing unrepresentative religious viewpoints.

- **Faith Communities**

The Lord Bishop of Chester: My Lords, after all the rhetoric about moving towards a post-Christian society to which we were subjected in the latter decades of the 20th century, **over 70 per cent of the population of England and Wales— over 80 per cent in Cheshire and the North West—**declared themselves to be Christian. To that must be added the other faith communities. **Does the Minister agree that the need to consult the faith communities is one of the key priorities of the 21st century?** World events have demonstrated that, if we can achieve peace between religions, we are well on the way to achieving aspects of world peace.³⁰

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.

- **Multi-cultural Britain**

Lord Alton of Liverpool: Last December, the Prime Minister gave a lecture entitled “Our Nation's Future— multiculturalism and integration” at an event hosted by the Runnymede Trust. I agree with a lot of what he says about past mistakes and the time for a new approach to diversity. Where I part company with him is with the implication that it should be the objective of the state to privatise faith out of the public square. He draws a distinction between what he says “defines us as citizens” rather than “as people”. If the implication of this is that we can be Christian or Jewish or Muslim people but not Christian or Jewish or Muslim citizens and that British values cannot really be Christian values, **in a country where 71 per cent in the 2001 census declared themselves to be Christian,** it will lead to systemic alienation and greater fragmentation, not to cohesion.³¹

Again, the above example shows how the Census data are being used to suggest that ‘Christian values’ must be ‘British values’, simply because the majority of people in the Census identified themselves as Christian. It is clear, however, that to identify however vaguely with a religion does not tell you what

²⁹Lords Hansard for 5 Mar 2008

³⁰Lords Hansard for 22 October 2003

³¹Lords Hansard for 7 Jun 2007

values you hold, whether you attribute them to your religious identity, nor that you would wish the country to be ruled and guided by religious values.

- **Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill**

Baroness O’Cathain: . . . The Government have been reactive to a proposition by the secularists and are trying to beguile us into saying, “Everything is going to be all right. It is nothing at all”. I am afraid—I do not like to say this because I am a member of the church— that I believe the Church of England has been duped.

As many will remember, a recent **census found that 72 per cent of the UK population identified themselves as Christians**. Following these figures, even the Guardian newspaper admitted on 28 February 2003 that:

“**This is a Christian country** simply in the unanswerable sense that most of the citizens think of themselves as Christians”.

Amendment No. 144B sweeps that view of the public aside and can only undermine social cohesion in our increasingly fragmented society.

I remind 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.³²

These examples indicate how the Census data on religion are interpreted in such ways as to suggest that failing to recognise properly – or maintain privilege for – the ‘religious’ majority, will have negative consequences for social cohesion and other aspects of life. The Census data on religion are unable to sustain such an interpretation but the illusion that they do is causing damaging decisions to be made that will have long-lasting effects.

³²Lords Hansard for 5 Mar 2008