Response to consultation on possible content of 2011 Census

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Topic or classification
The topic of Religion, which must be extended to include non-religious beliefs

If responding about a classification, which topics are required to derive it?

1. Why is the information required?
Please indicate if the information is used for resource allocation purposes.

Non-religious beliefs
Information is required for non-religious belief for broadly the same reasons as it is required for religious beliefs and we address this in our response to question 5 below. Specifically related to the question of resource allocation is a changing circumstance that will be highly relevant to the situation in 2011. By that time, the proposed Commission for Equality and Human Rights will be constituted and operational and its specific duties will include discrimination on grounds of ‘religion or belief’, and good relations between people with different religious and non-religious beliefs, and this will require a sophisticated picture of religious and non-religious beliefs in British society. Government bodies that now exist, such as the units within the Home Office Communities Group (particularly the Cohesion and Faiths Unit), as well as bodies responsible for policy on hospital chaplains or broadcasting (for example), have the same need for as complete a picture as possible.

As far as the British Humanist Association is concerned, we are the foremost body representing the non-religious in the UK, and data that presents a less than clear picture of the diversity of religious and non-religious beliefs in the UK is a positive hindrance to our research and policy work. As nuanced a picture as possible needs to be available from the
data collected in the 2011 census if there is to be progress based on evidence in the equality strand of 'religion or belief'.

**Two dimensions of religion and belief**

We welcome the fact that GROS and NISRA again intend to collect information on the religion that the respondent was born into as well as the religion of the respondent at the time of the census. If these two dimensions are present and non-religious belief is added to both categories, meaningful and useful data for the purposes of mapping identity and changing belief patterns will be gathered.

We submit that it is vital for similar data to be gathered for England and Wales. There are obvious benefits in harmonising the questions in every region, especially when it comes to resource allocation by UK wide bodies such as the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. Quite apart from this, the need for clarity in this area requires that the survey of religion and belief be more sophisticated than in 2001.

We believe that the data from the 2001 census was unreliable because many respondents, faced with just one question and a limited list of possible responses, may have opted for Christian simply because this was the way they were brought up, or because it is their default response to a question requiring little thought, or a familiar label in a list of less familiar beliefs.

The 2001 census in England and Wales produced a total of 71.7% Christians and 14.6% with no religion. This contrasted both with the Scottish results and with almost all other surveys in England and Wales, including officially sponsored ones.

The 2001 census in Scotland found only 65% of Christians and 27.6% with no religion. This is surely the result of the different questions asked rather than a true indicator of a difference in beliefs. It means that the results for England and Wales cannot be compared with those for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

As to other surveys on religious belief in Britain, most have found far lower totals of religious believers: British Social Attitudes in 2000 found 55.2% Christians and 39.5 no religion¹, while a YouGov poll last year² found only 44% believing in God (in all religions), 35% not believing and 21% unsure. In *Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12-19 Year Olds*, a research report for the DfES in 2004, 65% of young people declared themselves atheists or agnostics, while British Social Attitudes in 2003 found 50% Christian and 43% with no religion. A Home Office survey in 2004³ found almost 22% of no faith, and that religion played little part in the lives of most of those calling themselves Christians.

The variation in these figures is a measure of the significance of the wording of the question. It makes it all the more important to ensure the questions asked in the different parts of the United Kingdom are comparable. This must mean that England and Wales moves to the more informative formulation used in Scotland or Northern Ireland. The double question we suggest is important given the extreme variation between different religions found in the last Home Office survey cited above: some respondents put religion as their principal marker, others put it very low down.

In proposing a double question and the inclusion of non-religious belief, we would be suggesting something akin to the following, though this is just one possibility to make our thoughts clearer to you:

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³ [http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors274.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors274.pdf)
The 2011 Census: Initial view on content for England and Wales

First, ‘Were you brought up with religious beliefs?...Yes/No’
‘How would you describe the religious or non-religious beliefs you were brought up
with?’...List of options that includes ‘non-religious’, with an option to specify.

Second, ‘Do you regard yourself now as belonging to any particular religion, or religious
denomination? ...Yes/No’ and followed again by ‘How would you describe your religious or
non-religious beliefs now?’...List of options that includes ‘non-religious’, with an option to
specify.

The sequence of questions (unlike that of 2001 in Scotland or Northern Ireland) therefore
follows the sequence of the respondent’s own life.

2. Why is this information required for small population groups and/or small geographies?

Not only will the Commission for Equality and Human Rights have a plan for the regions,
but we can also reasonably expect some of its work to be concentrated specifically in local
areas. Our work too relies on reliable information as to local demography.

At the same time, there is a need for robust data on the diversity of religious and non-
religious beliefs that is present within local communities. The community cohesion agenda
requires clear knowledge of local circumstances and details such as how religious or non-
religious adherence may be changing in different communities to assist in, for example,
combating hatred on the grounds of religion or belief.

Some important questions of policy that are decided at a local level also need to be
informed by a detailed picture of local religious and non-religious beliefs. One example is
the content of RE (now including non-religious beliefs such as humanism) syllabuses for
local schools, decided locally, the formulation of which is intended to reflect local
populations.

3. What assessment of alternative source of information has been carried out? What would
be the impact of using the next best alternative?

The only alternative to placing non-religious belief with religious belief in the census
would be to source data on non-religious belief from surveys such as the proposed
Continuous Population Survey (where we argue it should also be), but a full picture will
only be available if non-religious belief can be mapped alongside and in a shared context
with religious belief, and both need to be included in multivariate analyses (see below).

4. Which other topics, if any, are required for multivariate analyses together with this
topic?

The same topics as are engaged by religious belief are engaged by non-religious belief
because both sorts of belief appear together in relevant legislation and policy on a
national level. So, basic demographics, ethnicity, educational attainment, labour market
and employment patterns are all required for multivariate analysis with non-religious
belief.

5. Why is it important that this information is available for the UK as a whole?
It is vital that non-religious belief is considered alongside any questions on religious belief that occur in the census. The framework within which belief is understood is rapidly changing in both legal and policy terms. The Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations, the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill, the Equality Bill, the Communications Act: these are just a few examples of where non-religious beliefs or simply a lack of religion, are developing a legal personality of their own. Non-religious belief has been given legal parity with religious belief in the Human Rights Act through its incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law and therefore needs to be taken into account in both the national and local equality agenda. Examples of this are plentiful: the DTI's steering group for the Equality Bill and the reference group for the government's current Equalities Review and Discrimination Law Review all carry a representative of non-religious belief and, in Scotland, the law on marriage has been changed to accommodate humanism as a non-religious belief to be consistent with the Human Rights Act.

6. Will this information ensure continuity with previous Censuses?

As the consultation document states in relation to this topic and the wider topic of identity, "for ethnic, national, and religious identity to be meaningful and dynamic there may be some loss in terms of direct compatibility over time." We endorse this. While we believe that information on religion or belief in 2011 will develop data gathered in the 2001 census, providing some continuity of theme, we argue that there must be a focus on changing patterns of religion and belief and as robust a set of data as possible in 2011.

7. Do you have any other comments relevant to this consultation?

On an organisational point, we recognise the need to keep the final questionnaire as simple as possible. We do not, for example, think there would be anything to be gained by sub-dividing non-religious beliefs into different sub-groups (e.g. rationalism, humanism, scepticism, atheism, agnosticism, secularism), particularly as these are overlapping definitions. We are content for all non-religious beliefs to be grouped under one heading as in our response to question 2 above.

Finally, we recognise that some of the points made here may be more pertinent to later stages of the consultation process prior to 2007. We hope nonetheless that our comments are useful, and would be happy to be contacted ahead of any further consultations by officials responsible for questions of identity in the census and to discuss any of these matters with the relevant officials at any time.