

The Desirability and Problems of the Inclusion of Ethnic and Religious data in National Censuses

Last year saw the inclusion of religious as well as ethnic based questions in the national census of England and Wales. The decision to include questions regarding religion was not taken lightly, and involved much heated debate over what is notoriously a very sensitive topic. Ultimately the allure of including such questions was too strong for the government to resist, and it was decided the benefits such information would bring outweighed the problems. The eventual payback is supposed to be felt across all sectors of society. Primarily the government gains by having a more detailed representation of the nation it is running. In turn the general public profit through the better distribution of services made possible by the census data. However religions and ethnicity are notoriously touchy issues and problems are still apparent. Some sectors of society feel their privacy is at stake, while others doubt the practical value of the data in policy making. These issues will now be explored.

It is argued that including questions on ethnicity and religion will increase the detail and perhaps the accuracy of the census. However this is to overlook the opinions of many individuals within society for whom the inclusion of such questions results in the exact opposite effect. Peter Skeny (2000) argues it is possible that without these questions the census will have higher levels of cooperation in both the honesty and quantity of replies. It is one notion that if a person is offended by the question they will not reply or if perhaps a person of an ethnic minority feels threatened within their environment they may lie about religion in an effort to go unnoticed. Both of which will damage the reliability of the census, making it less useful.

There are numerous reasons for the suspicion of the national census surrounding the questions of race and religion. Most of these are ill-informed and rarely hold much, if any truth, but for those who harbour the reservations they are real and it is the censuses that suffer. A problem in America for example is the climate of the 'big brother conspiracy theories'. These are surprisingly far reaching and often concern the argument over why race and religion are included on the census. The idea being if America is colour blind and tolerant of all races, why would this information be needed? Further more the most recent census of the USA in 2000 was criticized by much of the public for the concentration too much on the topic of ethnicity, which in fact made up 1/4 of the census questions independently. Frequently people are suspicious of the census eventual use with regards to the ethnicity questions. And so don't answer. The fact that in 1790 a black American, then a slave, only counted for 3/5th of a person may not play on the minds of most Americans when completing their census questionnaire, but still does not help the reputation the American census would like to hold. These are just a few of the image problems censuses has, and this is the reason it is argued that exclusion of questions regarding religion would in fact lead to a more accurate database, if slightly smaller.

Another backlash to the ever increasing probing by censuses is felt in the decreasing amount of personal privacy. The MCBs Research & Documentation Committee foresaw an objection that rang true for much of the public 'It is wholly inconsistent with our traditions of freedom and personal privacy to ask a question about a person's religious beliefs....religious faith is a private matter, not to be pried into by

compulsory public inquiries'(2001). The human right to privacy is yet another major problem with asking such questions.

The final prime objection to questions of ethnicity and religion is involved with the practical uses of the data. Zellick (1999) argues referring to the use of the information on religion that 'it has to be seriously doubted if the data yielded would be any value at all'. The religious groupings provided in the census are fairly vague, giving only separate 8 groups. Perhaps there is almost as much difference within some of these groups as there are across them. Even with this data though Zellick argues the government could do little in terms of service distribution based on the data. This is because the codes are too blunt for much success to come of them. It must also be stated that Scotland did not feel it necessary to ask questions on religion in their most recent census, and so one basic question remains, is the information necessary and are the problems worth while?

The only answer to which is yes. Although all the problems stated are real and need dealing with in time, the government made a good decision by including religion on the census. The most recent data when processed, will give a much needed, more genuine view of England and Wales. The benefits of which will out way all problems it might cause.

The recent addition of religion to the census follows the evolving view of how we classify society within England. In the early half of the twentieth century class was the defining factor, but could not be universally categorized so was never included on the census. As migrants came to England in ever increasing numbers from the commonwealth in the 1950s and 1960s, so ethnicity was deemed the principle means of determining ones-self. Naturally questions relating to race were subsequently included on the national census. Today religious beliefs are considered the most important factor and ideas of people being grouped based on skin colour and country of origin seems out dated. Hence the question concerning religion was introduced. (MCBs *Research & Documentation Committee*) This was a natural progression as the views of society have developed, but the implications for which are of greater consequence.

One great advantage of the new data will be that it can fill the gap of accurate and reliable statistics of religious communities in the England. According to P. Weller and A. Andrews (1998) this had been 'becoming an increasingly significant area of academic and political concern.' The UK's Muslim community for example is estimated to be anywhere between 750,000 and 2.5 million. Obviously this could cause great problems for the government when trying to incorporate religion in to policy making and dealing with friction between different ethnic groups. The Muslims in fact get rather a raw deal in the UK. Case in point being the Midlands, where the unemployment rate among those of the Muslim religion is as high as 50%.(MCBs *Research & Documentation Committee*.) It is hoped in the Muslim community that their presence on the most recent census will put an end to their being the 'invisible' element of British society. And start to iron out the all too apparent inequalities. This is governments underlying reason for the inclusion of religion. So that religious exclusion and inequalities can be identified and evened out.

On way this may happen is through better distributions of public services, by taking religion into account. It has been argued that the previous method for distribution of public services based on ethnicity was not in sufficient detail to be advantageous for the minorities. But the census questions on religion will allow for better informed decisions to be made. For example religions that require for a patient to be seen by a same sexed doctor could taken into account when recruiting GPs. Also recruitment efforts could be more precisely directed, for example the MCBs Research & Documentation Committee state, 'there is need for Muslims to be better represented in the public services - to reflect their population base in local communities' (2001). An example of how this information can be used to good effect can be found in Australia. Here 30% of children attend schools run by religious organisations, so knowledge of the populations religion is vital.

This view is shared by many members of the leading religions in the UK. Foremost Muslims and Jews have both backed plans as they feel the recognition as individual religions would be beneficial for their community (P. Aspinall, 2000). The readiness to stand up and be counted by the ethnic minorities was shown by John Dixie in 1997, while carrying out a mock census in several areas; found that 91.6% filled in the optional religion question. Further evidence of the usefulness of this data, if any was needed, can be found in a number of countries across the world. America, Australia, Canada and New Zealand are just a few of the worlds countries which have used the data with varying degrees of success.

Lasts years census will give us the greatest insight into the make-up of Britain to date. As the questions included broaden to envelope more subjects it is only natural for people to be cautious of their uses and possibly suspicious of the motives. But there is little doubt that the benefits should outweigh the negatives. Lets not forget that todays society is rewarding an ever decreasing number, the information supplied by this census can be used in an effort to even out the inequalities that have been hidden from the politicians in vaguely grouped statistics. Certainly caution should be shown though, the inclusion of many more subjects could soon be breaching on human rights. Sexuality.

Bibliography

MCBs Research & Documentation Committee, *FAQs on the 2001 Census - The religion question*, 2001

M. Anderson and S. E. Fienberg, *Race and Ethnicity and the Controversy over the US Census*, 2000

P. Aspinall, *Should a question on 'Religion' be included in the 2001 British Census? A Public Policy Case in Favour*, 2000.

P. Weller, *Counting Religion, Religion, Statistics and the 2001 Census*, 1998.