

Recommendations regarding the question of religion in the census

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Dear [REDACTED]

I welcome the government's efforts to get more accurate census results on the question of religion. Many people claim allegiance to a religion when it is really not the case. When I was in high school in the 1960s almost all the students claimed to be 'Christians' irrespective of what they believed and valued or how they behaved. These days, people are more likely to identify as having "No Religion", but there are many Christians who would not be able to fit their faith position into the census questions. Both these problems lead to inaccurate data. Like the government, I would like to have statistics that are a more accurate reflection of reality.

RELIGION OR DENOMINATION?

One of the problems¹, I believe, is in how the census questions are worded. There is confusion between the concept of "religion" and the concept of "denomination". Christianity is a religion, but there is no option provided to state that a person is a Christian. The only options provided for Christians are denominations like Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, etc. These are not religions; they are some of the different denominations or branches of Christianity. Other religions also have the equivalent of denominations. For example Sunni and Shiite are branches of Islam; and Theravada, Mahayana & Vajrayana are branches of Buddhism. However the census is worded in such a way that only Christians can't state their religion, but only their denomination. This means there is inconsistency between the question asked of Christians and that asked of people of other faiths; there is thus also inconsistency in the responses.

It is incorrect to imply that different Christian denominations are different religions. On the whole they share the same scriptures and the same core beliefs. Many denominations exist mainly because they emerged in different parts of the world at a time when travel and communication was slow and difficult. (Anglicans emerged in England, Presbyterians in Scotland, Lutherans in Germany, Church of Christ in USA etc.). These days, Christians, and even clergy, move readily between denominations but would not think they are changing religions. Personally I have done work² for many of these denominations³ but I have not changed religion in doing so.

A simple solution to this would be the use of a drop-down menu. Having selected "Christian", a respondent would be prompted to select which denomination they adhere to; similarly, a person selecting "Muslim" could choose which branch of Islam they identify with, etc. The option "Other" should also be given for each religion. The options "Other Religion" and "No Religion" should also be given.

¹ I'm working off my memory and don't have a record of the census document as I answered the census online but I write this from my memory of the questions.

² As a lecturer, trainer or guest speaker.

³ Probably a dozen or more.

attend church or not as some people don't attend but are committed Christians, while others do attend but are not Christians.

To explore how serious people are about observance of their nominated religion, a follow-up question could ask: *Typically, how often do you engage in some faith based activity? E.g. pray, meditate, read scriptures or religious literature, attend a place of worship, or help others out of religious motivation.*

- *Daily*
- *Weekly*
- *Monthly*
- *Annually*
- *Rarely*
- *Never*

Please give my thoughts some consideration. I think this would lead to more accurate findings on the census.

Yours faithfully,
