

**National Equality Panel: Call for Evidence.
British Humanist Association, February 2009.**

About us

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned, non-religious people living in the UK. It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good and responsible lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. It is committed to human rights and democracy, and has a long history of active engagement in work for an open and inclusive society.

The BHA's chief executive was a member of the steering group for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and of the reference group for the Equalities and Discrimination Law Reviews and the BHA itself regularly participates in campaigns, working parties, committees and consultations (Government and other) on these issues as they affect the interests of those we seek to represent.

The BHA's policies are informed by its members, who include eminent authorities in many fields, and by other specialists and experts who share humanist values and concerns. The BHA itself is deeply committed to human rights and advocates an open and inclusive society in which individual freedom of belief and speech are supported by a policy of disinterested impartiality on the part of the government and official bodies towards the many groups within society so long as they conform to the minimum conventions of the society.

We are aware that the Equality and Diversity Forum (EDF), of which we are a member, has already made a submission to you, which includes a number of reports and with which we broadly agree. However, we are disappointed that in that submission the term 'faith' is used rather than 'religion or belief'. 'Religion or belief' is the legal term for the equality strand and encompasses those with religious and those with non-religious beliefs such as Humanism. The word 'faith' excludes those with non-religious beliefs and should not be used, especially not in relation to equality, diversity and human rights.

Introduction

We welcome this opportunity to make a submission to the National Equality Panel's Call for Evidence, and thank the Panel for an extended deadline for this submission.

We understand that the Panel's remit does not extend to examining evidence on the impact of specific policies, projects, case studies and so on which 'show how services help disadvantaged people or highlight the problems faced by service users'. In the case of non-religious people, it is primarily those sorts of examples that evidence continuing discrimination and disadvantage in a number of areas, including (but not exclusively) in employment, law, education, broadcasting, public services and Government-run community-focused strategies and funding.

However, given the scope of this particular inquiry, we have specific comments to make about the lack of data, research and analysis that would assist your task. It is because of a lack of reliable data on religion or belief in the UK that analysis of inequality using data is fraught with difficulties and could lead to inequalities between religious and non-religious people, specifically because policies, projects are based on inaccurate data.

Problems with data on religion and belief

Reliable data on religion and belief is notoriously difficult to produce. When people are asked about their beliefs, their answers will vary enormously with the precise wording of the question and the context in which it is asked, and without very detailed questioning it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether the answer provided indicates religious belief, active involvement and practice, a sense of belonging, or just a vague cultural affiliation. Unlike the other equality strands, it is also the case that beliefs are not innate and they are highly personal to individuals. Due to difficulties of measurement, data collected on religion or belief is often imprecise, unreliable and inaccurate, and this is especially problematic when those figures are used for purposes such as positive action initiatives, for targeting policy or services to specific groups, or for operational imperatives such as impact assessing.

Census data on religion and belief

While there are numerous surveys that attempt to capture data on religion and belief, including the respected Social Attitudes Survey, it is the Census data on religion and belief that is most widely used and credited.

A question on religion was included in the Census in England and Wales for the first time in 2001. The Census data on religion produced by the 2001 Census produced a wholly inaccurate measurement of the religiosity of the population: its underreporting of the non-religious population and its failure to reflect accurately either religious belief, religious practice or religious affiliation has produced a clear and damaging change in the tenor of public policy on religion or belief.

The White Paper 'Helping to shape tomorrow: The 2011 Census of Population and Housing in England and Wales' (Cabinet Office, December 2008) proposes to use the same question as in 2001. We consider that to re-use the same question in 2011 would be one of the most damaging possible acts of public policy in terms of producing discrimination based on religion or belief. Further, we believe that to reuse the 2001 question would be unlawful under the Human Rights Act 1998 and under the Equality Act 2006.

In advance of the 2011 Census the Office for National Statistics¹ (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.

By implication, based on the nature of the uses to which users said they would put the data, the requirement was for high quality, accurate and reliable information on the actual religious practice and needs of service users. None of this information can be garnered from the data produced by the question '*What is your religion?*' used in the 2001 Census and proposed for the 2011 Census.

The question '*What is your religion?*' used in the 2001 Census and proposed for the 2011 Census gave a far higher figure for 'Christian' than all other surveys. According

¹ The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the executive office of the UK Statistics Authority, a non-ministerial department which reports directly to Parliament.

² Office 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

to other, more accurate social surveys³ 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 population⁴ - 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.

The Census data on religion attempt to 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.

The Government and the ONS have recognised the inadequacy of the Census data. For example, in the Government's response to the consultation on the Equality Bill, it said '*reliable statistics are not available*' for '*strands such as... religion or belief*'⁵.

The White Paper states '*ONS acknowledges that the proposed question does not measure religious practice, and that for some user needs (particularly for service planning) a measure of practice may be useful*' (p52).

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. For example, a rationale behind the Government's new 'interfaith' strategy and the accompanying £7.5 million in funding from the public purse (following on from a previous £12.5 million) is the 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', believe in the supernatural and mix with others of the same religion in the community⁶.

Further, the figure stating that 72% of the population are 'Christian' has been used in a variety of ways, such as to justify the continuing presence of Bishops in the House of Lords, to justify the state-funding of faith schools (and their expansion), to justify and increase religious broadcasting and to exclude the voices of humanists in a number of contexts.

Our recommendations to the Panel

³See, for example, *Social Attitudes Survey 2007*

⁴Christian Research (2005) *The 2005 English Church Census*

⁵*The Equality Bill – Government response to the Consultation*, July 2008.

⁶Communities and Local Government *Face to Face and Side by Side: A framework for partnership in our multi faith society*, July 2008

We recommend that the Panel look into the lack of reliable data on religion and belief in the UK, especially in light of the unequal policies that are and could be made on the basis of it, which could lead to inequalities based on religion or belief.

We would be very happy to contribute further and in more detail about the non-religious part of the religion or belief as your inquiry progresses.