



**HUMANIST  
ASSOCIATION  
OF IRELAND**

*compassion • equality • reason*

*Submission to the  
Central Statistics  
Office on the 2027  
Census of Population*

Humanist Association of Ireland

January 2023

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Humanist Association of Ireland (HAI) campaigns for the equal treatment of people of no religion by the State. The HAI actively seeks a society which respects the separation of Church and State and removes all religious privilege and bias from its Constitution, laws, policies and practices. The principle of the separation of Church and State should apply in a truly democratic nation regardless of the various belief groups in the population.
- 1.2. Humanism is a positive ethical philosophy of life based on concern for humanity in general and for individuals in particular. It is a view of life which combines reason with compassion, and our understanding of existence is based on the evidence of the natural world and its evolution.
- 1.3. The HAI welcomed the change to the 2022 census question on religion; however, we believe that it does not go far enough. We believe that this question should be further changed, so that the focus is placed on whether a person practises a religion, rather than on whether or not they “have” a religion.

## 2. Proposed Changes to the Religion Question

- 2.1. The HAI requests a change to the Religion question, and asks that the current question be replaced with a two-part question, as follows:

*Do you practise a religion? (Answer Yes or No)  
If yes, what religion do you practise?*

- 2.2. Consideration should be given to the removal of the pre-selected religion checkboxes, which may result in a higher percentage of people ticking a box for a religion that they may only culturally affiliate with and may never practise. Prior to the 2002 census, this question was an open question, worded as follows: “Religion – State the particular denomination. If none, write None”.
- 2.3. Answering the question should be optional.

## 3. Reasons for the Proposed Changes

- 3.1. Cultural Affiliation with Religion

The benefit of making these changes to the question is that it separates those who practise a religion from those who only culturally identify with a religion. There are many people who feel they “have” a religion if they were baptised into one, even though they may no longer practise or hold any of the beliefs associated with the religion. Those people as such essentially do not have a religion, but yet, under the current wording, they may be inclined to tick the box associated with their baptism religion.

There has been a consistent trend in recent censuses showing the exponential rise in those claiming no religion. In the 1991 census, No Religion represented 2% of the population, and the number rose to 6% in the 2011 Census. In the 2016 Census, the number rose again to 10% making “No Religion” the second largest category behind Roman Catholic and showing clearly that Ireland is becoming a more secular society. The results of the 2022 census are not yet known, however given that the percentage has been increasing year on year, we expect a further significant increase in the percentage of people identifying as having no religion. We believe that this figure would be higher if the check-boxes were removed.

### 3.2. Accuracy of Data

While the wording in the 2022 census was slightly better than previous censuses, it still assumed that religion was the default position and did not make the distinction between a person’s baptism religion, and their beliefs and practice. The HAI’s proposal on the revised wording would help to make the distinction between cultural affiliation with religion and the actual practice of religion in Ireland, which would ultimately result in the production of more accurate data.

Removing the checkboxes would allow people to write in their religion, in the same way as they did prior to the introduction of the checkboxes in the 2002 census. It would also reduce potential prejudice in favour of the listed options and it would deal with concerns raised by some minority faiths who in the past felt offended and isolated by their omission from the list of religion checkboxes. (Irish Census Form Omits Box for Jews, 2006).

In addition, when the checkboxes were introduced in 2002, minority religions increased their figures by a far greater percentage than the percentage increase in the general population. For example, the Methodist Wesleyan religion had been declining in the decades up to the 1991 census, when 5,037 citizens identified themselves as Methodist or Wesleyan. In 2002, this figure jumped dramatically to 10,033, an increase of over 99%. Similarly, the Church of Ireland religion, which had also been in decline, experienced an increase of almost 30% to 115,611 citizens. These increases are against an overall population increase of just 11%. (CSO, 2023)

### 3.3. Fair Representation for All Citizens

Changing the religion question to focus on the practice of a religion will lead to more objective and accurate statistics. It will also ensure fairer representation for the non-religious when key policy decisions are being made, for example, the allocation of funding for essential state services such as health, education and social care. Religious influence is still prevalent in our schools and hospitals, despite growing demands for a more secular society. The slow pace of change in this regard, with the school divestment programme being an example of this, is not helped by the use of census data which does not accurately reflect the practice of religion in Irish society today.

National and local governments rely on the Census findings, to plan and make important policy decisions regarding resources and spending for the future, and the change in the question would help to ensure a more inclusive future for all citizens.

## 4. Recommendations

- 4.1. Amend the Religion question to a two-part question  
*Do you practise a religion?*  
*If yes, what religion do you practise?*
- 4.2. Remove the pre-selected checkboxes to allow for a written answer.
- 4.3. Make the question on religion optional

The Humanist Association of Ireland believes that implementing these changes will result in an improved and more accurate dataset, which will help with better planning in aspects of society that are heavily influenced by religion, such as schools and hospitals. This will allow for fairer representation for all citizens regardless of whether or not they have a religious belief.

## 5. References

CSO. (2023, 01 18). Retrieved from Central Statistics Office: <https://data.cso.ie/>

*Irish Census Form Omits Box for Jews.* (2006, April 13). Retrieved from The Jerusalem Post:  
<https://www.jpost.com/jewish-world/jewish-news/irish-census-form-omits-box-for-jews>

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