

## Make sense of the census

The census of England and Wales will take place on March 27. You'll be able to complete it online or fill in a paper questionnaire. One of the questions is "What is your religion?", not "Do you have a religion?". It's followed by a list of the major religions in the UK. "None" is on the list, but the way the question is asked implies that you're expected to be religious, and many people will respond by ticking "Christian", when they're not. Why? Winston Fletcher, in this month's New Humanist magazine, wrote,

'For the 5.5 per cent in minority religions the question is straightforward. But manifestly nobody who is not from a religious minority would claim to be, say, a Muslim, Sikh or Jew. So for the majority of those who answered, the fundamental tick-box choice was Christian or None. But this is far too crude. Faced with such a dichotomy, people shy away from saying they have absolutely no religion. Many are consciously uncertain: agnostic. About half the population believes there may be a God of some kind, and large numbers of others believe in various aspects of the supernatural. All this makes many people unwilling to state unequivocally they have no religion. And since the only other tick-box the census offers is "Christian", this is the box they tick.'

"Here's a Trivial Pursuit question with an answer that isn't at all trivial. Which two nations still reserve places in their parliaments for unelected religious clerics, who then get an automatic say in writing the laws the country's citizens must obey? The answer is Iran... and Britain."

Johann Hari

The Independent, 18 February 2011

This matters, a lot. The statistics gleaned from the census are used to inform policies on public services and to justify the continuing influence of religious (mainly Christian) organisations in state affairs. The result of the last census in 2001 gave a totally misleading picture of religion on the UK, and cut the number of non-religious people in half. All other reputable surveys, including the Government's own British Social Attitudes Survey, give a very different picture. BSA surveys have shown the proportion of non-religious people to be roughly 43%. A 2007 Ipsos MORI poll asked "Do you consider yourself to be a religious person?"; 62% answered no, 36% answered yes, and 2% were don't knows.

The 2001 census was used to justify an increase in faith schools, the continuation of "collective worship" in schools, keeping 26 bishops in the House of Lords, the hours of religious broadcasting, continued legal privileges for religious groups, and more state funding for faith-based organisations. When asked about these issues, a majority will say that they don't want more faith schools and they're not interested in religious TV and radio programmes. Church attendances have dwindled, only about 11% of babies are baptised in church, fewer marriages take place in church, and the Co-op recently reported that about half of today's funerals are "a celebration of a life", not traditional religious ceremonies. As Winston Fletcher says,

'Most Census Christians, I suggest, feel the same about Christianity as non-football fans feel about the World Cup. They are not against it, but it is irrelevant to them. If anyone asks which country they support they probably say England, because that is what is expected. But in reality they don't give a monkey's.'

You'd think that when 390,000 people claimed to be "Jedi" in the last census, the validity of the results on religion might have been treated with more scepticism, but with the religious authorities eager to exploit the "evidence" they found to justify their parasitic claims on British society, such inconsistencies were bound to be overlooked. This time, however, there's been a campaign to persuade those who aren't really religious to tick the "None" box, not to just leave the question unanswered. If you don't answer, you don't count.

Please talk about this to any sceptical friends you may have. Explain why it's important, and why they shouldn't tick "Christian" if they're not. Make sense of the census.

**We'll be providing some leaflets for delivery door-to-door or to post in shop windows, etc. If you can deliver some, please get in touch ASAP by phoning 01394 387462 or email [mail@suffolkhands.org.uk](mailto:mail@suffolkhands.org.uk).**

[www.census-campaign.org.uk](http://www.census-campaign.org.uk)

[www.suffolkhands.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhands.org.uk)  
[www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com](http://www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com)

## The BHA groups questionnaire

**Denis Johnston**

As you may recall, in January I sent out an invitation to our members to help us respond to the BHA "Working better together" document. Although the committee considered the BHA questionnaire to be poorly constructed and confusing, we considered that it would be better to canvas the views of our members rather than to just respond with our own views. Although this was rather rushed - the deadline was the 31st January - we were pleasantly surprised (indeed impressed) that so many of our members took the time and trouble to respond so rapidly.

We sent out 64 questionnaires (with associated documents) by post and a further 16 by email. By the deadline we'd received 16 postal responses and 4 emailed replies giving an overall response rate of 25%. This, we are told, apparently is remarkably high.

Before giving the results, we should point out that there were two problems with the first group of questions. Firstly, respondents were asked "What are your main current activities and how important do you consider them?" There are two questions in one there that caused some confusion. Secondly the response options included a "We don't do it" column, but it wasn't clear if this was asking if the group didn't do it or the individual didn't. Unfortunately these were the questions provided by the BHA and although tempted to rewrite them, we realised that if we did that we'd actually end up asking entirely different questions. So, for better or worse, we stuck with the original unadulterated BHA version.

That said, most questions had consistent responses. For example almost everyone rated "Providing a place for humanists to meet socially" and "Promotion of Humanism", "Supporting charities" as important or very important.

There was slightly less support for the two "campaigning" issues (National, Local and Other) with just over half saying these were important or very important and most of the others saying they were "neutral".

"Participating in SIFRE and /or SACRE" was generally positive, but answers to this question were omitted by many and some said they did not know what these organisations were.

On BHA "relationships", results were mixed with most supporting BHA fund raising and supporting other secular organisations. However there was also a minority who rated this as unimportant.

Similarly with the Celebrants issues. Most said that we should support both BHA and "local" celebrants but there were a number of votes cast in the "unimportant" boxes. An obvious problem with that question was that "local

Celebrants" were not well defined.

The second group of questions, asked about to what extent members agreed with the BHA view of how groups and the BHA could work better together. These questions were much clearer and with two exceptions there was universal agreement between the membership and the committee. The two exceptions were:

1. Encourage people to join the BHA to maintain its financial health. Here over 50% disagreed. Unfortunately (again) this is two questions in one and we do not know if people were voting against joining the BHA per se, or voting against it because they thought it was asking if they should join just to support the financial health of the BHA.
2. Engage on behalf of SACREs. There was a substantial "neutral" vote on this and (again) some comments from members that they were not familiar with the role of SACREs.

Finally, on the question concerning whether or not we should become a "branch" of the BHA. Only a small number actually answered this. Those who did were against it. Some commented that they thought we already were a branch. Others commented that they couldn't answer without knowing what difference it would make.

The final question which asked "What do think being a branch would mean?" had few responses but those that were received generally cited "lack of local freedom/ autonomy" and "politicization" as reasons for being against it.

At the time of writing we have not yet seen any national results of the survey from the BHA, but have heard from other groups that their responses were similar to ours.

We understand that there will be a follow up survey - this time to all the BHA members.

Finally - a big thank you to those who took part.

**Holywells High School** in Ipswich, which was placed in "special measures" by Ofsted from 2001-2004 and threatened by a C of E take-over, has become 'Ipswich Academy', run by a Swedish organisation, Kunskapsskolan.

**Uncaged monkeys:** Prof. Brian Cox, Ben Goldacre, Simon Singh and Robin Ince from 'The Infinite Monkey Cage' on BBC Radio 4 are coming to the Ipswich Regent for a Night of Science and Wonder on 2nd May.

## Christianity & Islam in the modern world

**John Palmer**

The first SIFRE/UCS Annual Lecture on Inter-Faith Issues was given by Professor Lord Harries of Pentregarth on January 13th on the subject of Christianity and Islam in the Modern World, before an audience of a hundred or more. Richard Harries, latterly Bishop of Oxford, is known for his presentations on BBC Radio 4's Thought for the Day. He also attracted attention with his support of gay priest Canon Jeffrey John and his opposition to the teaching of creationism. Harries divided his lecture into two themes: historical/sociological and interfaith.

His historical comments, almost exclusively centred on Islam, started with the view that secularisation peaked in the 1960s and that religion is now once more a major player on the world scene. He claimed that the decline of Muslim influence in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was due to weak leadership. He made no mention of the earlier rejection by Muslim imams of reason in favour of revelation, as recently described by Western commentators. He noted that when he was a theological student, Islam was not considered worthy of serious study. The world has been changed by: the rise of Wahhabism; the establishment of many Muslim states; oil; and Islam as a political force. Harries reminded the audience that Iran, then a powerful monarchy, was changed to a Muslim state by the influence of one imam.

Harries continued his first theme by asserting that the challenge for Europe was to offer religious rights to Muslims. But there was a sociological aspect. Young Muslims were more likely to be unemployed than the population as a whole. Against this, a higher percentage of Muslims were studying, compared to the general population. And, while the original Muslim population was overwhelmingly peaceful, second and third generation Muslims were often disconnected from a country's base culture, and were likely to be un-rooted anarchists.

When Harries turned to interfaith issues, he described three dialogues. He called the first the way of understanding – let others speak for themselves and define themselves. The second was the way of affirmation – building common ground. And the third was the exposure of differences, based on respect and trust.

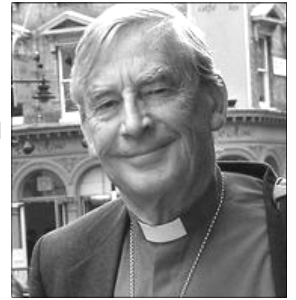
He continued by stating that religious faith must be freely chosen, which may not have worried the SIFRE/UCS audience of mainly middle-aged, middle-class Christians, but which would not play too well in certain of the Muslim states he listed earlier. And it is difficult to know what to make of another statement that the religious must be in the forefront of secularisation.

When asked about his view of the Afghanistan conflict, Harries said that extremists should be able to state their convictions in a political forum, as the only way forward.

The agenda should be "hearts and minds", better intelligence and only thirdly warfare.

The final part of the bishop's address was a description of the relevance of Abraham to the three major monotheistic religions, as an example of interfaith conversation. At this point, the non-religious in the audience – there was at least one – would have found their attention wandering.

This lecture was not so much about Christianity and Islam as about an explanation of Islam, past and future. An image of *The Guardian* in a dog collar sprang to mind quite often. It would have been nice to hear a discussion of the theme that, if Islam has changed from reason to revelation, Western society and even Western Christianity could be said to have changed from revelation to reason, and to wonder if this cross-over of ideas was too difficult to change. But perhaps the audience was too polite to raise such thoughts.



**Richard Harries**

## Acronyms explained

**Margaret Nelson**

From some of the responses to the questionnaire that Denis mentioned (see p2), it appears that newer members don't know what SACRE or SIFRE mean. You may not know what UCS is either (see this page).

**UCS** is University Campus Suffolk.

**SIFRE** is Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource, a charity based in Ipswich. We've been involved since its inception in 1991, the same year that we began. Some of us have been humanist representatives at SIFRE Forums of Faith. I have been a SIFRE tutor (now an EEFA tutor), which means that I've been given opportunities to talk about humanism in schools and to a variety of statutory and voluntary bodies.

We've contributed to SIFRE seminars, consultations and publications. Humanism is included in a popular board game sold by SIFRE, Diversity, which is used by schools, the police, health service staff and local government staff as part of their training.

SIFRE is based on secular principles; no group is allowed to dominate or proselytise (which may be why the C of E has been less than enthusiastic about it at times), and everyone is treated equally.

Last year (2010), SIFRE reverted to an entirely voluntary status, while all the educational work was handed over to its off-shoot, **EEFA** (the East of England Faiths Agency), which is now responsible for the tutors.

(Continued on page 4)

**HUMANISM: an ethical approach to life without religion; Humanists think we can be good without God.**

**SECULARISM: the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate.**

## Dates for your Diary

Meetings are on the second Tuesday monthly from 7.30-10pm in the lounge at Pinewood Community Hall, Laburnum Close (signed to Pinewood Surgery), Ipswich, IP8 3SL, near the A12/A14 Copdock interchange and Copdock Tesco. The car park is at the end of the close on the right, after the surgery. For detailed directions, or to request or offer a lift, please get in touch. Refreshments provided. You're invited to make a small donation to help pay for the room hire.

**8th March—A History of British Humanism from the 19th century, including the local story.** A presentation by Margaret Nelson that explains how we got here and asks, where next?

**Noon, Saturday 19th March—Pub lunch at The Duke of York in Woodbridge.** All welcome, but please let us know if you're coming by the 16th.

**12th April—AGM, followed by 10-minute topics.** The usual stuff—electing a committee etc.—is kept to a minimum, so there's time for some lively discussion. We need a new chairperson, and possible one or two more committee members. Get in touch if you'd like to know what that involves. If you pay your subscription annually, it's due, and it's a minimum of £10. What we discuss is up to you—any bees in your bonnet?

## Eastern Region Humanist Groups meeting, Cambridge, January

**John Palmer & Tom Boles**

The second Eastern Region humanist groups meeting was held to discuss the BHA's suggestions of bringing the BHA and the humanist groups more closely together, possibly into a branch-based organisation (see p2). The groups represented were: Bedford, Cambridge, Essex, King's Lynn, Watford and Suffolk. A BHA celebrant attended too.

After some discussion, it became obvious that most attendees did not want to belong to a BHA branch structure and did not understand the BHA's motives in suggesting such a radical change. We, as the Suffolk representatives, emphasised: the problems relating to celebrants; doubts about the BHA's ability to organise a branch system and concerns about the resultant bureaucracy if such a system were created; issues raised by many members not being members of the BHA; failure to understand the benefits of the system and the reasons for the initiative.

It was decided to send minutes of the meeting to the BHA and to call another meeting, on May 7<sup>th</sup>, at which it was hoped there would be BHA board members or trustees to present the BHA position personally.

[www.suffolkhands.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhands.org.uk)

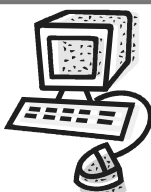
**Nathan Nelson**

At SH&S Towers, our highly trained web monkeys have been labouring over a few changes to the site, and we're a little bit excited. We've scrapped our entire registration and sign-in system, and replaced it with a new system designed to make it easier for you to share posts, comments and discussion on the Suffolk Humanists and Secularists site. Now, when read any story on the SH&S site, you'll see easier options for sharing it under 'Share', and easier options for adding your comments under 'Respond' - allowing you to sign in with Twitter, Facebook, Yahoo!, OpenID or Disqus, the web's most popular commenting system. All existing comments on the site have been imported into the new system, so nothing has been lost. Comments on Twitter and other sites will now show up.

We've also updated the look and feel of the site and polished a few other knobs and buttons.

If you were registered with us before, your old account has been deleted.

We're moderating comments to begin with but the hope is that we can open things up and allow the community to moderate discussion - so please feel free to make a start!



## Acronyms...

*(Continued from page 3)*

**SACRE** stands for Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education. Every local education authority has a SACRE, which is responsible for devising a local RE syllabus and supervising the provision of "collection worship" in schools (a statutory requirement). RE is the only subject in the school curriculum that doesn't have a national syllabus. Suffolk County Council has had a humanist SACRE member for over 20 years. I was co-opted years ago (I forget when). In 2007, we introduced a new RE syllabus for Suffolk that includes "humanism and secular world views". In view of this, I suggested that I might become a full member of Suffolk's SACRE with voting rights, and the other SACRE members agreed.

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