

The Muslim Council of Britain

Response to the Office of National Statistics

Religion

Scoping Report

October 2002

1.INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is a democratically elected umbrella organisation that represents the interests of a total of three hundred and forty-nine national, regional and local Muslim organisations. The overriding aims and objectives of the MCB and its organisational structure are detailed in *The Constitution*.¹

1.2 The MCB was intimately involved in the interfaith campaign to have the 'Religion' question' included in the 2001 Census.² This response reflects our ongoing interest in ensuring that full advantage is taken of the unique opportunity afforded by the 'Religion' question data to understand an integral yet under-researched facet of contemporary British society.³

1.3 We welcome this opportunity to comment on the 'Religion Scoping Report' and also to contribute to the 'Brainstorming Meeting' scheduled for 7 October 2002.

1.4 This response has been formulated by the MCB's Research and Documentation Committee through a process of extensive consultation with MCB affiliate organisations and also other interested individuals and institutions; the latter consultation process was facilitated through a one-day national conference held in September 2002 dedicated to exploring the conceptual, research and policy implications of the 'Religion' question.⁴

2.OVERALL COMMENTS

2.1 Our consultation indicates that there is widespread interest in ensuring that the 'Religion' question data is given the importance it merits and that maximum advantage is taken of this unparalleled opportunity to understand British faith communities. We thus recommend that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) publish as wide a range of statistics based on religion as possible.

2.2 Our consultation reveals reasonable levels of satisfaction with the proposed analyses and reporting plan as detailed in the 'Religion Scoping Report'. We however believe that the comprehensiveness and usefulness of the multi-source topic report would be enhanced by considering the following three areas:

- Producing a separate multi-source topic report dedicated to 'Religion'
- Expanding the range of data sources used in preparing the 'Religion' report
- Ensuring a standardisation of analyses, reporting, interpretation and dissemination plans for the 'Ethnicity and Identity' and 'Religion' reports.

2.3 Detailed below are our specific recommendations in relation to each of these three areas.

¹ The Muslim Council of Britain. *The Constitution*. London: MCB, 1997.

² Sherif J. *Campaigning for a Religion Question in the 2001 Census*. London: MCB, 2002.

³ The Muslim Council of Britain. *Electing to Listen. Promoting Policies for British Muslims*. London: MCB, 2000.

⁴ The Muslim Council of Britain. *The Demographic Profile of Britain's Muslim Community: Charting a Research Agenda*. London: MCB, 2002.

3.IMPORTANCE OF A SEPARATE ‘RELIGION’ MULTI-SOURCE TOPIC REPORT

- 3.1 Whilst recognising that religion is an integral aspect of identity (and in some cases ethnicity), we nonetheless believe that ‘Religion’ should be treated separately from ‘Ethnicity and Identity’. Our main reasons for this position are summarised below (Points 3.2 – 3.8).
- 3.2 The ‘Religion’ question is at present voluntary; by taking proactive steps to ensure that data from this question are not inadvertently buried within the contents of the already extensive proposed ‘Ethnicity and Identity’ report we should by the time of the 2011 Census be in a better position to objectively assess what additional value (if any) the religion question has conferred in understanding the nature of our pluralist society. Such an assessment is, we believe, vital in order to provide an evidence-linked assessment of whether the status of the religion question should be changed in future censuses.
- 3.3 Our understanding of the nature of identity continues to evolve. It is for example now clear that although race and ethnicity may be the dominant paradigms for conceptualising identity amongst some British constituencies, these paradigms may in themselves be insufficient for understanding faith-based communities, this being especially true where religious affiliation may transcend conventional racial and ethnic categories (as is the case with respect to the three Abrahamic faiths, for example). Separating data on religion from ethnicity will help ensure that the distinction between these different yet at times complimentary frameworks are not inappropriately blurred.
- 3.4 There is now increasing empirical evidence to show that religious affiliation is a powerful and independent predictor of a range of important social outcomes.⁵ Such findings suggest that religion should be treated independently of ethnicity. That said, it is still in our opinion important to consider possible interactions between ethnicity and religion in predicting social outcomes.
- 3.5 A growing body of evidence suggests that religious discrimination continues to blight the lives of many people in Britain. Whilst racial discrimination is outlawed in Britain the same is not true with respect to religious discrimination. Detailed data on a range of social outcomes by religious affiliation may help to reliably assess through statistical modelling the extent (if any) of institutional exclusion by religion and to assess the possible role and impact of legislation outlawing religious discrimination.
- 3.6 Religion and ethnicity are conceptually distinct; whilst the former may change the latter is more likely to be fixed from birth to death.
- 3.7 Both the previous and present government have recognised that religion and religious organisations play an important role in civic society having the potential

⁵ Modood T, Berthoud R, Lakey J, et al. *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage*. London: Policy Studies Institute, 1997

to promote social cohesion and regeneration.⁶ The proposed 'Religion' report would provide a baseline from which to monitor trends and also assess the impact of any attempts to promote social inclusion of faith groups.

3.8A stand-alone report on 'Religion' would be of considerable symbolic importance, as it would clearly signify to researchers and policy makers that religious affiliation should be considered when considering future research and developmental initiatives.

3.9A multi-source topic report dedicated to the question of 'Religion' would appropriately complement the 'Religion' chapter (Chapter 15) in *UK 2003*,⁷ which is soon to be published by ONS.

4.EXPANDING THE RANGE OF DATA SOURCES USED

4.1 Since the proposed multi-source topic report will represent the first detailed analyses of the impact of religious affiliation, we suggest that the range of datasets used be expanded beyond those referred to in the 'Religion Scoping Report'. We agree that the main data sources available are: *Census 2001* and *Labour Force Survey 2002 – 2003*. We would however urge use, where appropriate, of the other possible data sources identified, namely: Administrative data on education; *British Social Attitudes Survey*; *British Household Panel Survey*; and *Home Office Citizenship Survey*). The additional data sources that we suggest could prove useful are detailed in points 4.2 – 4.4.

4.2 *The Fourth National Survey on Ethnic Minorities*.⁸ This was the fourth in a series of ad-hoc surveys undertaken in 1994, the sample base comprising a nationally representative sample of over 5,000 people from ethnic minority groups and almost 3,000 white people. This survey looks at a broad range of social issues including education, employment, income, health and housing. A key strength of this study for the present purposes is that religious affiliation was enquired about.

4.3 *National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle*.⁹ This interview study of over 11,000 people aged 16-44 conducted in 1999 – 2001 provides an in-depth understanding of sexual habits, attitudes towards sex, sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases. Particular strengths of this study are that there was an 'ethnic boost' to ensure that minority ethnic communities were adequately represented, enquiry was made about religious affiliation and an attempt was made to assess religious practise.

4.4 Article 9 of the European Convention guarantees to individuals the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, these rights being enshrined within

⁶ The Runnymede Trust. *The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain. The Parekh Report*. London: Profile Books, 2000.

⁷ Further details are available from:

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=5703&Pos=&ColRank=1&Rank=272>

⁸ Modood T, Berthoud R, Lakey J, et al. *Ethnic minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage*. London: Policy Studies Institute, 1997

⁹ Johnson AM, Mercer CM, Erens B, et al. *National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle*. Further details are available from: <http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/surveys/nssal/nssalintro.htm>

The Human Rights Act 1998.¹⁰ Religious discrimination will be unlawful in the areas of employment and training under *European Union Article 13 Employment Directive* set to come into effect by December 2003. The *Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001* extends the racially aggravated offences of assault, public order, criminal damage and harassment to cover attacks aggravated by religious hostility. It is therefore important, we believe, that attempts are made to quantify the extent of religious discrimination in Britain so as to provide a baseline from which to assess future trends and also to assess progress in tackling religious discrimination. We suggest that the following additional data sources may be considered:

- *Religious Discrimination in England and Wales*.¹¹ This study used a multi-method approach to assess evidence for and the extent of religious discrimination in England and Wales and involved a qualitative phase, which consisted of interviews and discussion groups conducted in Cardiff, Leicester, London and Blackburn. The quantitative phase consisted of a national postal survey of religious organisations.
- *Anti-Islamic Reactions in the European Union After the Terrorist Attacks Against the United States of America*.¹² This was a Europe wide imitative aiming to monitor and chronicle the wave of Islamophobia that spread across Europe in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks.
- *Islamophobia – A Challenge for Us All: Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia*.¹³ The Runnymede Trust's widely acclaimed report evaluating the extent of institutional discrimination against Islam and Muslims in British society.

5. STANDARDISATION OF ANALYSES, INTERPRETATION AND DISSEMINATION PLANS FOR 'ETHNICITY & IDENTITY' AND 'RELIGION' REPORTS

5.1 It is important for the purposes of ensuring a consistency of approach that the 'Ethnicity and Identity' and 'Religion' reports are analysed, structured, published and disseminated in a standardised manner. To help realise this coherence of approaches, we suggest that the proposed analyses and dissemination plan detailed in the 'Ethnicity and Identity Scoping Report' be used as the standard since this approach appears more pertinent to some of the key questions and challenges that face contemporary British society.

5.2 We thus recommend that the 'Religion' multi-source topic report is structured according to the following six main themes:

¹⁰ Human Rights Act 1998 (Available from: www.hmsso.gov.uk/acts/acts1998/19980042.htm)

¹¹ Weller P, Felman A, Purdam K. *Religious Discrimination in England and Wales: Research Report 220*. London: Home Office, 2001

¹² Allen C, Nielsen J. *Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU After 11 September 2001*. Vienna: European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2002.

¹³ Runnymede Trust. *Islamophobia – A Challenge for Us All: Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia*, London: The Runnymede Trust, 1997

- Theme 1 – Population
- Theme 2 – Identity
- Theme 3 – Working Lives
- Theme 4 – Living Standards
- Theme 5 – Well-Being
- Theme 6 – Community and Citizenship

5.3 We do however recognise that in view of the limited availability of data sources providing reliable information by religious affiliation, it may not be possible to comprehensively address all of these themes. Where appropriate information is unavailable, we suggest that these research gaps are highlighted in the final ‘Religion’ report since the identification of such lacunae could help to appropriately focus the attention of the research community (and funding bodies).

5.4 In addition to the standard tabulations and cross-tabulations, we believe, that in order to be able to interpret data correctly, care needs to be taken to appropriately adjust for confounders and effect modifiers in the relationships being studied. So, for example, when modelling the relationship between religious affiliation and educational attainment, it is important that due attention is paid to adjusting for factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic factors and country of birth.

6.IDENTIFICATION OF STATISTIANS AND REPORT WRITERS

6.1 We will be happy to work with ONS to identify individuals and organisations that can contribute to the analysis of data from the ‘Religion’ question and also assist in the writing up of reports for publication.

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