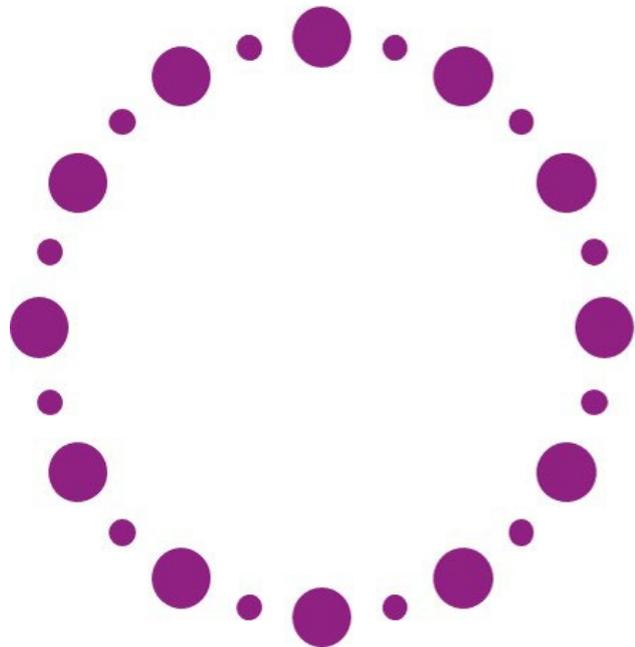


**census**  
2021



# Census 2021 guidance note on religion questions and religion outputs

22 September 2022



[nisra.gov.uk/Census2021](https://nisra.gov.uk/Census2021)

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## 1. Introduction

Census 2021 contained two religion questions, the first on “current religion” and a follow-up question on “religion brought up in” which is also referred to as “religion of upbringing”. This paper describes the background to the inclusion of religion questions in the 2021 Census, the processing of census religion data and the subsequent reporting of census religion outputs.

## 2. Why did the census include questions on religion?

Modern censuses have been held in Ireland/Northern Ireland since 1841 and a religion question has been included in every main census since 1861 (160 years ago). Religion questions were included in the 2021/22 censuses in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and around the world. In Northern Ireland, Census Office consulted on the continued inclusion of religion questions in Census 2021 and there was significant public support – see [Census 2021 topic consultation](#).

In Northern Ireland the two questions on religion in Census 2021 were consistent with the questions from the 2001 and 2011 Censuses. The first religion question focused on “current religion” and the second on “religion of upbringing” – this follow-up question was asked only of respondents who had no “current religion”.

There are robust justifications for the religion questions related to equality obligations under the Northern Ireland Act (1998) – see [Northern Ireland Act](#) and the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 - see [Equality Guide to Monitoring](#), and the need to provide information on religion to help plan public services. As an example, equality laws create a requirement to monitor the religious make-up of the Northern Ireland workforce<sup>1</sup>. The 2021, and earlier census, religion statistics are used for employment monitoring and have the support of the Equality Commission and key users of census data.

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<sup>1</sup> The Equality Commission refer to “Community Background” – in the Census the combination of questions on “Religion” and “Religion of Upbringing” are jointly referred to as “Religion/Religion of Upbringing” which is broadly consistent with the Commission’s “Community Background” classification.

This support was reflected in the public consultation. On this basis, the two questions were included in the Census 2021 Order and Regulations - see [Census regulations](#).

### 3. What were the religion questions in Census 2021?

As noted, there were two religion questions in Census 2021. The first question asked about “current religion” – the question wording is shown in Figure 1 (online) and Figure 2 (paper).

**Figure 1: Current religion question wording – online**

**What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?**

Roman Catholic

Presbyterian Church in Ireland

Church of Ireland

Methodist Church in Ireland

Other  
You can enter your religion on the next question

Or

None

**Save and continue**

**Figure 2: Current religion question wording – paper**

**13** What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?

Roman Catholic ➔ GO TO 15

Presbyterian Church in Ireland ➔ GO TO 15

Church of Ireland ➔ GO TO 15

Methodist Church in Ireland ➔ GO TO 15

Other, write in ➔ GO TO 15

None

The second question related to “religion of upbringing” and was asked only of those respondents who answered “None” or chose not to answer the current religion question. The “religion of upbringing” question is shown in Figure 3 (online) and Figure 4 (paper). It should be noted the online question highlighted the different wording of the second question to ensure that respondents fully understood that this was a different question than the first religion question.

**Figure 3: Religion of upbringing question wording – online**

**What religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in?**

Roman Catholic

Presbyterian Church in Ireland

Church of Ireland

Methodist Church in Ireland

Other  
You can enter the religion on the next question

Or

None

Save and continue

**Figure 4: Religion of upbringing question wording – paper**

**14** What religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in?

Roman Catholic

Presbyterian Church in Ireland

Church of Ireland

Methodist Church in Ireland

Other, write in

None

#### 4. Guidance given to the public on the religion questions in Census 2021

Census 2021 was run under authority derived from the Census Act (Northern Ireland) 1969 - see [Census Act](#). This legislation states that taking part in the census is required by law, but that there is no penalty for failing to complete questions on religion. This statutory position was highlighted to all Census 2021 respondents as part of the initial invitation letters and guidance. To help respondents, guidance was available online, on paper and through the call centre. The online guidance for the religion questions is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Online guidance for religion questions – Census 2021**

Question	Guidance provided
<p>What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?</p>	<p>Why we ask this question: Information on religion is a key requirement of census users and is used by a range of bodies and organisations, including central government, local Councils and religious organisations.</p> <p>If you do not have a religion select “None”.</p> <p>If your religion is not listed, select “Other” and enter the name of the religion in the space provided.</p> <p>There is no penalty for failing to answer this question.</p> <p>If you run out of space, enter as much as you can. Only enter one character per box.</p> <p>If you’re answering for someone else, select the answer you think they would choose.</p>
<p>What religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in?</p>	<p>Why we ask this question: Information on religion is a key requirement of census users and is used by a range of bodies and organisations, including central government, local Councils and religious organisations.</p> <p>If you were not brought up in a religion select “None”.</p> <p>If the religion you were brought up in is not listed, select “Other” and enter the name of the religion in the space provided.</p> <p>There is no penalty for failing to answer this question.</p> <p>If you run out of space, enter as much as you can. Only enter one character per box.</p>

Question	Guidance provided
	<p>If you're answering for someone else, select the answer you think they would choose.</p> <p>The personal information you submit to us is protected by law. We do not share it with anyone. You cannot be identified in the statistics that we publish.</p>

## 5. How did Census Office process Census 2021 data?

The primary census data collection period ran from March to July 2021. Every effort was made to gather responses directly from the whole population, however as with all censuses, some respondents did not answer all questions while others failed to complete a return. This section describes how the data was processed to ensure the final results represented the whole population.

In total, census returns were received from 1,844,500 distinct usual residents. Of the respondents, 27,400 or 1.5% did not complete the census religion questions fully (“question not completed”) and thus did not provide information on “religion” or “religion of upbringing”<sup>2</sup>.

In Census 2021, a statistical modelling approach called the Canadian Census Edit and Imputation System (CANCEIS)<sup>3</sup> was used to model not-completed questions. Given the equality monitoring user need, not-completed “religion of upbringing” questions were modelled using CANCEIS, however no modelling was undertaken for “current religion”<sup>4</sup>. Thus the “current religion” Census 2021 outputs include a “Not Stated” category, whereas the “Religion or Religion brought up in” outputs do not have this category.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents who ticked “None”, wrote in “No religion” or any variants of this (e.g. atheist) is a full response and their response accepted as is.

<sup>3</sup> CANCEIS documentation at <https://www.istat.it/en/methods-and-tools/methods-and-it-tools/process/processing-tools/canceis> and <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=3901>. CANCEIS is an international census standard for question imputation and used in many censuses around the world.

<sup>4</sup> This approach of using CANCEIS for question not completed for “religion of upbringing” in 2021 is consistent with the approach taken in the 2001 and 2011 Censuses.

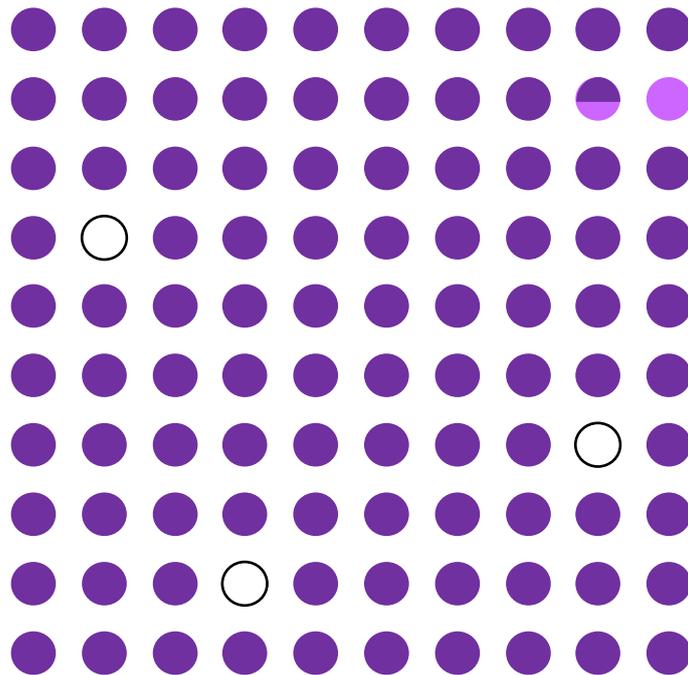
Using information from the field operation, administrative data, statistical modelling and the Census Coverage Survey (CCS), it was estimated that 58,700 people failed to fill out a census return (“census not returned”). This gives a final full census population estimate of 1,903,200<sup>5</sup> usual residents (=1,844,500+58,700) – or a response rate of 97% (1,844,500/1,903,200). In 2011 the response rate was 92% and in 2001 the response rate was 95%. As census users expect statistics to reflect the full population, Census Offices across the UK include modelled data in Census 2021 to account for people who did not respond<sup>6</sup>. Thus locally 58,700 census non-response records (3%) have been modelled and the final results reflect estimates of the full usual resident population. A visual schematic of this is shown in Figure 5.

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<sup>5</sup> The actual estimate for the final full census population is 1,903,175 but has been rounded to 1,903,200 in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Modelled data for “census not returned” was implemented in the 2001 and 2011 Censuses and is also adopted across all parts of the UK. Locally 158,000 modelled records were added to the 2011 census and 82,000 modelled records were added to the 2001 Census. In total 58,700 modelled records were added to the 2021 Census.

Figure 5: Census 2021 database (each dot = 1% of usual residents)



Symbol	Descriptions	Counts
●	Census response with religion question(s) completed.	1,817,100
●	Census response with religion question(s) not fully completed. Religion brought up in modelled across all options.	27,400
	Subtotal	1,844,500
○	Census non-response. Current religion & religion brought up in modelled across all options.	58,700
	Total	1,903,200

To understand any impacts of these statistical processes on the published results, the following four tables have been produced. The first 2 tables (2 and 3) show religion “published results” along with the “enumerated” and “modelled” results.

**Table 2: Current religion statistics – Census 2021 – impact of person imputation (numbers)**

<b>Current Religion</b>	<b>As Enumerated</b>	<b>Modelled</b>	<b>Published Results</b>
Catholic	782,300	22,800	805,200
Presbyterian Church in Ireland	308,900	7,200	316,100
Church of Ireland	214,800	5,000	219,800
Methodist Church in Ireland	43,700	1,000	44,700
Other Christian (incl Christian related)	126,100	4,300	130,400
Other religions	23,400	2,100	25,500
No religion	315,500	15,500	331,000
Not stated	29,600	900	30,500
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>1,844,500</b>	<b>58,700</b>	<b>1,903,200</b>

Note 1: Imputed (or modelled) records for religion – for current religion this relates solely to those respondents who failed to make a return

**Table 3: Current religion statistics – Census 2021 – impact of person imputation (percentages)**

<b>Current Religion</b>	<b>As Enumerated</b>	<b>Modelled</b>	<b>Published Results</b>
Catholic	42.4%	38.9%	42.3%
Presbyterian Church in Ireland	16.7%	12.2%	16.6%
Church of Ireland	11.6%	8.5%	11.5%
Methodist Church in Ireland	2.4%	1.7%	2.4%
Other Christian (incl Christian related)	6.8%	7.3%	6.9%
Other religions	1.3%	3.5%	1.3%
No religion	17.1%	26.3%	17.4%
Not stated	1.6%	1.5%	1.6%
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Note 1: Imputed (or modelled) records for religion – for current religion this relates solely to those respondents who failed to make a return.

The following tables (4 and 5) show the religion/religion of upbringing “published results” along with the “enumerated” and “modelled” results.

**Table 4: Religion/religion of upbringing statistics – Census 2021 – impact of question and person imputation (numbers)**

<b>Religion/Religion of Upbringing</b>	<b>As Enumerated</b>	<b>Modelled</b>	<b>Published Results</b>
Catholic	833,500	36,200	869,800
Protestant and Other Christian (incl Christian related)	794,600	32,900	827,500
Other religions	25,700	2,900	28,500
No religion	163,200	14,100	177,400
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>1,817,100</b>	<b>86,100</b>	<b>1,903,200</b>

Note 2: Imputed (or modelled) records for religion/religion of upbringing – this relates to those who failed to make a return and those who returned but did not complete the religion/religion of upbringing questions fully.

**Table 5: Religion/religion of upbringing statistics – Census 2021 – impact of question and person imputation (percentages)**

<b>Religion/Religion of Upbringing</b>	<b>As Enumerated</b>	<b>Modelled</b>	<b>Published Results</b>
Catholic	45.9%	42.0%	45.7%
Protestant and Other Christian (incl Christian related)	43.7%	38.2%	43.5%
Other religions	1.4%	3.3%	1.5%
No religion	9.0%	16.4%	9.3%
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Note 2: Imputed (or modelled) records for religion/religion of upbringing – this relates to those who failed to make a return and those who returned but did not complete the religion/religion of upbringing questions fully.

More details are included in the census quality report at [Census 2021 Quality assurance](#).

## 6. What statistical outputs are produced from these questions?

The univariate statistics from Census 2021 are badged Main Statistics (MS). The questions on religion have been used to create initial tables on “religion” and “religion or religion brought up in”. In line with user need, identified through a consultation, five tables were published and the table names and designs are listed in Table 6. The tables can be viewed on the [NISRA website](#).

**Table 6: “Religion” and “Religion or religion brought up” tables included in first release**

<b>Table Number</b>	<b>Table title and description</b>
<b>MS-B19</b>	<b>Religion:</b> This table provides a breakdown at Northern Ireland & Local Government District levels of the current religion of the usual resident population. The table has an 8 way classification of religion.
<b>MS-B20</b>	<b>Religion (expanded classification):</b> This table provides a breakdown at Northern Ireland level of the current religion with an expanded classification (1,000 or more people with that religion) of the usual resident population
<b>MS-B22</b>	<b>Religion - 1861-2021:</b> This table provides a breakdown at Northern Ireland level of the current religion of the usual resident population from 1861 to 2021. The table has a 4 way classification of religion.
<b>MS-B23</b>	<b>Religion or religion brought up in:</b> This table provides a breakdown at Northern Ireland & Local Government District levels of the “religion or religion brought in” classifications of the usual resident population - a 4 way classification of “religion or religion brought up in” is used.
<b>MS-B24</b>	<b>Religion or religion brought up in (expanded classification):</b> This table will provide an expanded classification of “religion or religion brought up in” of the usual resident population. A 7 way classification “religion or religion brought up in” is used.

## 7. What is the historical pattern for religion outputs from the census?

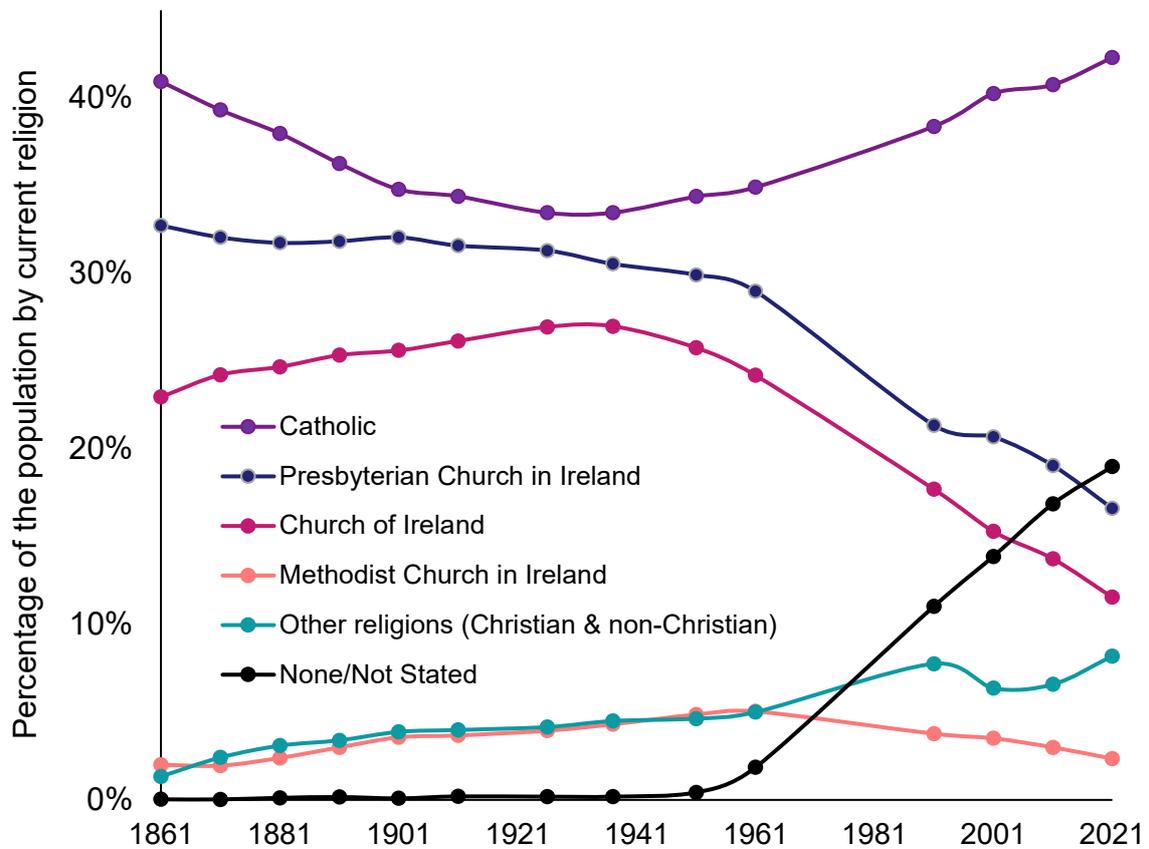
Census data provide religion statistics going back over 150 years. Published table B22 (see Table 6 for link) provides results for “current religion” from 1861 to 2021 – this is summarised in Figure 6 with the breakdown of the Northern Ireland population by “current religion” from 1861 to 2021.

A further consideration is statistics on “religion or religion of upbringing”. As the second question on “religion of upbringing” has only been included in the census from 2001, the recent results for “religion or religion of upbringing” are shown in Table 7.

**Table 7: “Religion or religion of upbringing” statistics 2001, 2011, 2021 Censuses**

<b>Census Year</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant and Other Christian (including Christian related)</b>	<b>Other religions</b>	<b>None</b>
2001	737,400	895,400	6,600	45,900
2011	817,400	875,700	16,600	101,200
2021	869,800	827,500	28,500	177,400
2001	43.8%	53.1%	0.4%	2.7%
2011	45.1%	48.4%	0.9%	5.6%
2021	45.7%	43.5%	1.5%	9.3%

Figure 6: Percentage of the population – current religion 1861 - 2021<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Religion statistics from the 1971 and 1981 Censuses are not shown on this graph due to the impact of civil unrest on Census enumeration.