

Extract from 2018 Submission by Lyndon Storey to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) re Australian Census religion question

I am the President of the Council of Australian Humanist Societies (CAHS), the peak body of Australian Humanism. In my capacity as CAHS President I have been approached by humanists who are unhappy with the way Humanism was presented as a category of “other” religion in the religion question of the 2016 Census.

I am writing to raise these concerns with the ABS, and with two proposals to help make the Census more capable of accurately capturing data about Australia’s rapidly evolving society.

1: Humanism should not be provided as an example of religion in the religion question.

The religion question in the 2016 Census included a list of religions for people to indicate their affiliation. It also included an option of “other” for people to write their religion if their religion was not on the list. Some examples of other were provided: “LUTHERAN, SALVATION ARMY, JUDAISM, TAOISM, HUMANISM”

Humanism is not a religion. The wording risked misdirecting people, and risked discouraging Humanists from describing themselves as Humanists if their beliefs were to be presented as religious. I have talked, in my capacity as President of CAHS, with humanists who were unhappy about this wording.

What is Humanism?

Humanism is, in essence, a secular belief system focused on the ability of human beings to develop meaning, purpose and ethics in their lives without reliance on supernatural sources.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is the global umbrella body of the worldwide humanist movement. Its “minimum statement on Humanism” says:

“Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance that affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives.

Humanism stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. Humanism is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.” See IHEU website at:

<https://iheu.org/humanism/what-is-humanism/>

The Amsterdam Declaration is a longer document describing which has been agreed upon by humanist societies around the world. It is available on the IHEU website. It says in part: (numbering from original document)

1. Humanism is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.

2. Humanism is rational. It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world’s problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and

technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.

...

5. Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion. The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.

See the IHEU website at: <https://iheu.org/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>

It should be very clear from these quotations that Humanism specifically rejects supernatural sources of knowledge and meaning. Many of its major documents, in part, define it against religion, as in the Amsterdam Declaration's "Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion." The IHEU's short statement on Humanism is even clearer about the non-religious status of Humanism – "Humanism is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality."

In this respect Humanism is clearly not a religion. This point is only emphasized when looking at the discussion of the meaning of religion provided by the ABS:

'Generally, a religion is regarded as a set of beliefs and practices, usually involving acknowledgment of a divine or higher being or power, by which people order the conduct of their lives both practically and in a moral sense.' See ABS website at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1266.0>

It should be clear then that for the vast majority of Humanists, as evidenced by our own collectively agreed upon statements, Humanism is a secular belief system, not a religion. Including Humanism as an example of religion misrepresents Humanism. It also has the strong potential to discourage humanists from filling in the Census appropriately. On more than one occasion Humanists have expressed their disappointment to me that Humanism has been included as an example of religion.

Both in the interests of basic respect to Humanists and our beliefs, and in the interests of the Census being able to provide an accurate picture of the Australian population's beliefs, I strongly recommend that Humanism should not be presented as an example of a religion.

2: The Census needs a question or sub question directly addressing the 'Secular Beliefs and Other Spiritual Beliefs and No Religious Affiliation' broad group.

As the number of people describing themselves as not religious increases it makes sense to develop a separate question or sub question to analyze the range of beliefs they hold.

When the "no religion" group was at 5% or less it might have made sense to simply conglomerate them all as non-religious. But with that percentage at 30% and increasing it does not make any sense to treat those beliefs as an addendum to the religion question, rather than as a set of beliefs that strongly influence Australian society, and which need to be documented in their own right.

The existence of this group is referenced by the ABS itself where it refers to the sub category of 'Secular Beliefs and Other Spiritual Beliefs and No Religious Affiliation' broad group"

See ABS website at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1266.0>

Humanism is, in fact, an example of a subset of the 'Secular Beliefs and Other Spiritual Beliefs and No Religious Affiliation' broad group, rather than a subset of religion. The secular etc. broad group is only going to increase as a proportion of Australian society over time.

I therefore propose that a new question or sub question be introduced to allow people to identify as part of this broad group, and to have the option of specifying their particular beliefs. Just as people with a religion have the option of specifying their particular religion under the current religion question so too should those with in conscience beliefs that are not religious, have the same option under the secular etc. category.

The question could then be something like:

Part A: "Do you have a religion? If no please proceed to part B. If yes please specify from the list of religions below or write in the name of your religion if it does not appear on the list.

Part B: If you do not have a religion do you have a personal guiding 'Secular Belief and/or Other Spiritual Belief and/or No Religious Affiliation?" If yes please specify from the list of beliefs below or write in the name of your belief system if it does not appear on the list. The list could include major options such as

Humanism, Rationalism, Marxism, Spiritual but not Religious, etc.

I do not insist on the precise wording above, but simply offer it to help visualize a possible approach. Moving to develop such a question would not so much be a rejection of the current approach as it would be building on it. Now that so many people do not have religious beliefs it makes more sense to start surveying, and treating with equal seriousness, their non-religious beliefs.