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BCS70 data note

The art of asking questions about religion

**Alice Sullivan, David Voas
and Matt Brown**

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The art of asking questions about religion

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Abstract

Over the years, the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) respondents have been asked a number of different questions about religion. In this data note, we investigate the way in which different question wordings have produced large differences in the substantive responses. As well as comparing the 1970 cohort's responses across different waves of the study, we compare BCS70 responses to responses to the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey and the Census. We have included new questions in the 2012 survey of the BCS70, asking explicitly about belief in God and an afterlife. We provide a first look at preliminary findings from these new questions, which reveal the complexity of many respondents' beliefs.

Introduction

In *The Art of Asking Questions* (1951), Payne stresses the importance of asking clear and specific questions in surveys, and cautions that changes in question wording can make a big difference to the assumed meaning of the question from the respondents' point of view. This point applies to instrument design on any topic, but arguably particular care is needed in question design on topics where the respondents' views may themselves be somewhat nebulous.

Religion is an enormously important part of many people's lives, and therefore it is not surprising that questions on religion are included in many multipurpose surveys. There is a substantial research literature on the antecedents and the consequences of religious belief and participation, and religion has been linked to a wide range of social and health outcomes from wellbeing to obesity (Koenig et al. 2001, Voas 2007a).

The term 'religion' may refer to a set of personal beliefs, an affiliation with an institution, a shared cultural identity, or participation in services or ceremonies. Survey questions about religion may tap into all of these dimensions, and if it is not clear what a particular question is asking, the interpretation of the responses becomes very difficult. This data note analyses the questions about religion that the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) respondents have been asked over the years, and the differences in substantive responses produced by different questions. The findings are compared with contemporary cross-sectional data sources, in particular the British Social Attitudes survey and the 2001 Census of population. We then introduce two new questions which have been asked for the first time in the 2012 wave of the survey. The purpose of this data note is to inform future surveys regarding the importance of question wording in the field of religion, and to inform analysts regarding the issues arising in interpreting responses to questions on religion.

The BCS70 follows the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970 (Elliott and Shepherd, 2006). Over the course of cohort members' lives, the BCS70 has collected information on health, physical, educational and social development, and economic circumstances among other factors. Since the birth survey in 1970, there have been seven surveys (or 'waves') at ages 5, 10, 16, 26, 30, 34 and 38. The age 42 survey began in May 2012 and will continue until the end of 2012.

Past questions on religion

Questions on religion have been included in a number of past waves of the BCS70, but these have not been consistent, and the wording has varied from wave to wave.

1986, Age 16

In 1986 the cohort members were asked: 'What religion were you born into?' and 'Is religion an important part of your life?'. These questions were asked in a paper self-completion questionnaire ('Home and All That' Document G¹) completed by 6,349 respondents. The questionnaire was administered via the respondents' schools, and includes the following information on the cover page:

"In this form we are asking your help in telling us about your views and opinions, and what you are doing and thinking. All the information you give will be treated in the strictest confidence. No names will be given out and this form will not be seen by anyone else. If you should have any difficulty in filling in any part of this questionnaire, please consult the person at school who gave it to you."

The question 'What religion were you born into?' can be seen as assuming implicitly that the respondent has a religion, although the response categories allow him or her to indicate no religion. 'None (atheist, etc.)' is given as the final category, and this was selected by seven per cent of respondents (Table 1). It is unclear what the 'etc.' is intended to imply – possibly agnosticism, but this is not explicitly mentioned as an option. The label for this category seems to refer to belief (specifically its absence), whereas the question would normally be read as referring to identity or membership. Indeed, the penultimate category is 'other cultural group', suggesting that religion is being defined as a cultural category rather than purely in terms of belief.

The notion of being 'born into' a religion is fairly vague. Consider for example a respondent whose parents were 'culturally' Anglican or Jewish, but who were non-believers or did not participate in religious activities. It is unclear whether such a respondent was expected to select a religious category according to the cultural identity of his or her parents or opt for 'none'. Sixty-one per cent responded that they were born into the Church of England.

It is difficult to find another survey with respondents aged 16, but we can look at approximately the same cohort in the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey when they reached adulthood a couple of years later. The BCS70 study members would have been aged 19-21 in 1989-91; by pooling those years from the BSA and looking at respondents aged 18-24, we obtain a comparison group of reasonable size. The BSA respondents were asked "In what religion were you brought up?" (If necessary, it was followed by the probe "What was your family's religion?") The question was asked in a face-to-face interview.

Being 'born into' and 'brought up' in a religion are not necessarily the same thing; the latter implies some degree of religious socialisation. Perhaps in consequence, the proportion of

¹ Available at www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/bcs1986_questionnaires.

respondents answering 'none' was twice as high in the BSA samples as among BCS70 members (Table 1). Conversely, the proportion naming the Church of England was considerably lower (43% versus 61%). It is not obvious why so many BCS70 members would have said that they were born into Anglican families; only 49 per cent of children born in England in 1970 were baptised in the Church of England (Voas 2003), which implies that for Great Britain as a whole the figure would be about 42 per cent. Some people 'born into' a denomination would not have been christened and vice versa, but the age 16 reports seem very high.

Table 1: Responses to questions about childhood religion as a young adult, BCS70 compared with BSA

Response	BCS70 Age 16, 1986		BSA Age 19-21, 1989-1991	
	What religion were you born into?		In what religion were you brought up?	
	n	%	n	%
Church of England	3850	61	474	43
Catholic	847	13	176	16
Other Christian	673	11	237	22
Muslim/Islam	81	1	27	2
Hindu	52	1	5	0
Buddhist	1	0	3	0
Sikh	40	1	7	1
Jewish	29	0	8	1
Other cultural group	41	1	1	0
None (atheist, etc)	430	7	154	14
Not stated	305	5	7	1
Total	6349	100	1098	100

Note: The comparison group is composed of respondents aged 18-24 from the British Social Attitudes survey, years 1989-91 pooled.

The question 'Is religion an important part of your life?' similarly assumes implicitly that respondents have a religion, although 'Have no religion' is included as a response category, and was selected by nine per cent of respondents. 'Don't know' is given as a further response category, although it is unclear whether respondents would have interpreted this as meaning that they did not know whether they had a religion, or did not know whether it

was an important part of their life. Just over half (51%) indicated that religion was ‘not important’ (Table 2).

Table 2: Responses to question: Is religion an important part of your life?, BCS70, Age 16

Response	n	%
Not stated	392	6
Yes, very important	506	8
Yes, quite important	1256	20
No, not important	3265	51
Have no religion	560	9
Don't know	370	6
Total	6249	100

1996, Age 26

In 1996, a postal questionnaire was completed by 9,003 respondents and included the question ‘Do you see yourself as belonging to any particular religion?’ Unlike the age 16 question, this construction does not implicitly assume that the respondent has a religion. Sixty-one per cent of respondents ticked ‘No, no religion’ (Table 3). The phrasing of this question is interesting, with the emphasis on *belonging* to a *particular* religion. The question is on belonging rather than belief, and it is not necessarily clear how respondents would have interpreted ‘belonging’. Those who responded negatively to this question were not necessarily atheists or agnostics, as they could have held a belief in a higher power or even the Christian god while not seeing themselves as belonging to a particular religious group. Conversely, some non-believers have a sense of cultural belonging to a religion, and may have responded accordingly.

Almost exactly the same question appears on the BSA survey (from which the BSC70 question was obviously taken): “Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?” We can extract a subsample for comparison by pooling datasets from 1995 to 1997 and looking at respondents born in 1968 to 1972. The split between people identifying with some religion versus none is virtually identical to that observed in the BCS70.

Table 3: Responses to questions about belonging to a particular religion, BCS70 compared with BSA

Response	BCS70 Age 26, 1996		BSA Age 23-29, 1995-1997	
	Do you see yourself as belonging to any particular religion?		Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	3435	39	494	38
No, no religion	5459	61	308	62
Total	8894	100	802	100

Those who did see themselves as belonging to a religion were asked to 'please say which below'. The open format resulted in a far wider range of responses than were provided as options in 1986. The detailed breakdown by denomination is similar to that found in the BSA, though once again the cohort study seems to have more Anglicans than the general population (40% versus 35% of those specifying a religion). Table 4 shows which religion respondents identified with, if they reported that they did feel that they 'belonged' to a religion.

Table 4: Religion at age 26 (among those who see themselves as belonging to a particular religion), BCS70

Religion	n	%
Church of England	1390	40
Roman Catholic	703	20
URC/Congregational	15	0
Baptist	26	1
Methodist	85	2
Christian - no denomination	509	15
Independent Churches	1	0
African/West Indian Churches	2	0
Pentecostal Churches	10	0
Salvation Army	8	0

Religion	n	%
Quaker	5	0
Other Protestant	5	0
Orthodox Churches	13	0
Church in Wales	20	1
Church of Scotland	106	3
Mormon	11	0
Jehovah's Witness	26	1
Spiritualist	17	0
Protestant	90	3
Evangelical	11	0
Other Christian denomination	2	0
Hindu	35	1
Jew	49	1
Muslim	68	2
Sikh	29	1
Buddhist	6	0
Other non-Christian	21	1
Not answered	172	5
Total	3435	100

2000, Age 30

The age 30 survey took the form of a face-to-face interview in the respondents' homes. The interviewers used a show card, and asked: 'Please look at this card and tell me, what is your religion, if any?' This question reverted to the practice of prompting for a religion in the construction of the question, although 'no religion' is given as the first response category here, as opposed to being the final and penultimate response category respectively in the two 1986 items. The proportion responding 'no religion' was 26 per cent, a dramatic drop from the 61 per cent responding 'no religion' to the 1996 question (Table 5).

This contrast mirrors that between the 2001 Census of population and the BSA survey. The Census question on religion in England and Wales was simply "What is your religion?" The

combination of the positive presumption, the very general response categories (None, Christian, etc.), and its placement immediately following the question on ethnicity helped to encourage identification with a religion (Voas & Bruce 2004). The cohort members would have just turned 31 on the census date (29 April 2001); the average level of 'no religion' for people aged 30 to 31 in England and Wales was 23 per cent. This figure is highly consistent with the BCS70 value, given that immigrants (who would not have been included in the cohort sample) are disproportionately likely to have a religious identity. For example, only 2.4 per cent of cohort members said that they were Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, whereas the corresponding figure for people aged 30 to 31 in the population was six per cent. This consistency between the 2001 Census and the 2000 survey of BCS70 is interesting given that the Census is a self-completion survey, whereas the BCS70 2000 survey was face-to-face. This could suggest that the mode of data collection is not an important driver of responses to this question.

Table 5: Responses to the question: 'Please look at this card and tell me, what is your religion if any?', BCS70, Age 30

Response	n	%
No religion	2899	26
Christian, no denomination	1536	14
Roman Catholic	1227	11
Church of England / Anglican	4207	38
United Reformed Church (URC) / Congregationalist	34	0
Baptist	72	1
Methodist	264	2
Presbyterian / Church of Scotland	386	3
Other Christian	165	2
Hindu	74	1
Jew	50	0
Muslim / Islam	141	1
Sikh	60	1
Buddhist	23	0
Other non-Christian	57	1
Don't know	8	0
Not answered	23	0
Total	11226	100

A direct comparison of the 1996 and 2000 responses shows that a substantial proportion of respondents gave apparently inconsistent responses to these two questions. Thirty-seven per cent of those interviewed in both 1996 and 2000 reported that they did not see themselves as belonging to a particular religion at age 26, but did report having a religion at age 30 when asked 'what is your religion, if any' (Table 6). This direct comparison confirms that the changes in responses between the surveys are not simply driven by differential attrition or non-response.

Table 6: BCS70 responses to 'Do you see yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' at age 26 by 'What is your religion, if any?' at age 30

		What is your religion, if any? (Age 30)	
		Any religion reported	No religion
Do you see yourself as belonging to a particular religion? (Age 26)	Yes	2827 (38%)	115 (2%)
	No religion	2774 (37%)	1806 (24%)

2004, Age 34

The 2004 wave was a face-to-face survey. Respondents were asked: 'Now I would like to ask you some questions about religion. Thinking first of your childhood, were you raised according to any particular religion?', followed by 'Which religion was that?' for those who answered yes, and responses chosen from a show card.

Fifty-five per cent said that they were raised according to a particular religion and 45 per cent that they were not (Table 7). This compares to only seven per cent who responded 'None, atheist, etc.' to the question 'What religion were you born into?' in 1986. Such a dramatic difference is unlikely to be due to differences in recall at the two time points. The difference may be partly due to the interpretation of being 'raised according to' a particular religion being different from simply being 'born into' a religion. The former perhaps implies more active engagement on the part of parents, and even a degree of orthodoxy, whereas being born into a religion may be interpreted as simply a matter of cultural identity.

It is also likely that the use of a preliminary question asking whether the respondents were raised according to a particular religion made a negative response seem more acceptable, in comparison to the 1986 question with its implicit assumption of a religion. Previous research has shown that the use of a filter question (for example 'Do you have a religion?', leading to a follow-up 'Which?' in the event of an affirmative response) produces considerably more 'no' answers than a single question in which 'none' is merely one option (Lambert 2002: 571). Furthermore, the wording 'None, atheist, etc.' in 1986 might have been especially off-putting.

In any event there is a striking contrast with the BSA findings for a similar cohort (people born in 1968 to 1972) at roughly the same time (2003-2005, pooled). In response to the question 'In what religion, if any, were you brought up?', 79 per cent of respondents named one.

Table 7: Responses to questions about childhood religion, BCS70 compared with BSA

Response	BCS70 Age 34, 2004		BSA Age 31-37, 2003-2005	
	n	%	n	%
Yes / one stated	5269	55	904	79
No / none	4353	45	242	21
Don't know	10	0	3	0
Missing	33	0	1	0
Total	9665	100	1150	100

The show card for the 'Which religion was that?' part of the question was extremely limited, lumping all Christian denominations together, representing 94 per cent of the responses to this item (Table 8).

Table 8: Responses to question: 'Which religion was that?' by those reporting that they were raised according to a particular religion, BCS70, Age 34

Response	n	%
Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant)	4962	94
Buddhism	3	0
Hinduism	59	1
Judaism (Jewish)	39	1
Islam (Muslim)	102	2
Sikhism	40	1
Other religion	64	1
Total	5269	100

Respondents were then asked ‘Do you actively practise any religion now?’, followed by ‘Which religion is that?’ and a show card. Only 14 per cent said that they practised a religion (Table 9). It is not entirely clear though how respondents would have interpreted the meaning of ‘actively practising’ a religion. The ‘which religion’ question again grouped all Christians together (Table 10).

Table 9: Responses to question: ‘Do you actively practise any religion now?’, BCS70, Age 34

Response	n	%
Yes	1390	14
No	8230	85
Don’t know	12	0
Missing	33	0
Total	9665	100

Table 10: Responses to question: ‘Which religion is that?’ by those reporting that they actively practise a religion, BCS70, Age 34

Response	n	%
Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant)	1151	83
Buddhism	15	1
Hinduism	32	2
Judaism (Jewish)	23	2
Islam (Muslim)	91	7
Sikhism	20	1
Other religion	58	4
Total	1390	100

Respondents were then asked ‘How often, if ever, do you attend any kind of religious service or meeting?’. This question was only put to the minority of the sample who had already indicated that they ‘actively practised’ a religion, which means it cannot be used to assess what level of religious attendance might have typically been reported as ‘active practice’. However, even among this group, over half (53%) indicated that they attended services no more than monthly (Table 11). The fact that nearly a fifth (19%) of these ‘actively practising’ respondents never or hardly ever attended services underlines the point that churchgoing is not regarded as the only form of religious practice.

Table 11: Responses to the question: ‘How often, if ever, do you attend any kind of religious service or meeting?’ by those reporting that they actively practise a religion, BCS70, Age 34

Response	n	%
Once a week or more	450	32
Two to three times a month	203	15
Once a month or less	472	34
Hardly ever	208	15
Never	57	4
Total	1390	100

2012, Age 42

Questions on religion in past waves of the BCS70 have asked about religious upbringing, belonging to a religion, and religious practice, but there has been a striking omission of any questions on religious belief. In the 2012 survey, we have aimed for conceptual clarity, distinguishing between religious upbringing, affiliation, practice and belief, and asking separate questions on each of these dimensions of religion. The questions on upbringing, affiliation and practice are repeated from previous waves, which will allow analysts to examine longitudinal change, whereas the questions on belief have not been included before.

The most general questions on religious belief are those concerning God and life after death. The question adopted for the BCS70 is a standard item that has been used in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) since 1991 and the US General Social Survey since 1988, asking ‘Which of these statements comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?’ with six categories ranging from “I don’t believe in God” to “I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.” Similarly, the ISSP question on life after death gives respondents the opportunity to say that they ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ believe or do not believe.

Simple binary questions are undesirable for two reasons: people have different conceptions of God and varying degrees of confidence in God’s existence. Although an item about ‘God’ may not be fully suitable for polytheists, it works well with the religions that are most common in the UK (in particular Christianity, Islam and Judaism).

The responses we report here are preliminary, being based on the first 2,197 responses. These responses may not be representative of the sample as a whole, and we have not investigated the characteristics of this subsample. Therefore, the analysis that follows is merely indicative, and is intended to inspire interest in the data to be deposited in 2013, rather than to provide definitive answers.

The 2012 survey takes the form of a face-to-face questionnaire combined with a paper self-completion questionnaire. The items on religion were included in the paper self-completion questionnaire, thus removing the risk of respondents being affected by any assumptions regarding what an interviewer might perceive as a socially desirable response to these questions.

As they have been in past waves, the respondents were first of all asked about religious upbringing and religious affiliation. The same question from the 2004 survey, 'Thinking first of your childhood, were you raised according to any particular religion?', was asked again in 2012. This question was immediately followed by 'If so, please select which one', with one multiple response grid and 'No – not raised according to any religion' as the first option (Table 12).

Table 12: Responses to the question: 'Thinking first of your childhood, were you raised according to any particular religion? If so, please select which one', BCS70, Age 42

Response	n	%
NO - NOT RAISED AS PART OF A RELIGION	695	32
Christian, no denomination	301	14
Roman Catholic	215	10
Church of England / Anglican	700	32
United Reformed Church (URC) / Congregational	16	1
Baptist	30	1
Methodist	63	3
Presbyterian / Church of Scotland	44	2
Other Christian	30	1
Hindu	13	1
Jewish	12	1
Muslim	24	1
Sikh	15	1
Other	17	1
Not stated	22	1
Total	2197	100

Respondents were asked next, 'Do you now see yourself as belonging to any particular religion? If so, please select which one', a question previously asked in 1996. Of the respondents so far, just over half said that they belonged to a religion, compared to only 39% of the full sample in 1996 (Table 13).

Table 13: Responses to the question: 'Do you now see yourself as belonging to any particular religion? If so, please select which one', BCS70, Age 42

Response	n	%
NO - NOT RAISED AS PART OF A RELIGION	1036	47
Christian, no denomination	323	15
Roman Catholic	155	7
Church of England/Anglican	462	21
United Reformed Church (URC) / Congregational	3	0
Baptist	15	1
Methodist	32	2
Presbyterian / Church of Scotland	20	1
Other Christian	24	1
Hindu	11	1
Jewish	12	1
Muslim	25	1
Sikh	15	1
Other	8	0
Not stated	31	1
Total	2197	100

The next item repeated a question asked in 2004, 'How often, if ever, do you attend any kind of religious service or meeting?' For the sample so far, attending services is certainly a minority activity, with nearly three quarters (74%) attending rarely or never, and only seven per cent attending weekly (Table 14). The comparable question in the BSA survey is 'Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals and baptisms, how often nowadays do you attend services or meetings connected with your religion?' The figures shown here come

from the 2008 year (which was when the questions on God and life after death were also included), including only respondents born in 1968 to 1972.

Table 14: Responses to questions about attending religious services or meetings, BCS70 compared with BSA

	BCS70 Age 42, 2012		BSA Age 36-40, 2008	
Response	How often, if ever, do you attend any kind of religious service or meeting?		Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals and baptisms, how often nowadays do you attend services or meetings connected with your religion?	
	n	%	n	%
Once a week or more	142	7	35	8
Once a month or more	94	4	31	7
Sometimes but less than once a month	342	16	84	20
Never or rarely	1602	74	276	65
Total	2180	100	426	100

Respondents were asked 'Which of these statements comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?', followed by a list of six options, from firm disbelief to firm belief (Table 15). Of the respondents so far, 22 per cent opted for the straightforward atheist position 'I don't believe in God', and a further 20 per cent selected the agnostic 'I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out'. At the other end of the spectrum, 13 per cent expressed a firm belief in God, 'I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it', and a further 18 per cent stated that 'While I do have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God'. In total, then, nearly a third (31%) of the sample believes in God (with or without doubts). The view 'I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind', selected by 14 per cent, expresses belief in some kind of supernatural power, but not in conventional religion. Twelve per cent were undecided, stating that 'I find myself believing in God some of the time but not at others'. These values are very close to those from the 2008 BSA survey that included the ISSP questions, despite the small base in the appropriate cohort (people born in 1968 to 1972). The slightly elevated figure for firm believers in the BSA data is related to the larger share of black and Muslim respondents, who tend to be more religious than average.

**Table 15: Responses to the question: ‘Do you believe in God?’,
BCS70 compared with BSA**

Response	BCS70 Age 42, 2012		BSA Age 36-40, 2008	
	n	%	n	%
I don't believe in God	473	22	39	21
I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out	439	20	30	16
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind	313	14	29	16
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others	263	12	23	12
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God	394	18	33	18
I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it	288	13	29	16
Total	2170	100	183	100

Forty-nine per cent of the sample said that they believed in life after death, either ‘definitely’ (19%) or ‘probably’ (30%) (Table 16). Thirty-four per cent said ‘probably not’, and 18 per cent ‘definitely not’. Although the degree of scepticism is higher than that found in the general population (judging from the rather small BSA sub-sample), belief in life after death is more popular than belief in God.

**Table 16: Responses to the question: ‘Do you believe in life after death?’,
BCS70 compared with BSA**

Response	BCS70 Age 42, 2012		BSA Age 36-40, 2008	
	n	%	n	%
Yes – definitely	405	19	35	21
Yes – probably	654	30	63	38
No – probably not	727	34	26	16
No – definitely not	383	18	40	24
Total	2169	100	183	100

A cross-tabulation of belief in God against belief in an afterlife (Table 17) shows that almost a quarter of those who believe in God (23%) do not believe in life after death. One in five (21%) of those who do not believe in God or do not know whether there is a God do believe in life after death.

Table 17: Belief in life after death by belief in God, BCS70, Age 42

Belief in God		Belief in life after death		Total
		No	Yes	
I don't believe in God	N	402	70	472
	Row %	85%	15%	100%
	Column %	36%	7%	22%
I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out	N	314	119	433
	Row %	73%	28%	100%
	Column %	28%	11%	20%
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind	N	127	184	311
	Row %	41%	59%	100%
	Column %	12%	18%	14%
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others	N	107	154	261
	Row %	41%	59%	100%
	Column %	10%	15%	12%
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God	N	120	273	393
	Row %	31%	70%	100%
	Column %	11%	26%	18%
I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it	N	34	254	288
	Row %	12%	88%	100%
	Column %	3%	24%	13%

Note: Total N = 2,158

Conclusions

A review of methods of measuring religious involvement suggested that “the following ‘law’ is at least semi-serious: a quarter of responses to any question on religion are unreliable” (Voas 2007b: 133). Our analysis of questions posed in past surveys of BCS70 (from 1986 to 2004) supports this view. Apparently small differences in question wording can lead to dramatic differences in responses. In 1986, the question ‘What religion were you born into?’ elicited only seven per cent of responses for ‘None (atheist, etc.)’, while in 2004 45 per cent of the sample responded ‘no’ to the question ‘were you raised according to any particular religion?’ In 1996, 61 per cent of respondents said ‘No, no religion’ in response to ‘Do you see yourself as belonging to any particular religion?’, whereas in 2000 only 26 per cent of respondents said ‘no religion’ in response to the question ‘Please look at this card and tell me what is your religion, if any’. Although the sample varies somewhat at each wave, and people’s views can change over time, it seems clear that the questions asked are the main factor driving these differences.

Our preliminary findings from the 2012 survey confirm the importance of differentiating between religious upbringing, affiliation, participation and belief. Sixty-eight per cent of our respondents said that they were raised according to a particular religion, and over half (52%) said they ‘belong’ to a particular religion, yet only 11 per cent attended services at least monthly. Thirty-one per cent expressed a belief in God (with or without doubts) but 49 per cent expressed belief in life after death. Religious affiliation does not imply belief in God, let alone participation in religious services or meetings, and for some respondents may just reflect a cultural default or quasi-ethnic identity. Indeed it is unclear how questions on religious affiliation should be interpreted. What does ‘belonging to’ a religion actually mean? It is very likely to mean different things to different respondents. This ambiguity is important in the context of the UK Census question on religion, which pertains to religious affiliation, given that the Census is intended as a tool for planning public service provision. Repeated efforts to stress that people are asked about affiliation, rather than practice or belief, has not stopped even expert commentators from muddling the concepts.

Our findings are important both for designers of future surveys and for researchers using survey data on religion, from the BCS70 and elsewhere. Considerable attention should be paid to the precise wording of survey questions and response categories, and particular care must be taken in the interpretation of survey responses in this field.

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