British Citizenship Test: Study Guide: The Essential Study Guide for the Life in the UK Test

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Commentary by Robert Moore

Life in the UK Test: Study Guide describes itself as 'the essential study guide for British citizenship and settlement tests'. It is a booklet that is geared to passing the tests, specimen versions of which are printed in the book. It is not therefore a comprehensive guide to modern Britain nor a sociological analysis of issues that newcomers might encounter. There is for example nothing on wealth, poverty and inequality, no discussion of the democratic deficit. The account given of British institutions is bland and formal, promoting a consensual image of the United Kingdom. Much of the practical information is, however, useful and might profitably be studied by native residents. As has been noted in the press, much of the British population would not be able to pass the citizenship test, but newcomers must.

Page 49 describes 'Religions in Britain' by tabulating the data derived from answers to Questions in the 2001 census (Q10 in England and Wales, Q13 in Scotland and Q8a in Northern Ireland). In the table on page 49 of *Life in the UK…* the figure of 71.6 per cent for 'Christian' is footnoted with '10 per cent of whom are Roman Catholics'. This latter figure could not have been derived from the 2001 census which for England simply offered the single category of Christian. The figure also seems implausibly low. As no source was given I emailed the publishers with a request for the source. The reply was that it came from the Home Office and 'correlated with the British Social Attitudes Survey'. I assumed the latter to mean that it was either directly taken from or is consistent with the British Social Attitudes Survey.

In summary the British Social Attitudes Survey data for 2001 gives the following breakdown of religion in Great Britain:

Table 1: Religion in Great Britain		
Religion	**Number**	**Percentage**
All Christian	1779	54.2
All others (incl. none)	1506	45.8
	3285	100.0
British Social Attitudes Survey 2001		

Of the Christians respondents 352 were Roman Catholic, which is 19.8 per cent of the Christians. Thus the figure given in *Life in the UK Test* was out almost by a factor of two. The figure quoted was, in fact, the percentage of the *total population* who were Roman Catholics (10 per cent). Either the Home Office or the book's editors had used the wrong denominator.

Had the correct denominator been used how consistent would the British Social Attitudes Survey data be with the census? The 2001 censuses give the following breakdown by religion:

Table 2 : Religion in the UK				
	Population	**Christian**	**% Christian**	**% of whom RC**
England	49,138,831	35,251,244	71.7	N/A
Wales	2,903,085	2,087,242	71.9	N/A
Scotland	5,062,011	3,294,545	65.1	15.9
Great Britain	**57,103,927**	**40,633,031**	**71.2**	**N/A**
N. Ireland	1,685,267	1,446,386	85.8	40.3
UK	**58,789,194**	**42,079,417**	**71.6**	**N/A**
Census 2001, England, Wales, Scotland and N. Ireland				

The apparent discrepancies between the census and the Attitude Surveys have already been dealt with admirably by Voas and Bruce in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* (*Vol. 19, No. 1, 2004 pp. 23*–28), what follows are my own reflections. The 2001 census (Table 2) reported that 71.2 per cent of the population of Great Britain was Christian (with the next largest group 'no religion')[10]. As the Table 1 showed, the British Social Attitudes Survey says that 54.2 per cent of the surveyed population was Christian. The reason for the 18 per cent

[10] The religion question in the census was voluntary and 7.7 per cent of respondents gave no answer. ONS treats them simply as 'missing cases'. This might be a mistake given that these respondents *chose* not to answer either out of religious, or (more likely) non-religious conviction. [I am indebted to David Voas for this point]

discrepancy is not hard to find: the census and the British Social Attitudes Survey asked different questions about religion.

In England and Wales the census question was 'What is your religion?' and respondents were offered a series of boxes to tick – 71.7 per cent chose the Christian box. In Scotland there were two questions: 'what religion, religious body or denomination do you belong to?' and 'What religion, religious body or denomination were you brought up in? In Northern Ireland these two questions were prefaced with another, third, question: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' In both Northern Ireland and Scotland it was possible to respond 'Roman Catholic' to the census question; 16 per cent did so in Scotland and 40 per cent in Northern Ireland.
In exploring the discrepancy it seems to me that the British Social Attitudes Survey and the census were not only asking different questions, they were seeking different answers. In England and Wales the religion question needs to be bracketed with the ethnic question, not only because the question came immediately after the ethnic question and might therefore be seen to be part of an enquiry about identity, but because it was intended to be seen as such. The government thought that

Responses to the question would help provide information which would supplement the output from the ethnicity question …[11]

The question was almost certainly seen as a means of differentiating people of Indian sub-continental origin or ancestry for whom answers in terms of nationality or national origin did not provide the information needed by – for example – local authorities. As one local education authority representative put it during a discussion of the results of the 1991 ethnic question, 'It still doesn't tell me how many Halal meals we need in schools'.

It is likely therefore that 'White British, Christian' was simply a way of asserting a native English or Welsh identity – being both white *and* Christian differentiates one from the 'others'. Voas and Bruce draw similar conclusions from their more extended analysis.

The British Social Attitudes Survey questions and the census questions in Northern Ireland and Scotland seem more likely to have been designed to adduce actual religious affiliations, there was more than one question about religion in the census schedules and they came before the ethnic identity question. Furthermore the first Northern Ireland question implied that one might legitimately have no

[11] *The 2001 Census of Population*, Cmd 4253, 1999: para. 64.

religion at all. Asking a specific question about religious affiliation, disengaged from issues of ethnicity and whiteness, seems to lower the overall level of 'religion'. Voas and Bruce make the interesting suggestion that whilst being Christian in England might express some anxiety about identity (white Christian equals not Muslim) in Scotland where the non-Christian population is small and highly concentrated, issues of identity are less related to religious and ethnic minorities than to relations with the English. Paradoxically this enabled more Scots to disavow religious affiliations.

Religion was placed in inverted commas above because knowing what an answer to a question on religion actually means is very difficult (this was largely the basis for academic opposition to a census religion question). Are respondents responding on the basis of general belief, practice, a carefully thought-out theology, or just a vague sense of what they ought to say? You may or may not attend chapel, you may or may not know that the unique Methodist doctrine is that of Perfection, you might also believe in astrology and check your stars daily, but still call yourself a Methodist. Many Freemasons claim to be Christian but there are (for the mainstream churches) two major heresies underlying their beliefs. Most masons probably feel they are joining a club and do not take much notice of the content of the rituals. I suspect that if we wish to study serious sociological issues around religion then surveys may be one of the less effective research methods. Though it might deal with things like church attendance fairly well, a questionnaire can not realistically address issues of belief in the sense of exploring specific theological knowledge and its relation to belief and practice. Surveys are nevertheless not without interest; for example whilst the census said that over 70 per cent of the population was Christian, according to the British Social Attitudes Survey only 29 per cent believed in a 'God who concerns Himself (*sic*) with every human being personally' and less than 15 per cent believed that life is meaningful because God exists. Presumably most of the 71 and 85 per cent of the respondents respectively denying central tenets of Christianity ticked 'Christian' in the 2001 census?

The Evangelical Alliance's most recent church census concludes on church *attendance* that 6.3 per cent of the English population 'usually attend church on a Sunday'.
(http://www.eauk.org/resources/info/statistics/2005englishchurchcensus.cfm#census)
On questions of *membership* individual churches have different methods of counting but overall the mainstream Christian churches show a decline in membership[12]. The exception to the decline is that

[12] Gavin Ross kindly provided me with the figures from *Whitacker's Almanac*

Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventists and Afro-Caribbean churches have all seen significant increases in their membership.[13] If church membership is an important aspect of Black identity in Britain then it is interesting that in the 2001 census in England and Wales they could only choose a Christian identity which was adopted by many non-believing white people in order to emphasise their whiteness.

These issues lie far beyond the simplicities of *Life in the UK Test: Study Guide,* it was naïve, indeed simply wrong, for the authors to apply the British Social Attitudes Survey percentages for Great Britain to UK census data. The error was compounded by their failure to read the British Social Attitudes Survey table correctly. They should publish a correction to page 49. Better still they should substitute the (British) *British Social Attitudes Survey* religion data for the UK census table if they wish to make any reference to Roman Catholicism.

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[13] Pentecostal churches had 130,000 members in 1997 and 280,000 in 2006; Seventh Day Adventists13,000 in 1980 and 25,000 in 2006. Afro-Caribbean Churches: 57,000 members in 1997 and 70,000 in 2006