



s 47F

19 March 2024

The Hon Anthony Albanese MP
 Prime Minister
 Parliament House
 CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

Proposed changes to the Census religious identification question

I am writing to raise my serious concerns about the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) changes to the religious identification question for the 2026 Census.

The Conference engaged in a consultation process with the ABS over the past two years but was informed in the last two weeks that the question would change, and that consultation had finished.

Most significantly, the Bureau will remove the tick box options for people who wish to record their religion. The new question “Does the person have a religion?” can be answered by a tick box for ‘No’, but there is no tick box for ‘Yes’. Instead, the ‘No’ tick box is followed by a space where a person who has a religious belief can write in their religion.

<p>24 Does the person have a religion?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Answering this question is OPTIONAL · For example: RELIGION 1, ROMAN CATHOLIC, RELIGION 3, RELIGION 4, RELIGION 5, RELIGION 6, RELIGION 7, RELIGION 8. 	<p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Yes (specify religion)</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; height: 100px;"> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> </table>																																																																																																				

The write-in-only option is an unwarranted complication for people who wish to record their religion. It will result in a greater number of responses that are invalid, indecipherable, or ambiguous. The current practice of maintaining a listed order of tick boxes for the eight largest religious groups determined by counts from the previous Census is a consistent approach that ensures data efficiency and accuracy.

The substantial change being imposed means that comparisons with past years will be difficult for researchers. Accurate and comparable data is vital as the Catholic Church and other religious groups rely heavily on it to assist parishes, schools, health services, welfare and other organisations to understand the religious demographic of the communities they serve.

I am very surprised at the ABS's imposition of changes without sufficient consultation with religious leaders and sociologists of religion and very concerned at the threat these changes pose to the usefulness of data from the 2026 Census. I would appreciate your agreement to reverse these changes.

I have attached a copy of the Conference's letter to the ABS. I can be contacted via s 47F
[redacted] at the Conference on s 47G(1)(a) or at
s 47G(1)(a) [redacted]

Yours sincerely,

s 47F [redacted]

✘ s 47F [redacted]
[redacted]



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

General Secretariat

19 March 2024

Georgia Chapman
Director, 2026 Census Content
Australian Bureau of Statistics
Via email: s 47F @abs.gov.au

Dear Georgia,

Proposed changes to the religious identification question

Thank you for alerting us to the proposed new religious identification question in the 2026 Census via your email dated 5 March 2024. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (the Conference) strongly opposes the reformulation of the question and asks that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reconsider the change.

Our position is supported by Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial PJPs.

One in five Australians identify as Catholic.¹ The Catholic Church and its agencies contribute in various ways across the spectrum of Australian society. As an integral part of its core mission, the Church seeks to assist people to experience the fullness of life. It is concerned with all that impacts human dignity and well-being for the common good.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is a permanent institution of the Catholic Church in Australia and the instrumentality used by the Australian Catholic Bishops to act nationally and address issues of national significance.

As this letter outlines, the change to the religious identification question is problematic for several reasons. Its content has been prepared by the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR), the research agency of the Conference², which has been one of the significant users of Census data from the religion question for over 26 years.³

¹ Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid, Katherine Jelavic, Leith Dudfield, and Marilyn Chee, *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia: Based on the 2021 Australian Census*, (Canberra: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2023): 2.

² "National Centre for Pastoral Research," Main page, National Centre for Pastoral Research, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/>. The NCPR was previously known as the Pastoral Research Office.

³ Several people have contributed to the content of this letter, including leading sociologists of religion, Dr Robert Dixon and Rev Dr Philip Hughes.

Revisions to the religious identification question in the 2026 Census

The proposed new formulation of the religious identification question in 2026 is:

<p>24 Does the person have a religion?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Answering this question is OPTIONAL · For example: RELIGION 1, ROMAN CATHOLIC, RELIGION 3, RELIGION 4, RELIGION 5, RELIGION 6, RELIGION 7, RELIGION 8. 	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <input type="checkbox"/> No </div> <div style="margin-top: 5px;"> Yes (specify religion) <table border="1" style="width: 100%; height: 60px; margin-top: 5px;"> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> <tr><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td><td> </td></tr> </table> </div>																																																																

The proposed examples (received via email on 12 March 2024) are:

For example: MAHAYANA BUDDHISM, ROMAN CATHOLIC, ANGLICAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA, HINDUISM, SUNNI, JUDAISM, SIKHISM, ABORIGINAL TRADITIONAL BELIEFS.

Concerns with the new religion question

We wish to outline five concerns with the reformulation of the 2026 question.

1. Disengaging religion from culture and identity

The religious identification question on the Australian Census, ‘What is your religion?’ assesses *religious identification* as part of a person’s culture and heritage, serving as an essential marker of other attributes and behaviour.⁴ Its purpose is not to measure “how religious people are, whether they hold religious beliefs, are members of religious organisations, or attend religious services”.⁵

The responses to the Census question on religious identification hold significant value for various stakeholders, including religious leaders, scholars, government personnel, not-for-profit organisations, and sociologists of religion who rely on the data to study a wide range of issues in Australian society.⁶ As one of the world’s most successful multicultural societies, data from this question has helped demonstrate and monitor changes in the multicultural character of Australia over time.⁷ The Catholic Church in Australia uses the data to assist

⁴ Gary D. Bouma, Robert Dixon, Philip Hughes, Andrew Singleton, and Michael Mason, “The question ticks a box”, *The Age*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/all-pfizer-doses-should-go-to-victoria-and-nsw-20210719-p58b3j.html>.

⁵ Bouma, et al., 2021.

⁶ “Religious Affiliation (RELP). Census of Population and Housing: Census Dictionary,” Australian Bureau of Statistics, released October 15, 2021, <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/guide-census-data/census-dictionary/2021/variables-topic/cultural-diversity/religious-affiliation-relp>.

⁷ Gary D. Bouma, “The Emergence of Religious Plurality in Australia: A Multicultural Society.” *Sociology of Religion* 56, no. 3 (Autumn, 1995): 285–302; Gary D. Bouma, *Many Religions All Australian: Religious Settlement, Identity and Cultural Diversity* (Melbourne: Christian Research Association, 1997a); Gary D. Bouma, “The Role of Demographic and Socio-cultural Factors in Australia’s Successful Multicultural Society: How Australia is not Europe.” *Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 4(2016): 750–71.

parishes, schools, health services, welfare and other organisations in understanding the religious demographic of the communities they serve.

At the 2021 Census, 54 per cent of the population answered the question of their religious identity, while 39 per cent said they had no religion and a further 7 per cent did not provide an answer. Religious identification remains important to the Australian population since numerous individuals seek assistance from religious institutions in times of personal crisis and for services such as schools, health care facilities and welfare.⁸

Reformulating the question as 'Does the person have a religion?' effectively destroys the measure of culture and identity as it changes the question to whether a person holds religious beliefs or not. This will result in the loss of a sense of religious heritage as the new format attempts to divorce religion from culture and tradition, presuming that this is no longer significant.

2. Standardisation and time series impacts

The purpose of tick box options in survey questions is to obtain clear, unambiguous responses capable of being measured and compared across a sample of respondents. Before the introduction of checkbox responses to the religion question in 1991, all responses had to be written in by the respondent. The tick box format has been successfully implemented for seven consecutive Censuses, leading to a high response rate (93.1% in 2021, an increase from 90.9% in 2016).⁹ One effect of the tick box format's relative consistency over time has been comparable results throughout this period. In conjunction with other Census information, this standardised data has assisted the Catholic Church in Australia in formulating policies and organising its operations, enabling the Church to respond to evidence-based needs of the diverse demographic groups in Australia and across the nation.

'What is the person's religion?' and 'Does the person have a religion?' are two different questions. The proposed reformulation represents a substantial change and will mean that results from the 2026 Census would not be comparable with results from the 2021 and earlier Censuses. The loss of comparability would be compounded by altering the format of responses from tick boxes to write-ins.

3. Introducing a new bias in favour of 'No religion'

The reformulation of the question will introduce a significant bias towards individuals who identify as having no religion. This is due to two factors: first, by offering the more convenient option of selecting 'no' as the initial response, and second, by limiting the availability of the tick-box option and providing only write-in options for everyone else. This unjustly increases complexity and ambiguity for all individuals who wish to record their religious identity.

Implementing the write-in-only option will result in a greater number of responses that are invalid, indecipherable, or ambiguous. Many people erroneously associate the names of

⁸ Gallet, W. (2016). 'Social Connectedness: The role of the local church in building community', *Pointers* 24(4): 1-5.

⁹ "Religious Affiliation in 2021", Australian Bureau of Statistics, released July 4, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia#religious-affiliation-in-2021>

their local churches with denominations and religious organisations. Some individuals will probably enter the name of their local church or other meaningless words. Others might opt not to respond at all. This will be particularly evident in communities where a more significant proportion of members are not proficient in English. Consequently, the information presented will be considerably less precise and useful. Determining the meaning of what people have written and correctly classifying it has always been difficult. With the new question and no tick box options for religious identification, this will become considerably more challenging.

Although certain groups during the consultation period expressed concerns to the ABS regarding a potential bias in the previous question towards those who identified with a particular religion, the optional nature of the question and the lead 'No Religion' response makes this bias negligible. The Census has consistently granted individuals the opportunity to indicate if they have no religious affiliation at all.

4. Impacts on the reporting of special ethnic minority groups

One of the strengths of the Australian Census is that it provides a relatively accurate account of many minor religious groups. Determining members of Eastern Catholic Churches—specifically Maronite Catholics, Melkite Catholics, Ukrainian Catholics, Chaldean Catholics, Syro-Malabar Catholics, and Syrian Catholics—is critical for the Catholic Church. Census data is used in these communities for the following purposes: to plan allocations of clergy based on regional concentrations of the increasingly dispersed church population; to address specific welfare needs, particularly of elderly first-generation immigrants; and to provide government agencies with information regarding specific ethnic groups affiliated with these churches.

When individuals encounter the list of the eight largest groups in the 2021 question, they can discern whether or not they belong to those categories. It provides them with a significant guide for explaining their heritage. Maintaining a listed order of various religious groups based on the counts from the previous Census is a consistent approach that ensures data efficiency and accuracy. Before each Census, the Catholic Church dedicates a substantial amount of time and effort to educate Catholics from Eastern Catholic churches not to tick the Catholic option but rather to provide alternative responses such as 'Maronite Catholic' under 'Other (please specify).'

The proposed reformulation will render many members of these groups clueless in 2026 (notwithstanding the availability of numerous examples). This confusion may be exacerbated by the respondents' literacy and language abilities, adversely affecting the recording of these minority groups and leading to severe undercounts. Inaccuracies in recording figures will substantially impede the formulation of policies and plans for these groups.

5. Confusions over the term 'Roman Catholic'

'Roman Catholic' is not a term Australian Catholics identify with. The institution's official name is "The Catholic Church in Australia". The term "Roman" is not part of that name, and its use in the list of examples would be unacceptable to the Conference and misleading and confusing to people completing the Census

The term 'Roman' last appeared in reports about religion in the 1986 report *Religion in Australia* (Cat. No. 2510.0), specifically in a footnote to Table 1.¹⁰ Before that, Census reports included 'Catholic' and 'Roman Catholic' as two distinct categories. While this indicates that many individuals continued to write in 'Roman Catholic' until the 1970s and possibly the 1980s, usage of that terminology among Catholics themselves declined precipitously, and the ABS decision to discontinue the use of the term 'Roman Catholic' reflected this.

The term 'Roman Catholic' is synonymous with 'Catholic' and includes both Catholics who identify as 'Western Catholic' (the term the ABS gives to distinguish Latin Rite Catholics) and Catholics who belong to Eastern churches (e.g. Maronite Catholics). Using the term 'Roman Catholics' in the Census question will cause considerable confusion among Catholics trying to record their religious identity accurately and may lead to the use of other meaningless terms such as 'Australian Catholic'. For these reasons, the preferred term for the 2026 Census is 'Catholic' as it has been ever since the tick-box format of the question was introduced for the 1991 Census.

Conclusion

The ABS is distinguished by the calibre of the Census data it generates and the tools with which the data is disseminated. The Catholic Church considers religious identification data and other Census data very important for several reasons: the comprehensive range of classifications and variables, the availability of data for large and small geographical areas, and the timely updating of the information every five years. However, to maintain data quality, the ABS must guarantee that its preparations for the 2026 Census have given full consideration to people with religious beliefs through adequate consultations with relevant stakeholders to ensure that proposed changes reflect the diverse perspectives and needs of the Australian population.

The changes to the religious identification question have likely been proposed by opponents of including a religion question in the Census. Should the reformulated question be adopted, the 2026 question could probably fail due to a high level of unusable responses and significant deviations from the 2021 results. This may lead to calls for the question to be omitted in 2031 and subsequent years.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and other Catholic agencies and institutions rely on ongoing reliable data produced by the ABS to support a vast array of services and activities to meet all Australians' current and emerging needs. We are deeply concerned about the significant effects that the reformulation will have on the data collected in the Census and urge you to reconsider such a drastic change to the religious identification question for 2026.

¹⁰ Ian Castles, *Census 1986 - Religion in Australia*. (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1991): ABS Catalogue No. 2510.0.

I would be happy to answer any questions the ABS may have. I can be contacted via s 47F
National Centre for Pastoral Research, on s 47G(1)(a) or at
s 47G(1)(a)@catholic.org.au.

Yours sincerely

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Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

SUPPORTED BY:

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Catholic Religious Australia

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Association of Ministerial PJs