

“A civilisation, an ethnicity, a culture, a heritage”

Thought for the Day

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It's ironic that this week's revelation that fewer than half the population identified as Christian in the census in England and Wales coincided with the start of the Christian season of Advent, which recalls another census in Judea more than two thousand years ago! We won't know about Scotland till next year, but that still raises some important questions.

As a representative of a minority community, the census matters to me because it's the closest we can get to an accurate picture of our size and make-up. But faith communities are at a disadvantage because it's not a compulsory question, and to make matters worse, in Scotland we ask about “belonging”, not more abstract identification, which obviously reduces the number who tick the box – and of course the census can only count ticks, not people!

This matters to us because, to quote the Director of the Institute of Jewish Policy Research, "Jewishness doesn't really sit in the category of a 'religion'. ... It is also a civilisation, an ethnicity, a culture, a heritage". That's what more than 800 people signalled in the previous Scottish census, when they wrote in “Jewish” as their ethnicity without it being listed on the form. If that's true of other faiths too, the decline in ticks for formal religion may actually be a symptom of a more loosely defined identification, but identification nonetheless.

So this diversity of identification matters, which is why the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities argued – successfully I'm pleased to say – for ‘Jewish’ to appear under the Ethnicity question too. Of course ethnicity is a minefield – as this week's appalling incident at Buckingham Palace demonstrated – but if we learn anything from that unedifying incident, it should be never to presume, never to stereotype, never to presuppose, but always to ask, and to respect how people identify themselves.