Religion Census Newsletter
January, 2018

Religious Families or Religious Groups

The U.S. Religion Census is often used to identify dominant religions within individual counties*. It is the best source for comparative county-level data across the nation.

But what constitutes a dominant religion?

The wall map included with the 2010 U.S. Religion Census is often used to identify broad religious families geographically: Baptists in the South, Lutherans in the Northern Plains, Mormons in much of the mountainous west, and Catholics in the Southwest and Northeast.

According to this map, two religious families, Baptist and Catholic, each have the largest number of adherents** in more than 1,000 U.S. counties. But the Religion Census can help us expand our understanding of American religion beyond this first impression.

This comparison is based upon “religious family” classifications created for the 1971 U.S. Religion Census (Churches and Church Membership in the United States, 1971). This in turn closely followed classifications used by the U.S. government in its earlier religion census. However, there are other ways to classify religious families.
The broadest grouping would be Baha’i, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and other major world religions. However, a county map showing the largest such group in each county would be a single color: Christianity was the largest reported group in all 3,143 counties in the 2010 religion census. (Our March 2017 newsletter gave a report on the non-Christian religions.)

Within the United States, the major Christian divisions might be considered Catholic, Latter-day Saints, Orthodox, and Protestant. There are some Christian groups that do not fit these categories, but even combined they are not the largest in any county.

*Other Christian categories are certainly possible. One of the benefits of the Religion Census datasets is that each researcher may define the classifications as they apply to a particular field of study. In this newsletter, we will tend to follow distinctions used on the Association of Religion Data Archives site. In turn, they cite other works for their classifications.*

By this grouping, Protestants are actually the largest group in more than half the counties that were marked Catholic on the first map.

While Protestants are the largest group in most counties, Protestantism itself covers a wide range of beliefs and practices. Three major divisions in Protestantism are African American, Conservative, and Mainline. There are other Protestant traditions, but again they are not the largest in any county.

Conservative Protestants are the largest group in more than half the counties of the United States.
But when Protestantism is subdivided, notice what happens to the Catholic, Orthodox, and Latter-day Saints numbers. In the Alaska panhandle, there are two counties where Protestants are the largest group, but where the Orthodox tradition is larger than any of the Protestant subdivisions. There are nine western counties where the same is true for the Latter-day Saints. And there are 259 counties where Protestants outnumber Catholics but where the Catholics are larger than any Protestant subdivision. This is especially evident in the Great Lakes and northern Chesapeake Bay areas.

Because the wall map we mentioned first subdivides the Protestant traditions even further, Catholics become the largest group in more than one thousand counties, with the Latter-day Saints largest in more than one hundred. The wall map also subdivides the Orthodox tradition, so that its seven counties are all assigned to the family labeled Eastern Orthodox.

This is a reality whenever groupings are made. Such groupings are both inevitable and appropriate. But researchers need to be cautious about speaking of dominant religions in such cases. It is possible to subdivide the larger religions to such an extent that a much smaller tradition appears to dominate.

On the first map, for instance, Christianity is divided into small enough groups that Islam is larger than any one of these Christian groups in one county. Islam actually is the largest of the defined religious families in Emporia Independent City, a county equivalent in Virginia, but over 60% of the religious population in Emporia belongs to Christian congregations.

The data collected by the Religion Census allows us to make the wall map groupings, shown in our first map. But it also allows us to check the impression of Catholic or Islamic dominance against the total Protestant or Christian presence in each county.
One way of recognizing that Protestants are dominant in most counties, while still recognizing their subdivisions, is to adapt the color scheme to show the largest Protestant group even in counties where Protestants are not the largest Christian group.

This map clearly shows that Mainline adherents form the largest Protestant group in the Northern Plains and in the Northeast, but that the Northeast is actually dominated by another Christian tradition—in this case, Catholic. Similarly, Conservative adherents are the largest Protestant group in the Southwest, but other traditions outnumber all Protestants in most of this territory.

Researchers, analysts, students, reporters, and many others rely on the U.S. Religion Census for subnational religious counts. These reports are available for anyone interested in specific groups, and complete data sets are used by those studying a broader spectrum of groups. And because the data is reported by group, it is relatively easy for researchers to create their own classifications.

But all these comparisons depend on data supplied by individual groups. This is why we are counting on people like YOU to encourage your own religious group to take part in the 2020 study.

*As in nearly all national research, “counties” is a broad term that includes the District of Columbia, Louisiana’s parishes, independent cities in several states, and boroughs and census divisions in Alaska. The more correct phrase is “counties or equivalents,” but many reports use the verbal shorthand of “counties.”*
**Adherents:** Every participating group is asked to provide an actual count or an estimate of the number of people associated with each local congregation. This number is termed “adherents.” Ideally, adherents include all regular participants and/or all those regarding that congregation as their spiritual home. This is done because religious traditions differ in whether they would include children and regular worshippers in their normal membership counts; and some traditions do not even have a membership category.

For specific adherent definitions for a particular group, see Appendix A on our Methods web page. For the general definition used when a group didn’t have a specific adherent figure, see page xvi of the introductory material.

Every decade the US Religion Census tries to include additional religious groups, making the US Religion Census increasingly accurate. The 236 groups that took part in 2010 are listed online. If you know of other faith groups that would like to participate and be included in this census effort, please send us the group’s contact information or contact person.

Meanwhile, over 6,200 people visited our website in October. Several have let us know how valuable this resource is, and how they are looking forward to the 2020 update. Naturally, we hope to include information from your group in the 2020 counts.

Published by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, sponsor of the U.S. Religion Census

This newsletter is intended for the following audiences:

- **Groups that participated in the 2010 Religion Census.** The newsletter is sent to the latest contact we have for the supplier of the statistics.

- **Groups that are eligible to participate in the upcoming 2020 Religion Census.** The newsletter is sent to the latest contact we have for the supplier of the statistics.

- **Members of the sponsoring agency for the Religion Census, the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.**

- **Those who requested to receive the newsletter through our website.**