A new feature of the U.S. Religion Census is the measure of religious diversity in each county. Religious uniformity would suggest that a single strategy, whether a fund-raising effort or a political campaign, could appeal equally to nearly everyone’s religious understanding. An appeal in a uniformly Jewish community might include endorsements from a synagogue leader and references to the Torah. In a Muslim community, an Imam might be more persuasive. In an area composed mostly of people with no congregational involvement, one might avoid any endorsement by religious leaders. On the other hand, religious diversity would require a broader approach, or perhaps multiple strategies. Such approaches would indicate that community members are aware of other traditions. This could lead to increased tolerance for other viewpoints or increased tension between different groups.

The first section of this chapter will examine religious diversity at the county level. The chapter will then explore diversity for metropolitan areas and for states. But before going into those details, we will first explain our diversity measure.

Measuring Diversity

First, how do we calculate diversity?

The easiest measure of diversity might be the count of different religious bodies in each county. Los Angeles county, California, with its 171 religious bodies, is at the top of this list. Among metropolitan areas, the 198 religious bodies in New York-Newark-Jersey City put it first. And among states, Pennsylvania has the largest number of religious bodies at 245.
But there is more to diversity than the number of religious bodies. Each of these three areas is dominated by just one religious body. Catholics make up nearly half (47%) of all Pennsylvania’s religious adherents. Catholics are 61% of the New York metropolitan area’s adherents and 62% of all adherents in Los Angeles county.

A common measure of diversity is Simpson’s Diversity Index, a mathematical formula that considers both the number of different groups and the relative sizes of each group within a specific territory. This is the measure used throughout this analysis.

Map 1 shows the religious diversity result for 13 categories of religious bodies and one additional category for the unaffiliated population for each county of the United States. According to this measurement, significant religious diversity is to be found in the Carolinas and in the central part of the country, extending from the Texas coast to the Upper Midwest.

**Congregations or Adherents**

The diversity formula can be applied to the number of congregations in each county. The synagogues, churches, mosques, temples, or other places where people gather, can be counted for each group, then calculated as the ratio of all such gathering places in the county. The ratios for all the groups present can then be squared, and the sum of those squares will be somewhere between 0 and 1. Subtracting that sum from 1 will give Simpson’s Diversity Index for that counties’ congregations.

**Map 2: Religious Diversity among Congregations for 372 Religious Bodies**

Based on the numbers of congregations for each religious body, counties in the Northeast and in the West have much greater diversity than those in the South or Great Plains. The Northeast has many large cities with a great number of different religious bodies and their congregations. On the other hand, many Southern counties may have a smaller number of different religious bodies, or one group may have a large proportion of all the congregations present.

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1 Simpson’s index is defined as $D = \sum \left(\frac{n}{N}\right)^2$. The total number of instances of the data is the large N. This universe can be used for bird species, for flower types, or for religious adherents. Then, one assigns each instance of the data to the appropriate category, the small n. For each category, one divides the small n (instances in that category) by the large N (total instances overall). This is the same first step as in computing a percentage, but rather than multiplying by 100, one squares the result. The same is done for each of the categories, and the squared results are added together.

This measure yields a result between 0 (complete diversity) and 1 (no diversity). At this point, the higher the number, the less diversity. This seems counterintuitive, so Simpson’s Diversity Index adds one more step: $1 - D$. This effectively reverses the scale, so that the higher number indicates higher diversity.
Recalling that the diversity index ranges between 0 and 1, it is worth noting that counties in the least diverse group of Map 2 can still have an index as high as 0.81. In the United States, there is still great diversity even in many of the least diverse counties.

Instead of congregational counts, diversity can be measured by the number of persons associated with each religious group. By applying this formula to the adherents reported in each county, the diversity among religious bodies is greatest in a band from the Carolinas through Pennsylvania and the lower Midwest to the Northwest.

Map 3: Religious Diversity among Adherents for 215 Religious Bodies

In this case, the overwhelmingly large Catholic population in New York, New England, and California definitely affects the perceived diversity of these areas. While differences among congregational centers is a mark of diversity, most sociological studies focus on people rather than structures.

Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will focus on diversity among adherents rather than among congregations.

Categorizing Diversity

But counting either congregations or adherents in different religious bodies may not be the best basis for measuring diversity. While there are distinctions between every religious body included in the religion census, some of those distinctions are far more significant than others, at least to outside observers.

In my own tradition, Nazarenes and Wesleyans have different leaders, different organizational structure, and different practices. But those differences seem very minor when comparing either group to Hindu believers or to Catholics.

The diversity index does not allow for degrees of difference between categories. If Wesleyans, Nazarenes, Hindus, and Catholics are each separate categories, a county evenly split between Wesleyans and Nazarenes would be considered just as religiously diverse as a county split between Hindus and Catholics. While this is technically a defensible position, it may not meet the “common sense” understanding of diversity.

Therefore, diversity measures need to include categories whose differences are as consistent as possible within the constraints of the data available.

World Religions

One classification is simply “world religion,” combining all Christian groups into one category, all Jewish groups into one category, and so on. Six world religions reported adherents in the 2020 U.S. Religion Census: Bahá’í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islam, and Jewish.
Map 4: Religious Diversity for 6 World Religions

This map clearly shows the diversity of major religions along the East Coast, major cities of the Midwest, and the West Coast. If we had similar data for other nations, this would certainly be a good classification system for comparisons.

However, in the United States, this is a bit misleading. If we had used the same scale as in Map 3 (all religious bodies), this map would have been all one color. The highest diversity based on world religions is only 0.51, compared to 0.62 as the necessary index to reach the “moderate diversity” of Map 3.

While this is partially the effect of fewer categories, a more compelling argument against this classification is that seven additional world religions reported congregational locations but were unable to provide adherent figures.

Religious Families

One of the popular features of the U.S. Religion Census is a wall map showing the dominant religious family in each county. This groups the Christian denominations into broader categories, reducing the number of separate groups to 43.

This classification has the advantage of being used consistently for over a century, having been recorded by U.S. census reports, the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, and previous versions of the U.S. Religion Census.

Map 5: Religious Diversity for 43 Religious Families

The concentrations here are similar to those for all religious bodies (Map 3).

Unfortunately, the distinctions between the families are not always consistent. Some of the classifications are based on the names of the groups without regard to actual theological distinctions. Theologically, the Church of the Nazarene could be included with the Methodist family, but is not. Presbyterians and the United Church of Christ are within the reformed tradition but are separate from each other and from the Reformed family.

Other classifications are based historically, with little consideration for changes over time. The Community of Christ considers itself part of Evangelical Christianity today, but remains part of the Latter-day Saints family in this categorization.

American Religious Traditions

In the U.S., political and sociological studies often refer to Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, or another of several religious traditions. The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) has assigned many of the U.S. Religion Census participants to one of ten Religious Traditions listed at the ARDA website. See the list of Religious Traditions and the methodology for ARDA’s classifications at https://thearda.com/us-religion/group-profiles/traditions.
Based on the work of the ARDA, the U.S. Religion Census has assigned all participating religious bodies into one of 13 categories: Black Protestant, Buddhist, Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Hindu, Islam, Jewish, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter-day Saints, Mainline Protestant, Orthodox Christian, Other Christian, and Other Eastern.

These groups appear to be categories readily understood by social commentators, and may be a better interpretation of what is meant by religious diversity.

**Map 6: Religious Diversity for 13 Religious Traditions**

The lack of diversity in the central south and in the Utah area matches the common perception of Evangelical strength and Latter-day Saints strength, respectively.

The major diversity of the Northwest and non-Utah Mountain states indicates that multiple religious traditions may be strong in these areas.

However, one major “religious tradition” is overlooked, especially in the Northwest and Northern New England. These two areas are among the least religiously affiliated in the country. With two-thirds of the population in Oregon, New Hampshire, and Maine not claimed by any religious group in the Census, perhaps the religious diversity in those areas is not nearly as great as Map 6 suggests.

**Including the Unaffiliated**

By treating the unaffiliated population as an additional group within American religious categories, we get a different picture of religious diversity in the United States.

Separate studies have indicated that the unaffiliated are not a monolithic group. There are those who claim to be part of specific religious bodies, others who identify as atheists, and others who consider themselves religious but who do not choose to participate in any religious congregation.³

Still, as a group the unaffiliated are a significant part of the American religious landscape; therefore, the definition of religious diversity within each county should include the unaffiliated as a fourteenth category. Map 1 uses the adherent figures for 13 categories of religious bodies and the unaffiliated population to show religious diversity at the county level.

By treating the unaffiliated as a separate religious category, Northern New England and the Northwest are now among the least religiously diverse areas of the country. Further, including the unaffiliated recognizes much more diversity in the South and

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Non-Utah mountain states, Michigan, and West Virginia also show much less diversity when the unaffiliated are included.

Map 7: Religious Diversity within Major Metropolitan Areas

Because the government defines metropolitan areas by county units, it is easy to calculate diversity for the nation’s largest metropolitan areas, those with at least one million people in 2020. Map 7 uses the same diversity levels as Map 1, making it obvious that the nation’s largest metro areas tend to be more diverse than counties outside these large metros.

Over one-third (20 of 56) of the nation’s largest metro areas rank with the top 20% of counties. Only 2 metros would rank with moderate diversity, and none would be categorized with the least diverse counties.

Table 1 shows the most and least religiously diverse metropolitan areas of 1,000,000 or more people. Denver, the least religiously diverse of the nation’s largest metro areas, is two-thirds unaffiliated with any religious congregation. Nearly half the remaining population is Catholic. With nearly 90% of the population in just those two groups, diversity is light, compared to other large metropolitan areas. Even so, the Denver diversity measure is still larger than that in 25% of America’s counties.

One might have assumed that Salt Lake City would be among the least religiously diverse, with half of its population claimed by the Latter-day Saints. With one-third of the population unaffiliated with any religious congregation, this means that the two largest groups account for less than 85% of the population, allowing for greater diversity than metro areas like Denver.

On the other hand, one-third of the Memphis metro is unaffiliated, nearly matching the one-third who are part of the Evangelical Protestant group. About one-sixth of the Memphis area is claimed by Black Protestant congregations. Mainline Protestants and Catholics each claim about 5% of the population, creating a very diverse religious community.

Indeed, most large metropolitan areas in the South show much greater diversity than maps of evangelical concentration alone would indicate. While evangelicals are usually the largest group in each of these metro areas, significant numbers of Mainline Protestants, Catholics, and other world religions can now be found in these population centers, along with significant numbers of people unaffiliated with any religious body.

Applying the diversity calculation to states, rather than to counties, we can see different patterns of what constitutes diversity. Sometimes the diversity is widespread throughout a state. Other times, diversity is concentrated in large population centers, raising the overall diversity level from the norm. And in one case, low diversity in most counties still results in high diversity within the state.
Map 8: Religious Diversity by State

Comparing Maps 1 and 7 shows that high diversity levels are not normally found throughout Southern counties, but are found in major population centers. These in turn affect the state totals, as shown in Map 8. Illinois seems to follow the same pattern, with its most diverse counties concentrated around the Chicago metropolitan area.

Comparing the same maps, the Upper Midwest seems to be more uniformly diverse. Mainline Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, and Catholics are well-represented throughout many non-metropolitan counties, with concentrations of unaffiliated persons as well.

Idaho does not follow either pattern. Few of its counties are classified as diverse, and its most populous counties are rarely among them. Rather, different parts of the state are dominated by different religious groups. When combined into a single unit, the diversity of the state is much higher than that of its neighbors. This may be partially explained by geographic constraints, such as the difficulty of traveling between the northern panhandle and the southern part of the state. It is also possible that state-to-state immigration tends to group people of like religious background into the same destinations.

The District of Columbia is not a state, of course, but if it were it would actually be the most diverse. As a major city itself and the seat of the national government, many religious groups have made a point of maintaining a presence in the District. While the largest single group is the unaffiliated (44%), four other groups each claim at least 10% of the population: Evangelical Protestants (15%), Catholics (12%), Black Protestants (10%) and Mainline Protestants (10%).

Among the least religiously diverse states, most have a large proportion of people unaffiliated with any religious body in the census (typically in the range of two-thirds of the population). Utah is an exception, with nearly two-thirds (65%) of the population claimed by one group, the Latter-day Saints.
Map 8: Religious Diversity by State, 2020
Simpson's Diversity Index Applied to 13 Categories of Religious Traditions and the Unaffiliated Population

Table 2: Most and Least Religiously Diverse States in 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Diverse (three largest religious categories)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Least Diverse (largest category)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana (37% unaffiliated, 27% Catholic; 25% Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alaska (65% unaffiliated)</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina (45% unaffiliated, 20% Evangelical Protestant, 18% Mainline Protestant)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Oregon (67% unaffiliated)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas (45% unaffiliated, 24% Evangelical Protestant, 20% Catholic)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Utah (65% Latter-day Saints)</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota (45% unaffiliated, 21% Catholic, 21% Mainline Protestant)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Maine (69% unaffiliated)</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho (47% unaffiliated, 25% Latter-day Saints, 12% Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>New Hampshire (73% unaffiliated)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommended Diversity Index

As noted under Map 1, this volume uses adherents reported within 13 categories of religious bodies and the unclaimed population to measure religious diversity within each county. The same process can be applied to any county-defined geographic area, such as states, metropolitan areas, micropolitan areas, and even judicatory boundaries within religious bodies.

This seems to the U.S. Religion Census steering committee to be the most useful categorization for measuring religious diversity as commonly used in this country. Data from the U.S. Religion Census is available online, and all researchers are free to set their own categories for measuring diversity.

Here are a few reminders when making diversity comparisons:

1) When using an index, it is important to note that the index essentially applies only to that categorization. Comparing index numbers between Map 3 and Map 4, as done above, can be done as an indication of scale comparability. But comparing specific numbers for one county from one categorization to another is not usually recommended.

2) For each of the maps above, real numbers set the boundaries between the five classifications. Within each map, the numbers themselves are less important than the relative diversity those numbers indicate. That is why the legends refer to diversity levels and not to index ranges.

3) No matter how carefully one crafts the categories, there will always be suggestions that it could have been done differently. Such suggestions are generally true, and we invite others to explore the data.