Methodology of International Religious Demography
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Introduction

Three unique features
• International (we study every country)
  o In a lot of social science most research subjects are western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic.
  o We study every country in the world.
• Interdisciplinary (we utilize many disciplines)
  o Linguistics, history, anthropology, sociology, urban studies
• Chronological (we investigate different dates)
  o 1910, 1950, 1970, 2000, every 5 years

Defining religion
• Unlikely to ever arrive at a satisfactory definition of religion, but, IRD demands a starting point
• Strict self-identification
• Tracking affiliation, not beliefs, attitudes, or practices
• World religion: size, history, global spread
  o Ex: Baha’i: only 7 million adherents, but has the widest global spread of any religion, second only to Christianity
  o Ex: There are more Sikhs than Jews in the world, but Jews are always included in the listings of “major” world religions (largely for historical/social reasons)

How many religions? Which ones?
• Standard world religion textbook (undergrad)
• Stephen Prothero, God is Not One
• Pew Forum
• WRD

Double-affiliation
• Religious categories are not mutually-exclusive
• Multiple religious belonging (or double belonging)
  o Allow double counting in the numbers and then use a negative number to reconcile totals back to 100%
  o Still have incomplete picture of MRB; lots of research still needed in this area

Non-affiliation
• IRD includes atheism and agnosticism in with “religious” categories even though they are not “religions”
• Tracking atheists and agnostics is difficult because, by nature, they are unaffiliated with formal structures that would be counted
  o This may be changing, with the rise of nonreligious populations in the West (Humanists, American Atheists, etc., all becoming more vocal)

**Major sources (3)**

**Censuses: Religion**

- The most comprehensive way of enumerating a country’s population
  - Generally taken every 10 years; data published 3–5 years following
  - Allows calculation of relatively accurate growth rates
  - Allows comparison from decade to decade
- Asking a religion question
  - What countries do, and which don’t?
    - 20th century: half the world’s countries asked a religion question
    - 1990s and on: countries increasing dropping the question
      - Too controversial, expensive, uninteresting
      - Some assume the population is 100% one religion (like Turkey, all Muslim)
    - 21st century: trend might be reversing
      - United Kingdom added religion question in 2001 census
      - India added caste question to 2011 census (though optional)
  - Only half of recent censuses ask a religion question
    - Ex: 14 of 27 EU countries: Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, Estonia, Finland, Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia, United Kingdom, Ireland
- Wording of religion questions
  - 2011 Irish census: “What is your religion?”
    - Choose from a set list: Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland (Anglican), Islam, Presbyterian, Orthodox, two rows for “other” (write in), and no religion
    - Humanist Association of Ireland suggested changing it to “Do you have a religion?”
      - Rejected because it would make historical comparisons difficult
  - Wording “Do you have a religion?” is probably better, but makes cross-national comparisons more difficult. “What is your religion?” is most popular because of this.

**Censuses: Ethnicity**

- Helpful where religion question isn’t asked
- Helpful where an ethnic group is equated with a particular religion
• Ex: 99% of Somalis are Muslim, so the number of Somalis in Sweden (for example) is an indication of a part of the Muslim community there

• Also helpful is question on country of birth (Ex: nearly everyone in Somalia is Muslim)

Limitations of censuses

• Do respondents feel free to be completely honest in answering questions?
  o Especially for social lower classes and religious minorities that are persecuted

• Who is counted in a census? Who is a resident of the state?
  o Non-legal residents, temporary workers, those temporarily living abroad, “undocumented” religious minorities
  o IRD needs a count of the entire population, legal or illegal

• Selecting responses from a set list
  o Results in over-estimates: everyone picks a religion regardless of whether they actually practice it


Ex: Jains in UK chose “Hindu” instead of writing in “Sikh” (2001); resulted in undercounting of Sikhs and over counting of Hindus
  • Institute of Jainology launched a campaign to get Jains to write in their religion; wanted to break the 10,000 barrier to allow them “minority religion” status, with access to jobs and other benefits
    o 2011 results: Jains listed as “other religions” so difficult to say how many were counted

Ex: Nonreligious in UK chose “Christian” because they were baptized Christian, not necessarily because they practice it

o Misses religions not recognized by the government
  • Ex: Baha’i in Egypt; atheists in Indonesia

• Limitation of ethnicity question
  o Not always true that people adhere to a particular religion in the same proportion as those in their home country

Ex: Palestinian Arabs are less than 2% Christian in Palestine, but in the United States are 30% Christian and in Australia 70% Christian (i.e., Palestinian Arabs abroad are more Christian than they are in Palestine)

Surveys & polls

• Large-scale demographic surveys: Less comprehensive than national censuses
  o Conducts household interviews
  o Can produce demographic profiles of countries, states, provinces, regions
  o Larger sample sizes and choose random locations for samples
    ▪ 5,000–100,000 depending on the population

• Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS)
  o 7,000 households ages 15–49; multiple time points

• General population surveys
  o Generally much smaller sample sizes (1,000–2,000)
  o Pew Global Attitudes Project; WVS; Gallup World Poll; European Social Survey
Limitations of surveys & polls

- General population surveys
  - Small sample sizes exclude smaller religions
  - Often conducted in urban areas that are easily accessible to pollsters
- Issues of non-response and response bias
- USA example
  - Does not ask religion question on census, so relies heavily on national polls
    - Inaccurate for smaller religions

Data collected from religious communities

- Detailed data collection and analysis
- Kinds of statistics collected: Demographics, workers, finance, attitudes, etc.

Limitations of data collected from religious communities

- Definition of “membership”
  - Western vs. Eastern understandings can be very different
    - Many Asians consider themselves as adherents of many religions
- Risk of inflation (wanting their religion to seem larger than it really is)
  - Some say the Watch Tower Society (Jehovah’s Witnesses) numbers are inflated but there’s no evidence for this
  - No organization (religious or otherwise) can realistically sustain the reporting of inflated numbers (they’ll be found out eventually)

Asking the question: One-step census approach vs. two-step survey approach

One-step approach: 2001 Bulgarian census

Two-step approach: 1999 Bulgaria European Values Survey

Results: Different methods yield different results

- Shows that using a two-step method, more people chose no religion when given the choice
  - Bulgaria: Census showed only 4% unaffiliated, but survey shows 30%

Further complication: 2011 Bulgarian census results

- Census revealed figures similar to the EVS 1999
- What does this mean for the reliability of the 2001 census?

Dynamics of religious change

- Births and deaths
  - Children are almost always counted as having the religion of their parents
  - Tracking fertility rates
- Ex: Muslims have higher fertility rates than Hindus (impacts religious landscape in India, for example)
- Religiosity is one of the most accurate indicators of fertility
  - Religious people have more babies than secular people
    - Ex: Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel
      - Wider Jewish community has falling fertility rates, but Ultra-Orthodox continue to have large families
        - May shape the landscape of Judaism in Israel in the future
    - Ex: Birth rates of Zoroastrians well below replacement level in Iran and India (two centers of the faith)
      - Bans on conversion, in-marriage only, low birth rates = no demographic momentum
- Converses to and converts from
  - Very difficult to track statistically
  - No religion can grow without converts
- Immigration and emigration
  - Cause for much of the religious diversity in the world, especially in the West
    - Ex: Muslims moving to Europe
    - Ex: Jews to Israel (largely secular): made Israel a largely secular nation
      - But Ultra-Orthodox have higher birth rates
      - Secular Jews are leaving Israel (have more marketable skills)
      - Secular Jews tend to marry non-Jews more than Orthodox Jews do
        - All indicates a decline of secularism in Israel
- Ex: Mormonism
  - Huge missionary outreach (converts) + high fertility rates = enormous growth in 20th century

Case study: Coptic Christians in Egypt
- Census show for the past 100 years that Christians are declining; 5% Christian
- Church estimates show 15%
- Overestimate by church? Social pressure on Christians to register as Muslim? Christians listed as Muslim on official ID cards? Church might report Egyptian ex-pats outside of Egypt while census does not.
  - Egypt has very high government restrictions on religion and high social hostilities involving religion
- WRD: Egypt 10.0% Christian (8.1 million; 7.5 of whom are Orthodox)