



ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

# World Religion Database

*Date of Review: August 10, 2009*

Composite Score:

★★★

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## Pricing

An annual subscription is U.S. \$870.00 for an unlimited institutional license, regardless of FTE.

## Product Description

The World Religion Database (WRD), released by Brill in Spring 2009, is an aggregated collection of census and other statistical data (mostly surveys) representing all 239 countries in the world. Its intended audiences are international religious demographers, religious studies scholars, historians, and social scientists. Data are equally useful for journalists or others who need quick statistics on world religions.

The WRD contains the published findings of an academic research project called “International Religious Demography,” based at the Institute of Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University. The project aims to provide a scholarly compilation and analysis of world religion data and to cross-validate inconsistencies in previously published religious data, from both online and print sources. (Johnson and Grim, 2009) As the project unfolds, new data will be added to the WRD. To date, the WRD has been in existence for only a few months; a future review will surely reveal more complete coverage.

Readers familiar only with Brill’s high quality and erudite publications may be disappointed and even confused by this new database since it in no way resembles Brill’s traditional offerings in Religious Studies. On the other hand, readers familiar with Brill’s *World Christian Database* (presumably the inspiration for the title *World Religion Database*) will not be disappointed since the WRD offers similar methodology, presentation, and content to the *World Christian Database* but emphasizes global religion. For this second group, the WRD will present exciting new religious data using the tried and tested methodology of the *World Christian Database*.

## Critical Evaluation

The WRD is a basic statistical source for the study of global religion. It aims to provide

... adherence data, where available from census and surveys, at the province, and eventually, city level. It also aims to account for subgroups of each major religion to the maximum extent possible ... (Johnson & Grim, 2009)

The first major data offering in 2009 was a collection of census and survey data for religious adherence in sub-Saharan Africa. Future phases will include all of the world’s regions and major religions.

## STRENGTHS

The sheer coverage in the WRD is impressive, with no other religious demography tool providing data for all of the world’s 239 countries. It includes data on adherents to very broadly defined major religions (19 in all) including Baha’is, Ethnoreligionists, Zoroastrians, Chinese Folk, Neoreligionists, Confucianists, Spiritists, Shintoists, Jains, Sikhs, and Daoists, among others. Definitions of each of these groups are provided to clarify the less well known such as Chinese Folk, Spiritists and Ethnoreligionists. Interestingly, the WRD also includes data on Atheists (people who define themselves as irreligious, materialist, Marxist-Leninist, and so on) and Agnostics (those who profess no religion, nonbelief, indifference, or secularism). For each country, social as well as religious statistics enable correlation between these different data sets. Clicking on any of the variables (for example “religion”) should link to a definition of the variable, though these links were not all available at the time of the review. Historical tables show the official state religion for each country since 1900 when that information is available. The top five religions are given for each country with corresponding affiliation percentages. There is also a link to the source surveys that includes the dates of surveys, their official names, the source type (census or survey), and when data were added to the database. As a package, this information is an excellent overview of worldwide religious affiliation and is quite adequate for the purposes of most undergraduate and graduate assignments in global religions. For example, if a student were asked to provide data on the growth or decrease of Christian adherence in Western Europe since 1900, she would be able to ascertain that in 1900, 98.73 percent of the population was Christian, but by 1970, the number had dropped to 88.70 percent, in 2000 it had decreased again to 73.60 percent, and in 2005 the number stood at 72.01 percent. The demographers behind the WRD also offer future estimates and in this case, they predict a decrease in Christianity in Western Europe to 66.01 percent of the total population in 2025 and 61.32 percent in 2050.

## WEAKNESSES

There are two significant weakness in this database and some other minor issues. The first and most immediately noticeable problem is technical. Despite online instructions to “Hover or click on any underlined field label to get additional help text,” most links in whole sections of the database are inactive. Others simply link to error message pages. Perhaps these problems are a function of the database being updated frequently, but no explanations are offered. One is left wondering when the product will be fully developed and whether its availability is premature.

The second problem is the search function. The text search box is all but useless and results are confusing. As already mentioned, the text search is a crude single word search, with no indication to users as to

what is being searched. Is the whole database being searched? Are only the field names being searched? One never knows. The fact that the search does not extend to all supporting documentation is also a problem, for it is in this documentation that one finds notes on sources, methodology, and the supporting information that a researcher requires to make full use of the data in the WRD. A fuller explanation of this weakness is provided in the “Content, Organization and Searching” section of this review.

Less noticeable is the lack of historical, general (nonreligious) demographic information. In practice this lacuna means that correlating a religious variable (for example, religious adherence) with a nonreligious variable (for example, birth rates) over an extended time period would require searching outside of the WRD. Perhaps this is not a major issue and searchers would be content to seek historical social data elsewhere, but this omission limits the usefulness of the database as an historical tool. Furthermore, one questions the appropriateness of including predictions of religious adherence. Perhaps suitable for a nonacademic audience, such predictions are less useful in a scholarly setting but nonetheless occupy an unjustified place next to empirical data given that they are only predictions and cannot be validated. A final comment is that a good percentage of the source data appears to be available elsewhere, online and in print, free of charge. While this does not indicate a weakness in the WRD per se, some institutions might question the need to subscribe. Several of these free sources are discussed in the next paragraphs.

### ALTERNATIVE DATA SOURCES

Based at the University of Pennsylvania, the Association of Religion Data Archives <<http://www.thearda.com/>> was founded in 1997 and is known for its American religion statistics. It compiles historical and current data, allowing scholars to analyze religion in the United States. Its use is limited by the lack of international data, however, with the sole international feature being that of “compare nations.” This allows searchers to select up to eight countries and then run a comparison on basic data relating to religious belief and practice. This is a valuable online source for American religious data backed up by a well-staffed research and Web development team.

Adherents.com, reviewed in the *Journal of Government Information* (Wathen, 2002), is a collection of references to statistical sources on religious adherence including published membership statistics and data on more than 4,200 religions, churches, denominations, religious bodies, faith groups, tribes, movements, and cultures. Adherents.com is the most broad religious demography tool available online. Although its coverage may seem unsystematic and perhaps superfluous, it is a good secondary reference source to religious demography, especially for those religious groups that are not included in the major world religions— if the user can avoid being overwhelmed.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life <<http://pewforum.org/>> is a broadly scoped database featuring data not exclusively religious in nature but also relating to the general social demography of the United States. Topics such as “Religion and politics,” “Religion and education,” and “Religion and the law” are some of the branches of data collected here. It is an excellent database for finding both source data and analyses of the current religious landscape of the U.S.

Other possible sources of online statistical data include *Afrobarometer* (contains data from about 20 African countries, not specifically on religion, but some surveys contain religious topics), *Population Reference Bureau* (excellent for international statistics, with analysis

and bibliographies) and *World Values Surveys*. Member institutions of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan also have direct access to data files covering both U.S. and international data at no additional cost beyond the price of membership. Statistics Canada <<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/>> offers free access to data about religion through library members of its Depository Services Program, 26 of which are in the United States.

### CONTENT, ORGANIZATION AND SEARCHING

There are three main ways to extract data from the WRD: text searching, browsing, and querying spreadsheet data.

**Text searching** Textual searching is very limited beyond a single word search in the search box. Entering a search term such as “Islam” retrieves unexpected and unexplained results. This particular example results in links to 38 countries (presumably with Islam listed as one of the top religions, though the searcher may not understand why), 14 cities, 118 peoples, 7 provinces, 2 cultures, 66 subreligions, 115 surveyed religions, 43 people–religion, and 24 dictionary entries—with no apparent ranking. These results, and the algorithm producing them are not immediately clear. Further investigation reveals a straight text match on the word Islam, meaning not even the most basic Boolean functions, including truncation, are present. This is a serious limitation. Subsequent searches on “Islamic,” “Muslim,” and “Moslem” all reveal different results, some of which had been duplicated in previous searches, making it impossible to retrieve all semantically related information on a topic with a text search.

**Browsing** The WRD’s browsing interface, though somewhat bland, is logically organized for data retrieval. There are four main sections: Main Query Home, Censuses and Surveys Home page, Religion Home page, and Top 20 Lists. Browsing by country (after which one can select a city or province) or by religion were both effective in finding desired statistics on Islam. Included in each country result are general population statistics such as total population (with growth and loss over time if available), literacy rates, life expectancy, etc. Health statistics, such as the percentage of a population who have access to medical care, how many people have disabilities, or the number of children with HIV, as well as social statistics such as the number of households with televisions, are also included. Religious liberty is rated on a scale of 1 to 10 and state religion is tracked over time. Trends include both historical religious data (going back to about 1900) and future estimates to 2050. The flag of each country is shown as well as a small map. Main cities are listed with their populations, and for each country there are breakdowns of survey locations.

Browsing for statistics related to Islam in the Religion section reveals an option to retrieve “Top Religions by Country,” which then offers a spreadsheet displaying countries with more than 5 percent of its citizens adhering to a particular religion. The spreadsheet is easily sorted from lowest adherence rates to highest, with Mongolia reporting 5 percent of its total population adhering to Islam and Afghanistan with the highest concentration at 99.7 percent of the total population claiming Islam as its religion. Each country name is linked to further demographic information about it, giving searchers a better overall context for the religious statistics they have retrieved. Survey sources (critical to understanding when and where the surveys were administered) are also linked in principle but these links were often inactive or resulted in error messages as described earlier.

**Spreadsheet Queries** A third option for retrieving data from the WRD is to directly query the spreadsheets after choosing one of the



## World Religion Database Review Scores Composite: ★★★★★

*The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.*

### Content: ★★★★★

The World Religion Database (WRD) is intended primarily for scholars and students. It has value for both groups, and as it develops, will surely increase in value, especially for scholars. There are some minor content limitations, but overall content is excellent.

### Searchability: ★

With three ways to access data, searching is not lacking, but neither is it fine tuned. Users can browse through menus or query the database but only very basic text searching is supported, and even then it is limited to datasets and the dictionary and does not extend to the entire database (i.e., the Field definitions or Methodology). Boolean searching and enhanced features such as saved search options or search combining are missing. Unfortunately, there were also many inactive links generating a high number of error messages. Overall searchability is weak.

### Price: ★★★

Institutions wishing to provide one access point to various sources of religious statistical data will not mind the relatively inexpensive \$870 price tag. However, because the WRD is a new tool and is not yet populated with all the data that is planned, it might be premature for those institutions with data librarians or well-crafted subject guides to religious statistics to subscribe to the WRD.

### Contract Options and Other Features: ★★★★★

The WRD comes with a standard Brill license. Briefly, this includes an overview of the rights of authorized users (anyone affiliated with the university as a current student or employee), including the right to print, save search results, distribute single copies of results to another authorized user, and transmit information from the database to a third party for educational purposes. Brill allows items from the database to be used in print or online course packs with proper attribution and allows some limited Inter library Loans to authorized users from other universities.

categories of data. Unlike many statistical databases, the WRD does not require any special software to download statistics, and users can access, manipulate, and export data in a spreadsheet format. Exporting is easy and fast. After selecting a table, one can specify the particular fields to view and also select criteria for those fields, which allows a more sophisticated user to access only the data that is of interest. Unfortunately, the spreadsheet functions are very difficult to see as they appear in a tiny white font on a dark blue banner at the top of the screen. Improving the visibility of this banner would point users to these functions more easily.

### CONTENT

One of the main challenges that the WRD faces is a lack of official data collection. The researchers note that historically only the Christian religion has kept a central, historical, and reliable count of adherents. Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and Hindus and all of their various subgroups have not collected membership data in a reliable or consistent way. The task of the researchers behind the WRD is, therefore, to uncover what data have been collected and cross-validate them, but challenges are many. Relying on country census surveys provides inconsistent data because only about half of the countries in the world even ask a question on religion. A further problem is the census question formulation often requires respondents to select from a list of predetermined categories. Such a list might discount minor or illegal religions. It could equally lead to overcounts if respondents choose a

category that most closely resembles their situation, but is not exact (Brill, 2009). Despite these and other general limitations of religious demography that are discussed in the Methodology document, the WRD is an excellent overall presentation of a wide variety of data.

### Conclusion

There is noticeable and growing interest in the field of religious data. Tools such as the WRD can help researchers, students, or anyone with an interest in world religious demography understand a given country's social and religious contexts and its citizens' religious affiliations as well as religious freedom or persecution in those places. The WRD offers tidy one-stop shopping for these and other religious data.

### Contact Information

#### World Religion Database

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 E-mail: <[brillonline@brillusa.com](mailto:brillonline@brillusa.com)>

Should libraries pay \$870 for the WRD? Possibly, if there is sufficient interest and demand. However, it would be a good idea to check with an academic data librarian first to ensure that a library is not duplicating sources to which it already has free or previously subscribed access.

## Contract Provisions and Authentication

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## Author Supplied References

Brill. (2009). *Methodology: World Religion Database*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. Retrieved from <[http://www.worldreligiondatabase.org/resources/WRD\\_Methodology.pdf](http://www.worldreligiondatabase.org/resources/WRD_Methodology.pdf)>.

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Wathen, A. (2002). Adherents.com. *Journal of Government Information*, 29, 75–78.

## About the Author

**Jennifer Dekker** is a librarian at the University of Ottawa, in Ottawa, Ontario. She holds a B.A. in Religion from Carleton University, and a Master of Information Studies from the University of Toronto. In her current position since August of 2005, she serves, among others, the Departments of Religious Studies and Jewish Canadian Studies. Previously, she worked at York University, in Toronto, Ontario, as an adjunct librarian. She is currently a columnist for *Access: the Magazine of the Ontario Library Association*, and a book reviewer for the *Peace and Environment News*, based in Ottawa. ■

## ▼ LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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done and what the results and conclusions are in the nutshell. Since most times scholarship extends or builds on the work of others, finding an abstract can be enough information to start the communication process or to discover that someone else is working on a particular topic. In many cases, an abstract may be the only source of information to inform a researcher that a particular research may have already been done or a particular method is being used in a research project. Just last week, I had a research group who found an abstract in WOS that they were eagerly trying to find out more about since that was the same area one of the graduate students had undertaken as his major research project. This abstract was also cited two times in the WOS. The outcome was the knowledge that this paper was not published elsewhere as yet. The researcher was able to track down the author based on this information to discuss his research findings.

Letters to the editors and addenda can also be extremely useful research material. As an example of their usefulness, I can refer to a question that I had in my library very recently. After repeating an experiment that was reported in a paper, a professor found several errors in calculation. She wanted to find out whether these errors had been corrected or identified in a letter to the editor, or if the author had cor-

rected it by publishing an addendum to the paper. Because letters to the editor, addenda, etc., are covered in WOS, the researcher was able to use this and the discipline database to do a comprehensive search for this information before proceeding to write her own review of it.

Book reviews are also useful source for information that undergraduate use especially in social sciences and the humanities. In fact, at my institution, entire classes are given assignments to review specific books that are discipline-specific. It is no doubt that book reviews written by professionals in the field offer the students a more in-depth view of analysis of a book, so students turn to databases to find these book reviews as examples. This information is lacking in the Scopus database.

As we all know, libraries pay exorbitant subscription costs to access both of these databases, so it is important that we continue to use them to provide the cover-to-cover information they offer about important research materials for our users in a timely manner.

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