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Choose the Method for Aggregating Religious Identities that Is Most Appropriate for Your Research

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Abstract

Some U.S. surveys measure many religious identities, including detailed Protestant affiliations. Researchers must decide how to aggregate these diverse identities. There are now a variety of options for aggregating religious groups into categories. Depending on the research question, it may be appropriate to use one of the existing options or to develop an aggregation strategy tailored to the project in question.

Keywords: religious traditions, religious identity, race, denomination, methodology.

Introduction

Diana Eck (2002) claims that the United States is the world's most religiously diverse nation. With roughly seven in 10 adults identifying as Christian, however, the country is far from having an even distribution of major world religions (Grim and Hackett 2014). Nonetheless, the United States is indeed home to a wide array of Christian denominations and movements, including many that emerged in America (Bloom 1992; Melton 2016; Miller 1997; Olson et al. 2018). By one count, there are more than 4,000 different denominations in the United States (Johnson and Zurlo 2018).

Though many U.S. surveys capture only a small number of common religious identities, a few track many groups. For example, the General Social Survey (GSS) and American National Election Studies have several dozen religion categories for respondents to choose among, and they record many additional categories volunteered by respondents. Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study (RLS) includes interviews with respondents who offered more than 100 distinctive ways of describing their religious identity (Smith et al. 2015).[1]

Surveys with data on dozens or even hundreds of religious identities pose both challenges and opportunities for researchers. When large enough samples are collected in one wave or are aggregated over several waves, it is possible to analyze the characteristics and attitudes of people who identify with religious groups of all sizes.[2] For researchers interested in the ways religion is related to various outcomes, it is often useful to aggregate these numerous identities to a more manageable number of categories.

Numerous aggregation schemas have been proposed for categorizing the myriad Protestant denominations. Older empirical research, such as Herberg's (1955) classic study, simply compared Protestants

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1 Each of these surveys begins with a general question measuring identification with a broad religious category, followed by branching questions that seek to capture more detail about specific affiliation. See 2016 GSS codebook (pp. 107–12): http://gss.norc.org/documentation/Documents/2016%20Quex%20Ballot%201%20For%20Public%20-%20English.pdf , ANES 2016 time series codebook (pp. 376–402): https://www.electionstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/anes_timeseries_2016_userguidecodebook.pdf , and RLS 2014 questionnaire (pp. 7–14) http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2016/10/25142557/RLS-II-Questionnaire-for-5th-release.pdf .

2 An alternative to classifying based on denominational identity is to group respondents based on their affiliation with a movement like fundamentalism, evangelicalism, or mainline Protestantism (Alwin et al. 2006; Smith 1998).

to Catholics and Jews. As it became increasingly clear that Protestantism is not a monolithic category, researchers began devising methods of dividing Protestant denominations into relevant groups. Lenski (1963), for example, compares white Protestants, black Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Roof and McKinney's (1987) influential work compares liberal, moderate, and conservative Protestant denominations, and, like Lenski, creates a separate category for black Protestant denominations. Smith's (1990) "Fund" measure similarly assigns Protestant denominations to liberal, moderate, and conservative ("fundamentalist") categories. For the last 18 years, the "gold standard" in the field (Frendreis and Tatalovich 2011) has been the religious traditions scheme proposed by Steensland et al. (2000), which is often identified by the variable name RELTRAD (Woodberry et al. 2012). Steensland et al. (2000) create a separate category for traditionally black Protestant denominations and divide most remaining Protestant denominations into two groups: mainline and evangelical Protestant. In this issue, Lehman and Sherkat (2018) propose a new system for classifying denominations, which they argue improves on the RELTRAD classification.

In the pages that follow, we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of RELTRAD (the most commonly used classification) and Lehman and Sherkat's new classification. We see obvious benefits and potential drawbacks to both. We conclude that the most appropriate approach depends on one's research question and the available data. There is no single correct approach. We focus on options readily available for use with the GSS, but guidelines discussed here are relevant for other surveys.[3]

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3 In the cumulative 1972–2016 General Social Survey data set, there is information on the religious identity of 62,197 respondents (religion data are missing for an additional 269 respondents). Although this is a valuable source of data to measure religious change over time, individual waves have as few as 1,372 respondents, necessitating aggregation over multiple waves to get a considerable sample of groups with modest numbers. In fact, in the cumulative file spanning more than 40 years, there are only 89 Hindus, 136 Muslims, and 177 Buddhists. Other surveys may be better suited to the study of smaller groups. For example, Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study collected data on more than 35,000 Americans (by contrast there were a total of 24,350 respondents in the nine GSS waves between 2000 and 2016). The pooled 2007 and 2014 RLS files have more than 70,000 respondents, exceeding the 62,466 respondents in the 1972–2016 GSS cumulative file. Although these data series are similar in size, they vary considerably in the span of time over which data were collected.

RELTRAD

In their original article, Steensland et al. (2000:292) begin with the assumption that denominations matter:

> Denominations exert a strong influence on social life.... Denominations generate their own worldviews through symbols, pedagogy, and rituals. They shape members' concrete views of political and economic issues.... And denominational culture is a significant component of childhood socialization.

Indeed, all such classification schemes are built on the idea that denominations matter, though some scholars argue that the salience of denominations is waning.[4] Putting aside arguments about the importance of denominational affiliation as opposed to other measures of religious identity, Steensland et al. (2000) used denominational history, creeds, and affiliation with ecumenical organizations to divide Protestant denominations into mainline, evangelical, and black Protestant groupings. Catholics, Jews, and the religiously unaffiliated each constitute their own category. Affiliates of Christian groups that are not considered either Protestant or Catholic (e.g., Orthodox churches, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons) are placed in the "other" religion category, along with non-Christians such as Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists.

   The RELTRAD classification has been a useful tool for social scientists studying religion. It is analytically powerful—respondents in the evangelical and mainline categories have been shown to differ substantially in various ways, including in their social class, political perspectives, and views of the family (Eggebeen and Dew 2009; Schwadel 2014, 2017). RELTRAD is widely employed, with more than 1,300 citations.[5] Thus, it maximizes comparability across research projects. The respect for denominational history that went into the construction of the scheme is a strength. Given African Americans' distinctive

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4 The most notable challenge to the idea of denominations as cohesive groups is probably Wuthnow's (1988) influential work on the decline of denominationalism.

5 As of September 12, 2018, the article had 1,361 citations, according to Google Scholar.

religious practices, views on social and political issues, and place in the social stratification system (Shelton and Cobb 2017), the separation of traditional black Protestant denominations is also a strength. The inclusion of detailed instructions on how to apply the classification, and the posting of relevant code online accompanying the initial publication of the article, made the RELTRAD scheme accessible to a wide range of researchers.

The RELTRAD classification also has features that may limit its usefulness for certain purposes. For instance, the treatment of nondenominational, interdenominational, and simply "Christian" respondents can be problematic. Respondents in these categories (a not inconsequential number of people) are considered evangelical if they attend church at least once a month, which is a decision that conflates affiliation and participation. In addition, those who attend less than once a month are dropped from the classification, leading to a considerable and nonrandom loss of data. Finally, we reiterate two concerns posed by Lehman and Sherkat (2018). First, while we suggested above that the separation of black Protestants is a strength, this can also be a weakness, particularly for recognizing diversity that exists among black Protestants on some outcomes. Second the RELTRAD scheme operationalizes nonblack Protestants into one of only two categories—evangelical or mainline Protestantism. The evangelical category includes conservative denominations like the Assemblies of God and the mainline category includes liberal denominations like the United Church of Christ. There is no category devoted to denominations that populate a more moderate middle ground.

Lehman and Sherkat

In this volume, Lehman and Sherkat (henceforth L-S) propose a new classification scheme to replace RELTRAD. In line with some of the observations above, they note that the RELTRAD classification "unnecessarily collapses the middle," and, relatedly, treats black Protestant as a single, separate group that is distinct from other Protestant categories (Lehman and Sherkat 2018). They also contend that RELTRAD ignores ethnicity, largely because they see Lutherans as comprising a unitary, ethnoreligious category. Finally, they stress that RELTRAD

ignores key historical events in the development of denominations, particularly as they relate to Lutherans, Baptists, and Episcopalians. L-S say their classification system is based on an exclusivist to universalist theological continuum. "Sectarian" denominations populate the exclusivist end of the continuum because they "claim to hold exclusive access to supernatural rewards and compensators, thus implying that anyone in society who is not an adherent of their sect will suffer divine wrath or at least not be rewarded in this life, or the afterlife, or both."[6] More liberal denominations that support the potential for all people to attain eternal rewards populate the universalistic end of the continuum.

The L-S classification scheme has several advantages. For instance, the addition of a "moderate Protestant" category may contribute to more nuanced understanding of variation among Protestants. The exclusivism-universalism continuum advocated by L-S is an interesting possibility for organizing denominational identities. The L-S classification is a logical approach for researchers interested in Protestant families (e.g., Baptist, Lutheran, and Episcopal) rather than groups of denominations that share similar stances toward modernity (mainline accommodation vs. evangelical resistance) or racial identity (black Protestant vs. other Protestant categories). Finally, the L-S scheme classifies denominations that have been added to the GSS since the RELTRAD scheme was developed.

Nonetheless, we also see some potential drawbacks to the L-S scheme. For instance, the classification is justified in part on the grounds that it emphasizes denominational history, yet it ignores the self-definitions and historical progression of some denominations. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, do not consider themselves to be Protestant, yet L-S places them in the sectarian Protestant category. We concur with L-S that there is diversity among black Protestants, and thus collapsing them into a single category as RELTRAD does can be problematic. Nonetheless, black Protestants are also quite different from white Protestants. Therefore, the L-S system may go too far

6 Lehman and Sherkat (2018) employ the label "sectarian" despite their own critique of how the concept has been used. The authors use the term neither to describe religious movements that are new or small nor to describe groups that are necessarily in high tension with the prevailing society. We suggest it would be at least as fitting to use alternative terms like "exclusivist" or "theologically conservative," which have the benefit of avoiding the pejorative connotations that some may attach to the term "sectarian."

in the opposite direction by completely ignoring race. Whether this is a problem or not likely depends on the research question being pursued. On a more pragmatic note, the number and choice of categories in the L-S classification makes it unusable without a very large sample. If one wants to analyze data from a particular year of the GSS, then categories with small numbers of respondents may be of limited benefit. For example, even the abbreviated seven-category L-S scheme includes one category (Mormon) with only 23 respondents in the 2016 GSS, and the more detailed 12-category scheme includes three additional categories with fewer than 100 respondents: Episcopalians (40), Jews (51), and liberal Protestants (77).

Two potential problems with the L-S classification concern the presumed underlying exclusivism-universalism continuum and the use of the broad families Baptist and Lutheran. First, while one key part of the rationale for the L-S classification system is that it arrays denominations on an exclusivism-universalism continuum, the article does not provide evidence for this. Indeed, on the only GSS question that seems to directly measure an exclusivism-universalism continuum, a considerable majority of respondents in each L-S category fall in the universalist camp.[7] Second, the use of the large Baptist and Lutheran denominational families undermines the ability of the classification to reflect an exclusivism-universalism continuum because these denominational families include individual denominations that lean toward different ends of the spectrum.

We use the 2014 Pew Research Center RLS to examine the exclusivist-universalist perspectives of Episcopalians, Baptists, and Lutherans, the three Protestant families that constitute their own groups in the L-S classification (Smith et al. 2015).We also look specifically at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which is classified as mainline Protestant in RELTRAD, and the two large Lutheran denominations classified as evangelical Protestant in RELTRAD, the

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7 The GSS lacks a stringent measure of religious exclusivism. The best GSS measure may be RELTRUTH, which measures whether respondents say there is little truth in any religion, basic truth in many religions, or truth in one religion. This measure was only asked in 1998 and 2008 as part of the ISSP religion module. In the most recent GSS wave with this variable (2008), seven of the full set of 12 L-S categories have fewer than 100 respondents who answered this question (five categories have fewer than 100 respondents even when pooling both available waves in which this measure was used). Nevertheless, in 2008, more than 70 percent of members of each L-S group said there is basic truth in many religions.

Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). In the RLS, respondents who are affiliated with a religion were asked: "Which of these two statements comes closer to your own views even if neither is exactly right? My religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life OR Many religions can lead to eternal life." Those who are Christian and say many religions can lead to eternal life receive a follow-up question asking if that refers to Christian religions or both Christian and non-Christian religions. We combined the two measures to make a single universalism-exclusivism variable. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Percent in exclusivist/universalist categories in select Protestant families and denominations.

	Episcopal	Lutheran	Baptist	Lutheran-ELCA	Lutheran-LCMS and WELS
My religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life	11[c,e]	14[c,d,e]	36[a,b,d,e]	9[b,c,e]	22[a,b,c,d]
Many religions can lead to eternal life, but only Christian religions	7[b,c,d,e]	15[a,c,e]	19[a,b,d]	13[a,c,e]	23[a,b,d]
Many religions can lead to eternal life, including some non-Christian religions	75[b,c,e]	63[a,c,d,e]	36[a,b,d,e]	69[b,c,e]	51[a,b,c,d]
Neither/both and DK	8	8	9	9	5
N	652	1,504	4,960	641	509

Based on analysis of 2014 Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study, respondents who are affiliated with a religion were asked: "Which of these two statements comes closer to your own views even if neither is exactly right? My religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life OR Many religions can lead to eternal life." Those who are Christian and who say many religions can lead to eternal life receive a follow-up question asking if that refers to Christian religions or both Christian and non-Christian religions. We combined the two measures to make a single universalism-exclusivism variable. The "neither/both and DK" category includes respondents who answered either/both or don't know to either question; column totals may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding; "Lutheran" includes all Lutheran denominations; ELCA = Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; "Synods" includes both Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod; significance tests not calculated for "neither/both and DK" category.
a. Differs significantly ($p < .05$) from Episcopal.
b. Differs significantly ($p < .05$) from Lutheran.
c. Differs significantly ($p < .05$) from Baptist.
d. Differs significantly ($p < .05$) from Lutheran-ELCA.
e. Differs significantly ($p < .05$) from Lutheran-Synods.

Looking across the first row of results in Table 1, it is clear that not many Lutherans or Episcopalians hold strict exclusivist views. Only 14 percent of Lutherans and 11 percent of Episcopalians say that only their religion can lead to eternal life, compared with 36 percent of Baptists. Moreover, Baptists are especially unlikely to say that non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life (36 percent, compared with 63 percent of Lutherans and 75 percent of Episcopalians). This lends some support to the notion that differences in exclusivism underlie the L-S classification. However, the problem, as we see it, is aggregating large and diverse groups such as Baptists and Lutherans. For example, as the final two columns in Table 1 show, LCMS and WELS Lutherans are more theologically conservative than those tied to the ELCA. The former groups are more than twice as likely as ELCA affiliates to say that only their religion can lead to eternal salvation. Although just about half of the LCMS and WELS Lutherans say some non-Christian religions can lead to salvation, roughly two-thirds of ELCA affiliates hold this view. Based on this table, it appears the LCMS and WELS affiliates are at least as similar to Baptists as they are to ELCA affiliates. Table 1 also shows that even Baptists are far from uniformly exclusivist; indeed, more than one-third of Baptists say they think that non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life. Furthermore, there is considerable variation among Baptist denominations, as there is among Lutherans (results not shown). The share of Baptists saying non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life ranges from 28 percent among Southern Baptists (classified as evangelical Protestant in RELTRAD) to 46 percent among the American Baptist Church in the United States (classified as mainline Protestant in RELTRAD).[8]

Our goal here has been to apply a judicious test of the L-S classification by examining the exclusivist-universalist distinction offered as a key theoretical foundation for the system. There is considerable diversity among both Lutherans (of different denominational groups) and Baptists (who are not uniformly exclusivist) on this measure, and this diversity may apply to many other outcomes of interest to researchers who would potentially employ the L-S classification scheme.

8 These results include people of all races who identify with these denominations. Among Southern Baptists, 42 percent of blacks say non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life as do 27 percent of nonblacks.

What Should Researchers Do?

The original RELTRAD article is subtitled "Toward Improving the State of the Art." Art may indeed be an appropriate term here. We believe there is no single, correct way to classify Protestant denominations, or other religious communities.

Researchers need to apply the classification that best addresses their research questions and pragmatically fits with their data limitations. For instance, as L-S suggest, having a separate black Protestant category may be appropriate when looking at political outcomes, and while evangelical may be "a politicized identity marker that emerged relatively recently [and] will likely fade over time" (Lehman and Sherkat 2018), it is currently relevant to American politics. So, perhaps RELTRAD is the most appropriate classification when focusing on political outcomes. On the other hand, the L-S addition of the moderate Protestant category may be particularly useful when examining religious outcomes, as that group likely populates the middle ground between liberal and conservative Protestants when it comes to religious behaviors.

We encourage researchers to be practical. A good beginning is to think about the population being studied. If one is examining religion in the Great Plains, where there are a disproportionate number of Lutherans, a single Lutheran category will curtail variation and provide limited explanatory power. Similarly, if one is studying religion in California, it may make sense to divide Catholics into Latino and non-Latino Catholics. If a researcher is interested in secular (as opposed to religious) respondents, he or she might make distinctions within the unaffiliated category (e.g., Baker and Smith 2009). If one is interested in African-American religion, then the recently proposed "Black RELTRAD" (Shelton and Cobb 2017) may be the best choice.

Data limitations must also be considered. As noted above, the full L-S classification requires a very large sample to have enough statistical power to assess meaningful differences. To a lesser extent, this is also true for the full RELTRAD coding, which is why many researchers combine the Jewish and other religion categories. With smaller samples, it may be impractical to use either the RELTRAD or L-S classifications. In such cases, a single demarcation such as born-again status may be the best approach (Smith et al. 2018). Others argue that

biblical literalism and the divinity of Jesus are the key markers of conservative or evangelical Protestantism (e.g., Hunter 1981), and thus a measure reflecting those beliefs may provide considerable explanatory power. Perhaps in an ideal world, we would all use the same classification system to maximize comparability and the potential for replication across research projects. But in the real world, variation in research questions and data limitations make this unrealistic.

Conclusions

Our main point here is that one size does not fit all. When deciding how to operationalize religion and religious affiliation, researchers must confront a series of relevant questions. What classification is most appropriate for the research question? Table 2 provides a comparison of the way respondents are classified in the cumulative GSS using the RELTRAD and L-S schemes. Studying such a table may raise questions about why respondents are classified differently in each system, prodding researchers to pursue a deeper understanding of

Table 2. Comparison of how respondents are classified in Lehman-Sherkat system versus RELTRAD system (GSS 1972–2016).

Lehman-Sherkat Categories	RELTRAD Categories								
	Evangelical Protestant	Mainline Protestant	Black Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Other faith	Unaffiliated	Missing	Total
Liberal Protestants	164	2,813	3	0	0	66	0	1	3,047
Episcopalians	0	1,371	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,371
Moderate Protestants	334	5,094	630	0	0	0	0	4	6,062
Lutherans	969	2,768	0	0	0	0	0	0	3,737
Baptists	7,682	125	4,522	0	0	0	0	1	12,330
Sectarian Protestants	4,233	55	402	0	0	504	0	52	5,246
Christian, no group identified	1,863	0	1	0	0	0	0	1,966	3,830
Mormons	0	0	0	0	0	760	0	2	762
Catholics and Orthodox	6	0	0	15,183	0	112	0	1	15,302
Jews	0	0	0	0	1,246	0	0	0	1,246
Other religion	0	0	0	0	0	1,770	0	0	1,770
No identification	0	0	0	0	0	0	7,254	0	7,254
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	509	509
Total	15,251	12,226	5,558	15,183	1,246	3,212	7,254	2,536	62,466

This table shows how respondents in the GSS 1972–2016 cumulative file are classified using Stetzer and Burge (2015) RELTRAD syntax for Stata (the only publicly available RELTRAD code posted as of September 2018) and Lehman-Sherkat syntax shared by Lehman.

classification decisions and to learn if and how these classification decisions are consequential for outcomes of interest.

Researchers should consider the limitations of available data. In the case of the GSS, some questions of potential interest in a given survey wave do not appear on all of the questionnaire ballots used in that wave. If Table 2 was produced using all respondents from a single year of the GSS, there would not be enough cases for a reliable analysis in some of the categories.

Researchers designing a survey must consider how much space can be devoted to asking about religious affiliation. Is it an in-person, phone, web, or mail survey? The mode affects what can be reasonably asked of respondents.

Some research questions require modification to existing classification schemes or even the development of new classifications. For instance, we have not addressed other conservative Protestant categories that may be of interest. Some researchers have devised methods of differentiating fundamentalists (e.g., Kellstedt and Smidt 1991), whereas others have created ways of distinguishing Pentecostals (e.g., Garneau and Schwadel 2013). Some researchers argue that connecting respondents to specific congregations is useful (e.g., Dougherty et al. 2007), though that requires relatively intensive data collection procedures.

In many cases, different measurement approaches will lead to different conclusions (Alwin et al. 2006; Hackett 2014; Hackett and Lindsay 2008; Lehman and Sherkat 2018; Shelton and Cobb 2017; Smith 1990; Steensland et al. 2000). We encourage researchers to consider (and be forthcoming in their publications about) if and how their conclusions would vary with different measures, such as implementing the RELTRAD versus L-S classification schemes.

We conclude by calling for transparency in the way we measure religion and suggest researchers build an online repository that documents relevant approaches. Ideally, code for each system would be made available on a central website, where it can be regularly updated with documentation and version information. For the RELTRAD system, code could be posted reflecting the original scheme (Steensland et al. 2000) as well as changes and edits recommended by others, including several authors of the 2000 article (Woodberry et al. 2012) who have called for the classification of new Christian groups added

to the GSS, breaking Mormons out as a separate category, and developing a new nominally religious category (notably the L-S system reflects some of these ideas).[9]

We are grateful to report that Roger Finke and Christopher D. Bader have agreed to develop a section of the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) website for the purpose of hosting code and other resources for classifying religious groups in the GSS (and eventually other surveys). By the time this article is published, we expect researchers will be able to turn to www.thearda.com/code to access code for each of these GSS classification systems (Finke and Bader 2018).With this convenient resource, researchers can consider the strengths and limitations of each scheme, assessing how each one fits their research questions and available data. As a community of social scientists, we should work together continually to "improve the state of the art."

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9 Separately, Stetzer and Burge (2015) identified an issue with the original RELTRAD code that may have undercounted evangelical affiliation and they have posted a version of the updated syntax on the Southern Baptist Convention's LifeWay Research site.

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