

Recovering the Lost: Remeasuring U.S. Religious Affiliation

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Over the past several decades, survey research has found a growing percentage of Americans claiming no religious affiliation. In this article, we introduce a modified religious traditions (RELTRAD) typology to measure religious affiliation. The approach benefits from a more detailed data collection and coding scheme of religious tradition based upon religious family, denomination, and congregation. Using new national survey data from the Baylor Religion Survey, we find: (1) improvement to survey design and measurement makes it possible to accurately locate more Americans within established religious traditions; (2) Americans remain connected to congregations, but less so to denominations or more generic religious identity labels; and (3) religious adherents are considerably more evangelical than prior studies have found. Finally, we consider how affiliation as a form of religious belonging relates to religious beliefs and behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Decades of survey research consistently confirm that a very high percentage of Americans believe in God, regularly pray, and consider themselves to be religious.¹ Yet there is at least the perception that many Americans are increasingly uncomfortable or even suspicious of organized religion. Indeed, contemporary survey research would seem to support this widely held notion. For example, in 1988, the General Social Survey (GSS) recorded 8 percent of U.S. adults as having no religious affiliation. Yet by 2004, less than two decades later, the percentage of GSS respondents reporting no religious affiliation topped 14.3 percent.

What are we to make of this increase in Americans reporting no religion? It has been argued that this increase in the percentage of those reporting no religion in America may be due to rising secularism or disfavor toward organized religion more generally. Yet, Americans continue to report being highly religious in survey after survey. Perhaps the notable swell in the proportion of respondents falling into the “religious nones” category is more a reflection of a retreat from denominationalism than a retreat from religious affiliation altogether. If so, it may be the case that the increase in religiously unaffiliated is an artifact of current measures of religious affiliation. For example, research has shown that some individuals who express no religious preference actually hold conventional religious beliefs, but choose not to identify with an organized group (Hout and Fischer 2002). This finding substantiates that “unaffiliated” and “nonreligious” are not interchangeable research categories and should not, therefore, be categorized together or treated as one and the same. Methodological innovation may be essential in bringing clarity to this discourse.

Darren Sherkat (1999) has also highlighted the impact that misclassification of survey respondents’ religious affiliation can have on research findings. While Sherkat’s pronouncement

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of Protestant misclassification has been challenged (e.g., Smith and Kim 2005), it is clear that accurate and updated methods of religious classification are needed to help researchers understand potential shifts occurring in American religion, particularly the growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated Americans and Christians who indicate no denominational affiliation. Another example of the need for improving methods of religious classification is the continued demographic shift of the American population. Precision in measurement and classification efforts will be increasingly important as the American population becomes more racially and ethnically diverse.

The aim of this research is to consider what is gained by taking measurement of religious affiliation down to the level of where someone worships (i.e., their congregation). We begin by reviewing the evolution of affiliation measurement. Then, we turn to new national survey data from the Baylor Religion Survey to measure religious tradition at a more localized level by using religious family, denomination, and congregation information.

Classification of Religious Categories

One of the most significant questions facing researchers who wish to study the impact of religion is how to most appropriately categorize religious respondents. A variety of ways to conceptualize and construct religious categories using available survey data have emerged. We review several prominent religious classification schemes and then introduce a new method of classification that clearly improves on previous survey research.

At the heart of most religious classification systems are national denominations. Americans are more involved in religious congregations and denominations than in any other type of civic group or association (Greeley 1972; Putnam 2000; Tocqueville 1835; Wald 1987; Wuthnow 1988). Because of the widespread influence of these religious organizations, Andrew Greeley (1972) dubbed the United States a “denominational society,” and denominational cleavages made it relatively easy for social scientists of generations past to categorize an individual’s religion.

Denominational classification schemes assume, however, that members of religious denominations share social characteristics that differentiate them from members of other denominations. Throughout much of U.S. history, groups such as the Episcopalians have been more similar to one another in their social characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors than they have been to Baptists or Lutherans or Catholics.² However, denominational classification schemes are also used because of their convenience. Surveys like the GSS and the American National Election Study (NES) place primary emphasis on denominational questions to assess religious affiliation.

Nevertheless, changes occurring in the United States since the 1950s have begun to call into question the empirical usefulness of denominational classification schemes. The boundaries separating denominations from one another have grown more permeable over time, and levels of denominational loyalty appear to be on the decline as rates of religious switching and intermarriage increase (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994; Miller 1997; Smith and Kim 2005; Wuthnow 1988). U.S. religion has also become characterized by what R. Stephen Warner (1994) terms *de facto congregationalism*. At the same time that denominational distinctions have become less meaningful for many Americans, congregational diversity has increased. The beliefs and practices, as well as the social and demographic makeup of denomination members, vary significantly from congregation to congregation such that one can no longer take for granted a common liturgy, familiar worship service, or even similar lifestyles among congregants within the same denomination (Warner 1994). In the past, national denominations functioned to provide individuals with a sense of belonging, locating them within a fixed set of religious and cultural identities in their communities. Increasingly, however, local congregations are becoming the primary source of religious identification and belonging for many Americans (Swatos 1981; Warner 1994). These shifts in the organization of American religion support the argument that denominational groupings tell researchers less about the social and political attitudes of respondents than they once did.

Taking these changes into consideration, alternative methods of classification have been offered that place respondents into larger religious categories.

Roof and McKinney (1987) direct religious researchers to think of religious denominations as belonging to one of six religious families: Catholic, Jewish, liberal Protestant, moderate Protestant, conservative Protestant, or black Protestant. As differences between particular denominations have become less distinct over time, the differences between these broader religious families have become more significant and more useful for religious research. Rather than individuals' attitudes and behaviors being shaped by denominational loyalties, Roof and McKinney (1987) propose that loyalties may be shaped by individuals' affiliation with larger religious families representing broad ideological and value orientations within the United States. For example, they distinguish between white Protestants and black Protestants, and further delineate white Protestants into conservative, moderate, and liberal groups. Liberal Protestantism is made up of the historic mainline denominations that have tended to accommodate themselves to the cultural influences of modernism and individualism in the United States. Their members also tend to enjoy higher social standing than members of other traditions. Moderate Protestant denominations are mainline groups that developed during the 19th century in America and appeal to large segments of the American middle class with an emphasis on personal piety and civic optimism. Conservative Protestants, in contrast, emphasize religious and cultural conservatism and have been heavily influenced by revivalism and the holiness movement that swept across the United States during the 19th century. Finally, they create a separate category for black Protestant denominations because of the historical and theological distinctiveness of the black church in the United States (cf., Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

The religious families approach that Roof and McKinney (1987) introduce represents one way that researchers have sought to deal with shifting denominational loyalties. The most commonly utilized method of classification, however, has been one developed by researcher Tom Smith (1990) of the National Opinion Research Center for use with GSS data. Like previous classification schemes, it relies on denominational affiliation to place respondents into religious categories. However, unlike previous schemes, Smith places individual respondents along a theological continuum rather than into groups representing particular denominational families. He assigns survey respondents to a religious affiliation of fundamentalist, moderate, or liberal, based on a predetermined set of denominational criteria. These criteria include the religious belief among clergy and laypersons within denominations, the ecumenical associations of denominations, previous denominational classifications, and the theological orientations of denominations as described in standard reference works. If an individual reports membership in a denomination that Smith (1990) has determined to be a liberal denomination, then that respondent is coded as a religious liberal. Because his scheme of classification ultimately relies on denominational affiliation for placing individuals, Smith's continuum exhibits the same weaknesses as previous denominational classification schemes. Moreover, the continuum masks differences that exist due to cleavages between historic religious factions, such as more accommodating and less accommodating groups within Protestant Christianity.

Substantive differences make religious groupings best understood as discrete categories like racial/ethnic groups or marital status, contends Christian Smith (1998). He argues that treating religious affiliation as a single item scale represents a "methodological oversimplification" and ignores the complex, multidimensionality of religion (1998:247). In his study of American evangelicals, C. Smith (1998) takes the approach of allowing survey respondents to classify themselves religiously in terms of transdenominational religious labels. He uses self-reported religious identities to categorize a national sample of church-going Protestants into four major groups corresponding with historical Protestant traditions: fundamentalist Protestants, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and liberal Protestants. This method of classification begins with the assumption that the most effective method for placing religious respondents into categories is asking them to identify where they belong.

Findings from his study establish that popular religious labels do have currency with many church-going Protestants, and that these labels are useful for predicting a number of religious beliefs and political behaviors. Respondents in the study, which included only church-going Protestants, were sufficiently aware of what the suggested labels meant to determine whether or not they identified with them. However, it is not clear how salient labels might be for segments of the U.S. population that are less involved with religious congregations. It is conceivable that popular religious labels are meaningful for the most religiously active members of U.S. society, and relatively meaningless for those less active.

Gaining prominence in social science research is a methodological strategy for aggregating persons based on religious affiliation, belief, and behavior into historic religious traditions (Kellstedt and Green 1993; Kellstedt et al. 1996; Kohut et al. 2000; Steensland et al. 2000). Kellstedt et al. (1996) identify 10 categories of religious tradition that they hold to be representative of the religious makeup in the United States: Catholics, Jews, Eastern Orthodox, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, black Protestants, conservative nontraditional Protestants, liberal nontraditional Protestants, other non-Christians, and secular individuals. They rely primarily on denominational affiliation to place respondents into appropriate categories. However, they also incorporate survey data on beliefs (e.g., view of Bible, Jesus, etc.) and self-selected religious identities of respondents (e.g., identifying with the term "born again") to aid them in categorizing individuals' religious tradition when denominational affiliation is inconclusive or nonspecific. Plus, they create several novel categories for religious groups like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Unitarian-Universalists, and atheists that do not fit neatly into prior classification systems. The expanded tradition categories allow them to place members of each of these groups into categories for conservative nontraditional Protestants, liberal nontraditional Protestants, and other non-Christians, respectively.

Expanding recognition of the religious tradition classification system (RELTRAD), Steensland et al. (2000) consolidate the categories to seven: Catholics, Jews, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, black Protestants, other religious groups, and unaffiliated individuals. They distinguish the two largest Protestant groups as evangelicals, who tend to emphasize personal piety and draw distinctions between themselves and mainstream culture, and mainline Protestants, who are more likely to embrace certain elements of modernism and mainstream culture. Steensland et al. (2000) are particularly concerned with correctly categorizing the growing number of non-denominational Protestants in the United States. They claim that these respondents often get grouped with individuals claiming no denominational affiliation at all. Based upon respondents' frequency of church attendance, they sort nondenominational/no-denominational Protestants into two groups. Those who report attending church at least once a month are assumed to be nondenominational Protestants rather than unaffiliated, and are placed into the evangelical Protestant category. Those attending less often get omitted from analysis.

Multiple studies now demonstrate the empirical utility of religious tradition as an explanatory variable for a host of religious, social, and political characteristics (Kellstedt et al. 1996; Kohut et al. 2000; Steensland et al. 2000). Indeed, individuals' social and political attitudes are significantly impacted by the religious tradition to which they belong. Specifically, evangelical and black Protestants have the most conservative attitudes on social issues such as abortion and gay rights, and evangelicals and mainline Protestants are the most likely to be ideological conservatives and members of the Republican Party. While analytically helpful, however, this scheme divides individual respondents into religious categories that may not be easily recognized by religious researchers or practitioners. The combination of affiliation, belief, and behavior information needed to appropriately classify religious tradition also requires survey instruments with ample religious items.

Developing an accurate and useful method of religious classification has proven difficult for religious researchers. There are relatively few religious data available from random national surveys such as the GSS and the NES. Quite naturally, these national studies include limited measures

of religion, making it difficult for religious researchers to construct meaningful and empirically useful religious categories. The measures utilized most frequently by religious scholars are religious preference and denominational affiliation questions. As a result, researchers interested in the scientific study of religious affiliation and identity have been limited by available data.

Measuring Religious Tradition with the Baylor Religion Survey

Conceptual categories are only useful if actual cases adequately fit into named categories. Consequently, accurately placing individuals is as much methodological as it is conceptual. One of the aims of the Baylor Religion Survey is to clarify issues of religious belonging. The Baylor Religion Survey is a mail questionnaire collected by the Gallup Organization in 2005 from a random national sample of 1,721 noninstitutionalized, English-speaking American adults aged 18 and older. The scope and content of the Baylor Religion Survey make it one of the most comprehensive data sets on American religion ever collected.³

Instead of relying on questions of broad religious preference alone (Protestant, Catholic, Jew, etc.) or in combination with questions about denomination, the Baylor Religion Survey uses a series of items to assess with greater precision religious affiliation and self-described religious identity. Appendix A presents question wording and response options; we summarize these items briefly below.

- Q1. Religious family with which respondent most closely identifies (42 options)
- Q2. Name of denomination
- Q3. Terms that describe religious identity (12 options)
- Q4. Term that best describes religious identity (from same list, with addition of “None of these” category)
- Q6. Full name of current place of worship
- Q7. Location of place of worship (street, intersection, or exact address preferably)

We employ the same religious tradition categories heralded by Kellstedt and colleagues (Kellstedt and Green 1993; Kellstedt et al. 1996) and Steensland et al. (2000): Catholic, black Protestant, evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Jewish, other, and none. Sorting involves clustering religious groups into broad traditions based on theology, history, and religious culture.

It is important to clarify that our religious tradition variable is a measure of social location rather than stated religious preference. We rely on the most specific information provided giving preference to denomination (Q2) and congregation (Q6) over religious families (Q1) in assigning respondents to religious traditions. Smith and Denton (2005) followed a similar strategy in the National Study of Youth and Religion; they categorized religious tradition from the congregation a teen attends. This approach is particularly well suited for a mail questionnaire, since respondents could take time to look up contact information for their place of worship in a telephone book, membership directory, or on the building itself the next time they attend. When no additional information was provided in Q2 or Q6 of the Baylor survey, we assign respondents to a religious tradition based upon the dominant theological orientation of their religious family and, at times, their race. Adventist, Anabaptist, Baptist, Bible Church, and Mennonite are coded as evangelical Protestant. Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian families are classified as mainline Protestant. Exceptions to these rules occurred for Baptists, Methodists, nondenominational, and Pentecostals who are African American. In such cases, respondents are coded as affiliated with the black Protestant religious tradition. Persons claiming a religious family of nondenominational Christian, other religion (unspecified), or do not know were dropped as missing for religious tradition in the absence of denominational or congregational data to accurately assign them.

In contrast to Steensland et al. (2000), we avoid using measures of personal theology or faith practices to place respondents into religious traditions. Beliefs about the Bible and Jesus

in conjunction with religious behaviors such as service attendance, prayer, and evangelism are important markers of religious identity. Religious organizations institutionalize beliefs and behaviors in the formation of a religious culture. For example, the Episcopal Church coalesces around values and norms that make it identifiably different than the Assemblies of God, although both are Protestant Christian denominations. The values espoused by a religious organization and its leaders, of course, may or may not match identically with the values of individual worshippers (e.g., Hadden 1969).

Research on religious conversion, for instance, documents that it is not cognitive acceptance of beliefs, but social ties and relationships, that primarily influence people to commit to a faith group (Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark 1996). For conceptual clarity, measuring religious belonging requires care to avoid conflating individual beliefs and behaviors with the institutionalized aspects of faith characteristic of religious organizations. Furthermore, it is methodologically problematic to construct independent variables using information from variables later treated as dependent in statistical analysis. Since we set out to explore the interrelationships between religious affiliation, beliefs, and behaviors, we are careful to keep these measures of religion separate. Hence, our measure of religious tradition is truly one of affiliation, based upon organizational belonging. Appendix B summarizes denominational groupings for our religious tradition categories.

Our analysis contrasts the Steensland et al. (2000) categorization to our revised coding of religious traditions described above. We explore percentage differences in religious tradition categories and then examine the implications of measurement in relationship to common religious beliefs and behaviors. Belief variables include view of Jesus and interpretation of the Bible. For both, respondents are asked: "Which *one* statement comes closest to your personal belief about. . .?" View of Jesus ranges from 0 = Jesus is a fictional character to 4 = Jesus is the Son of God. The second belief item, biblical literalism, is coded from 0 = the Bible is an ancient book of history and legends to 3 = the Bible means exactly what it says—it should be taken literally, word-for-word, on all subjects.

Religious service attendance and frequency of scriptural reading are our measures of religious behavior. Attendance is measured on a nine-point scale, from 0 = Never to 8 = Several times a week. Frequency of scriptural reading is taken from the question: "Outside of attending religious services, about how often do you read the Bible, Koran, Torah, or other sacred book?" Response options are identical to the nine-point scale for attendance. Analysis of variance models test for mean differences in religious beliefs and behaviors across religious traditions. We run separate models to contrast the Steensland et al. coding to our revised categorization. Difference-in-means *t*-tests enable us to test for statistically significant differences across the two coding schemes. We also test to see whether the cases we recover from the Steensland et al. approach differ in any significant ways from the sample overall in regard to religious belief and behavior. Another series of *t*-tests are employed.

Finally, we examine the relationship of religious traditions with the terms people use to describe themselves religiously. This allows us to examine C. Smith's (1998) contention that people are able to locate themselves conceptually within meaningful religious groups. Religious self-descriptions come from Q3 and Q4 of the Baylor survey, as outlined in Appendix A.

Findings

Despite perceptions to the contrary, Americans continue to overwhelmingly identify with organized religion. Nearly nine out of 10 (86.7 percent) of our respondents selected a religious family with which they identify (Q1). Yet, people identify with congregations more readily than denominations. Just over half of survey respondents named a denominational preference (55.3 percent), but more than two-thirds (68.5 percent) gave the name of a local place of worship (Q6) and 56.4 percent were able to provide location information for the congregation (Q7). This finding aligns closely with the 61.5 percent of American adults who were able to name a congregation they

TABLE 1
COMPARING CATEGORIZATIONS OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

	Steensland et al. RELTRAD	Dougherty et al. RELTRAD
Black Protestant	5.4%	5.0%
Evangelical Protestant	30.5%	33.6%
Mainline Protestant	22.0%	22.1%
Catholic	21.7%	21.2%
Jewish	2.6%	2.5%
Other	5.0%	4.9%
Unaffiliated	12.9%	10.8%
Total valid cases	1,590	1,687
Missing cases (full sample $N = 1,721$)	7.6%	2.0%

attend at least once a year during data collection for the National Congregations Study (Chaves et al. 1999).

Given that people are better able to name a congregation than denomination, it stands to reason that coding religious tradition would benefit from attention to this most localized level of religious affiliation. Indeed it does. Table 1 contrasts the Steensland et al. coding of religious traditions—using religion and denomination variables supplemented with information on race and religious service attendance—with the more detailed classification of religious groups available through the Baylor Religion Survey. Several significant findings emerge from the contrast between these two coding formats. First, our RELTRAD measure captures more of the cases than does the Steensland et al. coding scheme. Compared to the full sample size of 1,721, the number of valid cases presented in Table 1 reveals that only 2.0 percent of cases end up as missing on religious tradition when congregational information is considered, as opposed to 7.6 percent missing when congregational information is ignored.

Related to missing data, a second important correction comes in the distribution of religious groups that results when missing cases are properly included. Barely one in 10 Americans (10.8 percent) has no religious affiliation. This is several percentage points less than estimated from other recent national surveys (see Hout and Fischer 2002; Smith and Kim 2005). While seemingly small, the difference between 10.8 percent unaffiliated and the 14.3 percent found to have “no religion” in the 2004 General Social Survey is statistically significant.⁴ We must be cautious about direct comparisons across these two surveys, however. Different methodologies and different question wording complicate comparisons. Still, by restricting analysis to alternative measures of affiliation within the Baylor Religion Survey, we see that not identifying with a religious family is not the same as having no religion. Hout and Fischer (2002) recognize this. They describe religious nones as largely nonattending believers. We discover that this does not always mean that they eschew affiliation with local congregations. Six percent of persons claiming no religion in Q1 subsequently provided the name of a denomination, congregation, or both in Q2 and Q6.

The numerically dominant religious tradition in the United States is the conservative brand of Protestantism espoused by Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, Missouri Synod Lutherans, and similar denominations. We find that a third of Americans affiliate with an evangelical Protestant denomination (33.6 percent). Equal proportions of Americans affiliate with mainline Protestantism (22.1 percent) and Catholicism (21.2 percent). Black Protestant denominations stand as a fourth distinctive Christian tradition, with 5.0 percent of our sample so affiliated.

Fewer than 5 percent of our sample identify with other religious traditions; the category itself is a varied collection of smaller, nontraditional, or non-Christian religious groups, including

Christian Science, Eastern Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon/Latter-Day Saints, Unitarian-Universalist, as well as Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Chinese folk religion. Hence, even many of the persons within this category would properly be classified as Christian. Treated as a separate tradition is Jewish, with 2.5 percent of the U.S. population associated with some form of Judaism (the most prevalent being Reform Judaism).

Overall, 181 cases (10.5 percent of the unweighted sample) were discovered different between Steensland et al. and Dougherty et al. variations of RELTRAD, including 100 cases excluded as missing in the Steensland et al. approach that we are able to recover. Seventy of these missing cases were respondents who identified their religious family (Q1) as nondenominational Christian but yet failed to provide sufficient denominational information or to attend frequently enough to be placed within Steensland et al. categories. Closer look at the congregations these individuals named (Q6)—including visits to church websites to review stated beliefs when the church name itself did not reveal denominational heritage—enabled us to locate these individuals into appropriate traditions. Evangelical Protestants represented 74 of the recovered cases, nine were Catholic, eight were mainline Protestant, eight others were in other religious traditions, and one was black Protestant. Another 19 cases were recovered from the ranks of unaffiliated in Steensland et al. coding once congregational information was considered. Again, evangelical Protestants gained the most cases (seven cases, 36.8 percent of the reassigned “nones”). For example, a male respondent listed his religious family (Q1) as “no religion,” earning him a spot in the unaffiliated category of Steensland et al. Yet, the respondent turned out to be active in a nondenominational evangelical church. Additionally, five Catholics who claimed “no religion” in Q1 supplied a parish name five questions later on in the survey, as did four individuals in other traditions and three in mainline Protestant congregations. Claiming no religion, and even no denomination, did not mean that these individuals were religiously unattached. Only by going to the level of congregation were we able to pick this up. Of the entire 181 cases discovered as different between the two RELTRAD categorizations, more than half of the discrepancies were recoded as evangelical Protestants (53.9 percent, unweighted), a quarter were mainline Protestants (26.4 percent, unweighted), 10.7 percent were Catholic, 7.3 percent were other traditions, and 1.7 percent were black Protestant.

These differences occur for two reasons. First, the Steensland et al. coding uses information from only religious family and denomination questions (Q1 and Q2). Only for Protestants, Jews, and other religious preferences does the General Social Survey ask follow-up questions. Thus, a person who states “no religion” may actually hold affiliation with a denomination or congregation, even if he or she does not regularly attend. After all, Hout and Fischer (2002) find “religious nones” to be largely nonattending believers. Second, the Steensland et al. coding invites measurement error by using religious behavior variables to assign persons to religious traditions. Persons claiming no denomination or nondenominational get classified as “evangelical Protestant” if they attend religious services once a month or more (Steensland et al. 2000:297). Those in nondenominational churches who attend less often get excluded. While the Steensland et al. coding is a vast improvement over prior classification schemes, the addition of congregational information helps further refine classifications. As we will show, even a modest refinement in measurement has implications.

Religious Beliefs and Behaviors

On the surface, a very similar story about religious beliefs seems to unfold from the alternative religious tradition classifications. Table 2 reports mean scores for biblical literalism and view of Jesus by the Steensland et al. and Dougherty et al. versions of RELTRAD. Both register the most orthodox religious beliefs within black Protestant and evangelical Protestant traditions. Mean scores on view of Jesus and biblical literalism are comparable for these groups and stand out even from other major Christian traditions. Slightly lower scores on these two beliefs link

TABLE 2
RELIGIOUS TRADITION CLASSIFICATIONS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS (MEANS
WITH STANDARD DEVIATIONS IN PARENTHESES)

	View of Jesus		Biblical Literalism	
	Steensland et al. RELTRAD	Dougherty et al. RELTRAD	Steensland et al. RELTRAD	Dougherty et al. RELTRAD
Catholic	3.79 (0.569)	3.78 (0.573)	1.52 (0.929)	1.51 (0.941)
Black Protestant	3.95 (0.216)	3.95 (0.218)	2.33 (0.589)	2.36 (0.599)
Evangelical Protestant	3.97 (0.240)	3.91 ^a (0.393)	2.39 (0.732)	2.29 ^a (0.847)
Mainline Protestant	3.69 (0.667)	3.69 (0.668)	1.51 (0.950)	1.52 (0.957)
Jewish	2.20 (0.986)	2.20 (0.986)	0.922 (1.08)	0.922 (1.08)
Other	3.35 (0.760)	3.34 (0.696)	1.18 (0.953)	1.15 (0.955)
Unaffiliated	2.07 (1.25)	1.84 ⁺ (1.16)	0.374 (0.814)	0.226 ^a (0.543)
<i>F</i>	219.97**	252.00**	144.97**	138.58**
<i>N</i>	1,499	1,591	1,467	1,556

^aMeans for RELTRAD category across coding schemes significantly different at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed t -test).

⁺Means for RELTRAD category across coding schemes significantly different at $p < 0.05$ (one-tailed t -test).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Note: Weighted data.

Mainline Protestants and Catholics. They tend to agree that Jesus is the son of God and the Bible is probably true although not meant for literal interpretation. Predictably, those with no religious tradition possess the lowest scores. All four models are statistically significant, reflecting significant differences in mean view of Jesus and mean biblical literalism within each categorization scheme.

More important for our analysis is where mean scores across RELTRAD models differ. What do we gain from considering congregational information in constituting religious traditions? For one, we gain a more secular unaffiliated category. Religiously unaffiliated persons in our coding show significantly lower mean scores on view of Jesus and biblical literalism than does the Steensland et al. unaffiliated category. Standard deviations drop as well, although more for biblical literalism than for view of Jesus. The unaffiliated are the most consistent (consistently low) in their unwillingness to interpret the Bible literally; they are the least consistent in their beliefs about Jesus (we tolerate a less stringent test of significance as a result, reporting significance from a one-tailed t -test). A second interesting contrast in coding schemes is in the evangelical Protestant category. Given the recovery of many cases into this category, we find a higher degree of variation among evangelical Protestants than observed from the Steensland et al. approach. This leads to a reduction in mean scores for our evangelical category. Although those in evangelical Protestant congregations and denominations are among the most orthodox in belief (and devout in practice, as we shall see below), the Steensland et al. categorization may inadvertently overstate the degree

TABLE 3
RELIGIOUS TRADITION CLASSIFICATIONS AND RELIGIOUS BEHAVIORS
(MEANS WITH STANDARD DEVIATIONS IN PARENTHESES)

	Religious Service Attendance		Scripture Reading	
	Steensland et al.	Dougherty et al.	Steensland et al.	Dougherty et al.
	RELTRAD	RELTRAD	RELTRAD	RELTRAD
Catholic	4.24 (2.54)	4.20 (2.52)	1.93 (2.21)	1.94 (2.22)
Black Protestant	4.60 (2.72)	4.83 (2.72)	5.77 (2.54)	5.94 (2.50)
Evangelical Protestant	5.31 (2.58)	4.92 ^a (2.81)	5.14 (2.86)	4.94 (2.89)
Mainline Protestant	3.98 (2.56)	3.88 (2.56)	3.05 (2.68)	2.99 (2.68)
Jewish	2.46 (2.12)	2.46 (2.12)	2.31 (2.29)	2.31 (2.29)
Other	3.98 (2.86)	3.80 (2.72)	3.78 (2.97)	3.61 (2.90)
Unaffiliated	0.628 (1.75)	0.168 ^b (0.528)	1.03 (1.94)	0.66 ^a (1.38)
<i>F</i>	88.17**	86.50**	100.07**	105.32**
<i>N</i>	1,576	1,670	1,573	1,668

^aMeans for RELTRAD category across coding schemes significantly different at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed *t*-test).

^bMeans for RELTRAD category across coding schemes significantly different at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed *t*-test).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Note: Weighted data.

of similarity and religiosity of this segment of American Protestantism. For neither belief variable, however, were the means estimated for our black Protestant and evangelical Protestant categories significantly different from each other.

Moving from belief to behavior, Table 3 verifies that black Protestants and evangelical Protestants are more devout in religious practice as well. Black Protestants stand out in terms of Bible reading. Evangelical Protestants lead marginally in rates of attendance. Mainline Protestants and Catholics once again stand between the high levels of religiosity found among more religiously orthodox groups and the low levels of religious practice evident among Jews and religiously unaffiliated people. Catholics and mainline Protestants are not identical in religious behaviors though. Catholics attend mass slightly more often than mainline Protestants attend their churches. Mainline Protestants, on the other hand, read the Bible outside of church more frequently than do Catholics. The lowest participation and least variation in religious behaviors occur within the unaffiliated category. Again, all models are statistically significant. Religious behaviors do vary by religious tradition, regardless of coding detail.

Using our systematic coding of tradition, predictable patterns appear. Again, we more effectively screen out those claiming no religion to those who actually have no affiliation with a religious group. The result is more consistency among the unaffiliated. These are individuals who are not attending religious services or reading sacred books, and they are devout in their non-participation. Evangelical Protestants look significantly different across classification schemes only for attendance. The same increased standard deviation and decreased mean as seen in belief

TABLE 4
RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS OF “RECOVERED” CASES (MEANS
WITH STANDARD DEVIATIONS IN PARENTHESES)

	Full Sample (<i>N</i> = 1,721)	Recovered Cases (<i>N</i> = 119)
Religious beliefs		
Biblical literalism	1.64 (1.08)	1.53 (1.17)
View of Jesus	3.58 (0.881)	3.57 (0.761)
Religious behaviors		
Attendance	3.84 (2.88)	2.65** (2.66)
Scripture reading	3.30 (2.99)	3.18 (2.79)

**Mean for recovered cases significantly different than mean for full sample at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed *t*-test).
Note: Recovered cases refer to respondents classified as missing or unaffiliated in Steensland et al. RELTRAD that were identified with a religious tradition in Dougherty et al. RELTRAD. Weighted data.

measures characterize church attendance for our evangelical category. To sum, our coding of religious tradition using congregations salvages more valid cases for analysis, helps clarify who is truly outside organized religion, and reveals more variation within the largest U.S. religious tradition, evangelical Protestantism.

A reasonable critique of our approach is that our aggressive effort at recovery may artificially inflate the share of religiously affiliated Americans with those that hold marginal ties to a congregation but are otherwise secular in belief and practice. To test this possibility, we compare the religious beliefs and behaviors of our recovered cases (i.e., those defined as missing or unaffiliated in the Steensland et al. approach that we were able to place within a religious tradition) to the full sample. Table 4 reports means and standard deviations for biblical literalism, view of Jesus, attendance, and scripture reading. On all but one item, our recovered cases match the overall sample. Americans, on average, lean toward the Bible being true but not meant to be interpreted literally. The same is true for our recovered cases. Americans, on average, think of Jesus as the son of God. A similar pattern emerges for the recovered cases. Americans, on average, read the Bible or other holy book several times per year outside of religious services. So do our recovered cases. Only when it comes to attending religious services do recovered cases appear “less religious” than the American population on average. Half of all Americans (49.8 percent) attend church, synagogue, temple, or mosque once a month or more; whereas just a quarter of our recovered cases attend this often. This is understandable. The Steensland et al. version of RELTRAD relies on high attendance to help identify evangelical Protestants. Those less frequent in attendance then are at higher risk for slipping through the methodological cracks of RELTRAD coding. The picture that emerges from Table 4 is that religious people are excluded from RELTRAD categories based solely on religious preference and denomination questions. Writing in a congregation name (and often address as well) on a mail survey seems to be indicative of some type of meaningful connection to religion.

Religious Labels

Although people know where they worship, they do not necessarily agree on a religious label to describe themselves. Within all Christian traditions, “Bible-believing” was the most common label selected by survey respondents from a list of 12 terms (Q3). A third of Catholics

(38.4 percent), almost half of mainline Protestants (48.1 percent), and more than two-thirds of black Protestants and evangelical Protestants (69.5 percent and 68.6 percent, respectively) claimed the label Bible-believing. Black Protestants and evangelicals also identified with the term “born again” in high percentages (57.3 percent and 62.3 percent, respectively). Catholics and mainline Protestants were nearly as likely, however, to use the label mainline Christian as they were to identify as Bible-believing. “Mainline Christian” was the second most common religious label selected by 34.9 percent of Catholics and 44.3 percent of mainline Protestants.

When asked which term best described them, black Protestants (46.0 percent) and evangelicals (41.8 percent) used the label “born again,” followed by “Bible-believing” (24.9 percent and 27.3 percent, respectively). “Mainline Christian” was the favored description by 23.8 percent of mainline Protestants and 24.9 percent of Catholics. Non-Protestant groups were most likely to report that none of the 12 terms on our list best described them, including 23.7 percent of Catholics, 58.8 percent of Jews, 37.3 percent of those in other religious traditions, and 73.0 percent of those without a religious affiliation.

One of the important findings from the Baylor Religion Survey is how few people identify themselves as “Evangelical.” Only a third of persons within the evangelical Protestant religious tradition selected the evangelical label as a term that describes them; only 3.1 percent said it was the best description. In fact, more mainline Protestants (4.6 percent) chose this label than those in evangelical denominations. This finding likely reflects persons who happen to be affiliated with a denomination or congregation bearing the name evangelical in the title (e.g., Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) but not in theology or ethos. On the whole, there is more agreement around the term “Mainline Christian” than around the “Evangelical” label. Yet, those in mainline Protestant denominations are not uniform in claiming this label. There is not a simple majority associated with any one label as being the best description among mainline Protestants. Perhaps the fact that mainline Protestants choose both “Mainline Christian” and “Bible-believing” as best descriptions in fairly equivalent proportions says something about the contested terrain of mainline Protestantism today.

Accurately placing individuals into religious groups seems better accomplished using a concrete referent. A congregation has a name, most have denominational ties, and all can be placed within larger theological, historical traditions. Religious traditions are not static. But they do have dominant tendencies, shaped by history and theology. It may be as others have suggested that religious labels and religious tradition tap into different aspects of one’s religious identity (Alwin et al. 2006). In future work, we intend to probe the interrelationship of these two aspects of identity further.

CONCLUSIONS

Survey research tends to consistently depict Americans as a highly religious people. However, survey research documents a significant rise over the last two decades in the percentage of Americans indicating no particular religious affiliation. How do we reconcile these findings? Are Americans both highly religious and skeptical of organized religion? We suggest that survey measurement and appropriate refinements in survey questions and subsequent coding schemes may help researchers gain more accurate insights into religious affiliation and identification.

In the current study, a critical review of various religious affiliation typologies is instrumental in the development of a more systematic data collection instrument and a more thoughtful coding process of religious tradition based upon religious family, denomination, and congregation. Using new data from the Baylor Religion Survey, we are able to recover and classify numerous cases and therefore gain new and key insights to the religious nones—an important category that has not received adequate attention in previous survey research.

Second, we find that Americans remain connected to congregations to an extent far greater than they associate with denominations or other religious labels. Indeed, congregations are the foremost social location where religious identity formation occurs. Seeking to place persons into religious categories requires attention to the way individuals themselves think of affiliation. Consequently, sociologists have invested increased attention in religious stories (narratives) as an essential aspect of religion (Greeley 1999; Smith 2003). Religious stories have an organizational basis in congregations, denominations, and religious traditions. Congregations, in particular, provide a “public narrative” that helps individuals locate themselves with others who believe and practice a similar faith (see Ammerman 2003). While Ammerman makes clear that institutionalized religious settings are not the sole purveyor of religious narrative, they certainly must be recognized as foundational. Ammerman (2003:216) acknowledges: “Religious narratives—the building blocks of individual and collective religious identities—are activated, then, by settings in which they are implied and by actions into which they have been distilled, as well as by overt experiences and direct references.” Through rituals such as song, prayer, and sermon or homily, as well as through the relational connections that develop around such practices, religious organizations remain a primary provider of the faith stories that shape people’s religious identities. We only scratch the surface of religious identity here. Still, it is enough to merit that future research take seriously the congregational context of religion as a social identity.

Third, we point out that religious adherents are more evangelical than prior studies have indicated. For instance, there are some in our sample who claim no religion yet are active, engaged affiliates of evangelical congregations. Prior research based upon more limited questions of affiliation fails to properly assign these individuals. Given the relational basis of evangelical theology, those inside this tradition commonly contrast their brand of Christianity with what they see as the lifeless rules and regulations of “religion.” Hence, for some evangelicals, their faith and the term religion are not synonymous. Mis-identifying religious nones is only one reason that evangelicals would seem to be undercounted in survey research. More importantly, measuring religious affiliation at the level of congregation drives up the evangelical count. In the typical American town, as many as half of the congregations, including most of those with no denominational ties and many of the active, growing congregations, will be evangelical.⁵ The sheer prevalence of evangelical Protestant congregations in the United States makes it reasonable that so many in the population would find religious affiliation within this realm of American Protestantism.

Admittedly, our study and conclusions are not without limitations. We fully acknowledge that cross-sectional data prevent us from answering questions regarding trends in religious affiliation in America. Our observations are simply based on the first wave of the Baylor Religion Survey. Subsequent waves of the survey will provide data necessary to further refine measurement and coding to gauge U.S. religious affiliation. We also recognize that researchers using most existing surveys will be unable to take advantage of our revised RELTRAD coding. Without congregational information, the Steensland et al. (2000) approach remains “the state of the art.” We hope that our findings may influence future data collection efforts. For those designing survey instruments we strongly encourage asking directly where people worship. Inquiring about congregations enables more accurate categorization of religious tradition and has a latent effect of creating a sampling frame of congregations for subsequent research (for more on the application of hypernetwork sampling to congregations, see Chaves et al. 1999).

Societies change and the research methods used to understand societies must change accordingly. So it is for measuring religious affiliation in 21st-century America. Denominational lines may have blurred, but larger religious groupings remain distinct and influential. Although to casual observers it may be difficult to tell a Methodist from a Congregationalist or a Baptist from a Nazarene, differences between mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant, the religious traditions to which these respective denominations belong, are meaningful in terms of beliefs and behaviors. Profiting from the wide range of religion items available in the 2005 Baylor Religion

Survey, we offer a revised coding of religious tradition that confirms the connection most Americans still have with organized religion. By tracing religious affiliation to local congregations—the places where people most intimately connect to religion—we find in important ways a more detailed snapshot of American religion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the John Templeton Foundation for funding the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey.

NOTES

1. Gallup Polls as well as other survey researchers have demonstrated these trends for decades. For a review of relevant surveys, see Gallup (1999).
2. For a more complete discussion of the social sources of denominationalism, see Niebuhr (1929) and Roof and McKinney (1987).
3. Details about strategy sampling and survey content for the Baylor Religion Survey are contained in the methodological overview by Bader, Mencken, and Froese in this issue.
4. Differences between religious nones in the 2004 GSS and religiously unaffiliated in the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey are statistically significant whether or not sample weights are applied in each data set. Weighting lowers the percent of religious nones in the 2004 GSS to 14.1 (out of 2800 valid cases). Even at this reduced percentage, results for a difference of proportions *t*-test (two-tailed) for the two samples remain statistically significant at the 0.001 level.
5. The estimate of evangelical Protestant congregations in the United States is computed from the 1998 National Congregations Study (see Dougherty 2003:42).

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APPENDIX A: BAYLOR RELIGION SURVEY AFFILIATION AND IDENTITY QUESTIONS

Q1. With what religious family do you most closely identify? (*Please mark only one box.*)

- Adventist
- African Methodist
- Anabaptist
- Assemblies of God
- Baha’i
- Baptist
- Bible Church
- Brethren
- Buddhist
- Catholic/Roman Catholic
- Chinese Folk Religion
- Christian & Missionary Alliance
- Christian Reformed
- Christian Science
- Church of Christ
- Church of God
- Church of the Nazarene
- Congregational
- Disciples of Christ
- Episcopal/Anglican
- Hindu
- Holiness
- Jehovah’s Witnesses

Jewish
 Latter-day Saints
 Lutheran
 Mennonite
 Methodist
 Muslim
 Orthodox (Eastern, Russian, Greek)
 Pentecostal
 Presbyterian
 Quaker/Friends
 Reformed Church of America/Dutch Reformed
 Salvation Army
 Seventh-day Adventist
 Unitarian Universalist
 United Church of Christ
 Non-denominational Christian
 No religion
 Other (please specify) _____
 Don't know

Q2. If possible, please provide the specific name of your denomination. For example, if you are Baptist, are you Southern Baptist Convention, American Baptist Churches in the USA, or some other Baptist denomination? If you are Lutheran, are you Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, or some other Lutheran denomination?

Name of denomination: _____

Q3. Do the following religious terms describe your religious identity?

- a. Born-Again (Yes/No)
- b. Bible-Believing (Yes/No)
- c. Charismatic (Yes/No)
- d. Theologically Conservative (Yes/No)
- e. Evangelical (Yes/No)
- f. Fundamentalist (Yes/No)
- g. Theologically Liberal (Yes/No)
- h. Mainline Christian (Yes/No)
- i. Pentecostal (Yes/No)
- j. Seeker (Yes/No)
- k. Religious Right (Yes/No)
- l. Moral Majority (Yes/No)

Q4. Please indicate the one term that best describes your religious identity. (*Please mark only one box.*)

Born-Again
 Bible-Believing
 Charismatic
 Theologically Conservative
 Evangelical
 Fundamentalist
 Theologically Liberal
 Mainline Christian
 Pentecostal
 Seeker

Religious Right
Moral Majority
None of these

Q6. What is the full name of your current place of worship? (*Please write your answer in the space below. If you attend more than one place of worship, please refer to the one you attend most often.*)

Q7. Where is this place of worship located? (*Please write in whatever information you know. If exact address is not known, please give a description of the location, such as the building name or the nearest street or intersection.*)

APPENDIX B: DENOMINATIONAL CODING OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Black Protestant

African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Baptist,¹ Church of God,¹ Church of God in Christ, Holiness,¹ Independent,¹ Methodist,¹ Missionary Baptist,¹ National Baptist Convention of USA, Nondenominational,¹ Pentecostal,¹ Southern Baptist¹

Evangelical Protestant

Adventist, Anabaptist, Assemblies of God, Baptist,² Baptist General Conference, Baptist Missionary Association,² Bible Church, Brethren, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed, Church of Christ, Church of God, Church of the Lutheran Confession, Church of the Nazarene, Cumberland Presbyterian, Free Methodist, Holiness,² Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Lutheran Church Wisconsin Synod, Mennonite, Nondenominational,² Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Pentecostal,² Presbyterian Church in America, Seventh-Day Adventist, Southern Baptist,² Wesleyan.

Mainline Protestant

American Baptist, Congregational, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal/Anglican, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Presbyterian Church USA, Quaker/Friends, Reformed Church of America/Dutch Reformed, United Methodist, United Church of Christ

Catholic

National Catholic, Roman Catholic

Jewish

Conservative, Orthodox, Reform

Other Traditions

Buddhist, Chinese Folk Religion, Christian Science, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), Hindu, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim, Orthodox (Eastern, Russian, Greek), Church of Religious Science, Unitarian Universalist, Unity

¹ Included only if race of respondent is black.

² Included only if race of respondent is not black.

