
RELIGIOUS STATISTICS, DATA, AND AFFILIATION NUMBERS

Websites Reviewed**AMERICAN RELIGION DATA ARCHIVE**<<http://www.thearda.com>>**HARTFORD INSTITUTE FOR RELIGION RESEARCH**<<http://hirr.hartsem.edu>>**VIRTUAL RELIGION INDEX**<<http://virtualreligion.net>>**RESOURCES FOR AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY**<<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>>*Reviewer: Ken Bedell*

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Internet search engines like Google or <http://www.ask.com> often unearth interesting opinions and can provide statistics related to any topic imaginable. Often, the source of data is obscure, however, and it is difficult to determine whether or not the data themselves are reliable. While the Internet makes it possible for people to reach a wider audience with their ideas and to research more than what is possible with printed media, the elimination of publishers and editors presents significant disadvantages.

There are two strategies a researcher can use to determine the reliability of data published on the Internet. First, the most cautious scholars will only use information from sites that are managed by serious scholars, who can be trusted to screen and review any information that is placed on their site. Second, if there is an Internet-published information from an unfamiliar source, it is possible to use the Internet itself to learn about that source. When the original site itself does not provide information concerning how to contact the people who have provided the data, it is always possible to obtain an e-mail address for a person connected to the site through the NIC database by checking the Whois database at <http://www.nic.com>. Then through e-mail, the author of the research report or the persons responsible for a set of data can be contacted. Usually they are very helpful in providing information that makes it possible to evaluate the reliability of what they have published. Most serious researchers are often eager to answer questions, as well as explain or discuss their research.

From my own experience using the Internet and the World Wide Web to gather and review data on religion, I have chosen four websites that can be considered extremely reliable for obtaining religious statistics, data, and affiliation numbers.

American Religion Data Archive (ARDA)
(<http://www.thearda.com>)

Roger Finke, from the Social Science Research Institute of Pennsylvania State University, is the director of this Lilly-supported website. The website was started in 1998 when Finke

realized that the Lilly Endowment (among others) spends large amounts of money to support the collection of quality data, but did not at the time make that data widely available to researchers. The Internet seemed an ideal mechanism to facilitate the dissemination of this information. Now supported by Lilly, the Templeton Foundation, and Pennsylvania State University, this website is extremely credible and provides data from a number of reliable sources. Each of the more than 350 sets of data available from this site is carefully screened to ensure that it was collected using sound social-scientific method.

In the limited space available in this review, it is not possible to give a complete description of all the data available, or of all the features of this website. One example of extremely reliable and useful data, however, will illustrate the importance of this site for researchers. The complete data set from the "Churches and Church Membership in the United States" studies for 1952, 1971, 1980, 1990, and 2000 are available. These data are collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. The 2000 data include the number of churches and the number of adherents for 149 religious bodies in every county in the United States. As with all data on this website, there is a clear codebook available that can be downloaded in any of four formats, including an SPSS completely labeled portable file and a fixed field ASCII file that can be imported into a spreadsheet. Software that can be installed and used to display or analyze data is also available from the site.

Another feature of this website is on-screen analysis, which is easily accessible and immediately available. A good demonstration of this feature is the "U.S. Congregational Life Survey" that was conducted in 2001. From the codebook section, it is possible to view a break out of the data on each question. For example, in this survey, a question was asked of people attending a worship service: "How long have you been going to worship services or activities at this congregation?" By clicking on Analyze Results for this question, it is possible to view data on how responses differed by gender, household income, education, marital status, and age.

The site is also helpful for those who are designing their own research projects. While looking at the codebook of any research project, it is possible to add a question to your personal question bank. For both students and experienced researchers, this is a way to build a survey in which the exact wording of each question has been carefully written by experienced researchers. With many of the data sets displayed on this website, the questions were put through pretests or other measures to determine their reliability.

The ARDA site has resources for both sophisticated religious researchers and the general public. It includes learning modules to guide the general public in using data in specific areas such as death and mourning, religion and music, and evangelicalism in America. This brief description only scratches the surface of resources available from this site. It belongs on everyone's list of first places to visit when looking for factual, data-driven information about religion and religious bodies.

Hartford Institute for Religion Research (<http://hirr.hartsem.edu>)

Scott Thumma is the administrator of the Hartford Institute for Religion website. With support from the Lilly Endowment, he has shepherded the growth of this site into one of the most complete sources of information about the scientific study of religion

available. The output of the Hartford Institute is impressive in its own right; however, the site is not limited just to Hartford Institute data but also organizes and presents a breadth of social-scientific research on religion.

The organization of the website is quite intuitive. The material is organized under eight categories, with each broken down into subcategories. For example, under Research Areas there are eight subject areas. Each subject area includes multiple resources or links. For example, the Religion and the Family area is divided again into Research, Articles, and Links. The Research link takes you to a list of three research projects, each of which is individually described.

As one browses the website, it becomes clear that Thumma is not only a sociologist; he is also a teacher. The site is organized with a sensitivity to helping people understand and appreciate contributions from the social-scientific study of religion. Some of the articles are taken from other sources, and some appear to be commissioned particularly for the Hartford Institute for Religion site. In all cases, Thumma presents introductory paragraphs or comments on resources, which make the material accessible.

This site is particularly important because it provides access to the high-quality research that is conducted by the Hartford Institute. One example is the Faith Communities Today (FACT) project. This was a research project based on an extensive data collection from congregations in more than twenty denominations. The complete report of more than sixty pages, with many colorful charts and graphs, can be downloaded for free. Another product from the FACT project is a document called "Meet Your Neighbors: Interfaith FACTS." This sixteen-page booklet is filled with colorful charts that show the similarities and differences between various religious bodies in the United States.

This illustrates one of the real benefits that the Internet has brought to researchers and to those who would like to access a high-quality analysis of scientifically collected data: the reports from the FACT study are available to many more people than they would be if they were only published as monographs or in an academic journal. It is disappointing, however, that the Hartford Institute presents summaries of its research and complete research reports but does not make information from projects like FACT available as raw data for other researchers. There are certain complications regarding the release of data that is owned by denominations, but in the long run, denominational leaders would only benefit from the full sharing of data, even if they believe that the data reflect negatively on the denomination. One characteristic of the Internet is that it makes it difficult to hide data. Denominational leaders will gain more from an open scientific inquiry than from attempts to control information. It should be noted that several denominations have placed their data from the FACT study on the American Religion Data Archive site.

Virtual Religion Index (<http://virtualreligion.net>)

Mahlon H. Smith, professor at Rutgers University, has created a very broad index of religion on the Internet, which is not limited to statistical or sociological studies of religion. Started in 1996, this site has a solid foundation based upon Smith's careful review of the entries for quality and usefulness, as well as his annotation of every site in the index.

From these annotations, one is hyperlinked directly to the site under review. This means, however, that the look and feel of the information vary significantly. For example, Philosophy of Religion includes a link to H. Richard Niebuhr's *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. The document itself is found at the <http://www.religion-online.org>, which also offers a collection of chapters, monographs, speeches, and articles by Niebuhr edited by William Fore. The danger is that it is easy to become distracted or even lost by following hyperlinks through various webpages. I found that after looking briefly at Niebuhr's book, I wanted to see the other Niebuhr writings available free of charge at this site.

In many ways, accessing this website is like entering the stacks of a research library, and it may be most helpful to begin with the Virtual Religion Index when you have a specific question about religion. Because Smith carefully evaluates all of the information posted on his list, a person searching for religious information on this website can trust that it is reliable and accurate.

Resources for American Christianity
(<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>)

On this website, the Lilly Endowment displays their database of the research they have supported. Because Lilly has been an important source of funds for religious research, this site has a significant number of high-quality research reports. Many of the full-length reports are available online, but even in cases where the document cannot be downloaded, the database points toward important resources relevant to the material. Along with the research reports, there are numerous interviews with experts in the various areas where the Endowment supports research. These interviews, many of them written by Tracy Schier, provide readily accessible information about topics that might otherwise be lost in technical language.

The About section of this website explains that the database is not a comprehensive presentation of all Lilly-supported projects. Rather, it is presented as a work in progress that will grow in time. So it is certainly a website to keep watching.

It would be possible to list many more excellent websites with reliable and useful data and reports for those interested in the social-scientific study of religion. Nonetheless, the depth and quality of the four websites under review illustrate that the scholarly community that uses data to interpret aspects of the social world has come a long way in making the results of the study of religion available on the Internet. Particularly impressive are websites where an effort has been made to provide information for both specialists and the general public. In this way, the results of serious research are not relegated to academic journals or books with long footnotes. The Internet has made it possible for the social-scientific study of religion to find a significantly larger audience.