

NOTES ON THE RELIGION DATA APPEARING ON PP. 4-5

Several observations should be made concerning the data shown on the "religious map" of the United States. One would not assume that individual denominational self-location as shown in surveys would necessarily agree with (formal) membership. One's concept of oneself as "Jewish" or "Roman Catholic" or "Methodist" may or may not correspond with where—if anywhere—one would show up in membership statistics. Indeed, for some, religious identification may be as much a matter of "culture" or even "ethnicity" as it is belief, let alone observance. Further, self-concept need not change in accordance with behavior. Someone growing up "Catholic" may cease to go to Mass with any regularity, but still identify as "Catholic" in response to survey questions. Persons brought up in a tradition may stop using that designation only if they acquire another identification altogether or lose so much religious commitment that "none" appears to be a better label to them. To take a specific example, it is generally agreed that the Episcopal Church has suffered substantial membership losses since the 1960s, and this is mirrored in the membership figures. But, whenever it has been possible to identify Episcopalians on surveys, the proportion has consistently hovered between 2 and 3% over the same time period.

Comparing survey results with membership figures has other difficulties as well, since the latter are compiled by national organizations (typically amalgamated from local statistics provided by congregations). The 1992 edition of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, for example, lists some 250 bodies (counting each "national entity" only once). Sometimes—as is the case for Roman Catholics—the labels that individuals use may be more or less synonymous with formal structure; in other cases they may not. For example, there are a number of bodies (23 according to the 1992 *Yearbook*, p. 135) claiming the label "Baptist." Individual members of congregations may not even be aware of the specific national denomination with which they are formally affiliated.

Partially because of such considerations, surveys have typically contented themselves with asking religion only to the level of "Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish." The National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey represents perhaps the best series of surveys that ask religion questions with sufficient detail and consistency across time to support the kind of trend analysis possible with membership statistics, but they go back only to 1972. In looking for survey counterparts to the 1960-1990 membership trends, Roper Center staff were unable to find any instance of an organization meeting the criteria for consistency of method, detail of inquiry, and sampling method that made sure geographically isolated groups could adequately be measured.

Such considerations dictate looking at data in terms of religious families or lineages. Almost any classification has some problems, and there is no uniformly acceptable grouping of the hundreds of denominations into a meaningful structure. Denominations can be related by history and "genealogy," theology, and polity—just to name several criteria. Two denominations which are quite close on one or two dimensions may well differ on a third. Developments such as the ecumenical movement have meant that theological shifts have occurred with which polity and organization may or may not have kept pace. Formal mergers (e.g., the Lutherans, the Presbyterians) have usually been within family lines.

In the data presented, we have generally chosen broad family clusters, breaking out some specific bodies (e.g., United Church of Christ and United Methodists, from broader categories). We have also shown two specific denominations—Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and Southern Baptist Convention—for separate enumeration since they are distinct in terms of self-concept and theology, and have organizational continuity. In looking at the membership figures, a number of cautions should be observed. Denominations differ in how membership is counted. Some count children (e.g., Roman Catholics), others only persons who have formally joined as adults. For some, "membership" in a statistical—if not necessarily theological—sense depends on a once for all commitment (e.g., baptism or confirmation). For others, it is defined by behavior as well (e.g., attendance to a certain level, giving, or formal affiliation declared and maintained). These make it difficult to compare the "objective" size of individual denominations, since an individual in one communion might be counted as a member while someone in another with an identical history of initiation, attendance and giving, might not. There's also variation in the extent to which lists are "purged" over time.

Surveys attempt to represent the total adult population, so their data are implicitly normed to current population figures. But what about membership data? Gains or losses can be either absolute (Are there more or fewer people with a given affiliation?) or relative to population. And if figures are normed, what is the appropriate base (total membership, adult population, total population, or what)? In the data that are presented on page 4, we have shown membership figures and changes both in absolute terms and in relative terms (membership as a proportion of total membership in each year, change as a proportion of each group's 1960 base).

—The Editors—