The Measure of American Religious Traditions: Theoretical and Measurement Considerations[1]

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Our original article espoused a simple way to recode religious groups on the General Social Survey (GSS) into historically meaningful categories and attempted to steer social scientists away from assigning these groups to a "Liberal-Moderate-Conservative" scale (Smith 1990). Among other problems, such scales create arbitrary cutpoints, have little to do with the historical movements that gave rise to particular religious affiliations and tend to conflate religious, economic, social and political ideas into one monolithic measure. In contrast, we assigned Protestants to mainline, evangelical and Black Protestant categories. In 12 short years, our classificatory system (RELTRAD) has become the standard way to code GSS affiliation data and has been utilized in many other survey efforts. Since its publication, no competing classificatory schemes have emerged to replace it. This article extends our earlier work and raises a series of theoretical and methodological issues for consideration by scholars in efforts to classify religious groups for analysis purposes.

Theoretical and Measurement Issues

The Concept "Evangelical"

Although the original article distinguished between Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism, scholars have not universally used the term "evangelical" in their work. The original authors debated the question of what terminology to use for the theologically conservative Protestants not affiliated with Black Protestant denominations: should we follow Green et al. (1996), calling them "evangelicals," or Woodberry and Smith (1998), calling them "conservative Protestants"? The article opted for evangelical. First, this avoids conflating politics with religion by dropping "liberal, moderate and conservative" terms. Focusing on historically identifiable religious traditions still seems optimal a decade later.

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Second, most movement leaders seem comfortable with the term evangelical (Lindsay 2007). Third, the umbrella organization for these denominations is named The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE).

However, part of the confusion caused by the term "evangelical" is its three meanings: as an *affiliation*, as a series of *doctrinal markers* and/or as *religious movement identification*. A religious tradition is a grouping of denominations and local churches that share a set of beliefs, practices, similar historical roots and organizational ties that distinguish them from other religious groups. In this sense, evangelical Protestantism is a religious tradition based on affiliation. Key subcommunities within the tradition include Baptist, Reformed/Confessional, Pentecostal, Holiness, Anabaptists and a large nondenominational component (cf. Blanchard et al. 2008 for an examination of Pentecostals).

Also, evangelicalism can be viewed as a set of doctrinal markers that allow for classification of denominations and individuals as evangelical. Prior research has identified four markers (Babbington 1989; Kellstedt et al. 1998; Green et al. 1998): (1. belief in Christ as the way to salvation or eternal life; (2. the Bible as the Word of God to be interpreted "literally" or without error;[2] (3. conversion as the mechanism for becoming a Christian (commonly called "born again"); and (4. a commitment to sharing the Good News through evangelism and missions. Although these markers can be found in denomination website faith statements, they are also means to distinguish among survey respondents. Individuals both inside and outside the evangelical tradition generally affirm these markers. Hence, an individual may be a mainline Protestant by affiliation but "evangelical" in terms of the markers. (In the online appendix, we show that as the number of markers increase, religious beliefs and practices become more orthodox and political behavior more conservative while not erasing differences between traditions.)

Finally, evangelical denotes a religious movement that individuals can identify with. In particular, many people identify as "evangelical" as a way to distinguish themselves from both mainline Protestants and from fundamentalist and Pentecostal movements. Thus, evangelical can be a general term referring to all more theologically conservative Protestants or to the "moderate" branch of this family of movements. Some scholars have asked respondents which of these religious movements they identify with: i.e., evangelical, fundamentalist, charismatic, Pentecostal (e.g., Smith 1998). They have found significant differences between these groups and that many respondents can distinguish between them. However, other research shows that some survey respondents do not use religious movement terminology to identify themselves or are confused by the terms (Smidt et al. 2009:32, note 11; Woodberry and Smith 1998).

In sum, the term "evangelical" can denote religious affiliation, doctrinal markers or religious movement identification. However, the meaning of terms like "evangelical" can change over time, and the assignment of denominations to a particular tradition may change as well. For example, American Baptists resemble other Baptists and evangelicals in many ways, but their membership in the National Council of Churches suggests a mainline assignment. Thus, scholars may need to adjust their assignments to religious traditions as conditions change. In addition, new movements may emerge to challenge the meaning of evangelical as well.

How We Measure "Evangelical" Matters

Some scholars think that detailed attention to measuring religious groups matters little, but many of the contradictions in the literature result entirely from how scholars measure evangelical. For example, if scholars use "Biblical literalism" to identify "evangelicals," then they appear less educated. If they use self-identity to identify "evangelicals," they appear more educated.[3] Using RELTRAD provides education rates in the middle of these other approaches (Kellstedt and Smidt 1996; Woodberry and Smith 1998; Smith 2000; Beyerlein 2004; Hackett and Lindsay 2008).

Ideally, surveys should measure affiliation carefully (see the 2007 Pew Forum Landscape survey for a model), include items to tap the doctrinal markers and provide measures of movement identification. (For an initial effort in this regard, see the online appendix and a number of recent research ventures; Green 2007; Smidt et al. 2009:chap. 1). Thus, we recommend using multiple measures of the concept evangelical when they are available. Where multiple measures are not available, denomination data should be. It has the advantage over movement identification measures of allowing scholars to classify more respondents (Alwin et al. 2006:543). However, both religious movement identity and denomination contribute distinct information and help explain additional variation (Woodberry and Smith 1998; Smith 1998; 2000; Beyerlein 2004; Alwin et al. 2006:560; Lewis and de Bernardo 2010). The online appendix provides support for this argument.

Coding and Disaggregating Black Protestantism

Some scholars have raised questions about the way that the Black Protestant (BP) category was coded in the original article (Greeley and Hout 2006; Yi 2009; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). We decided that race should not be used to differentiate Black Protestants from other Protestants. Hence, African Americans in historic Black denominations were placed in the BP category, while others were assigned to the evangelical or mainline Protestant traditions based on affiliation.[4] We wanted scholars to be able to differentiate African Americans who attend BP denominations from those who attend other denominations (or do not attend) and non-Blacks who attend BP denominations from those who do not. We still feel this method of categorization is defensible. However, other surveys (like the 2007 Pew Forum Landscape Survey) assign all Black Protestants to the same category. Future surveys should ask respondents if the church they attend has a homogeneous or diverse racial/ethnic composition to help evaluate these different approaches.

In addition, some scholars have wondered if collinearity will occur if they control for both Black Protestant tradition and African American racial identity in the same regression. However, in large surveys this should not be a problem. Many African Americans are Catholic, evangelical or mainline Protestant or non-religious, while some non-Blacks attend BP churches, giving statistical leverage to differentiate respondents' race from their religious affiliation. Moreover, collinearity does not bias coefficients; it only inflates the standard error. Thus, if

the coefficient for BP moves towards zero when controlling for race, it suggests that race and not religious tradition explains the association with the dependent variable. On the other hand, if the coefficient remains relatively stable while the standard error becomes much larger, this suggests collinearity.[5]

Finally, the diversity within the evangelical tradition in terms of denominational families is also apparent in Black Protestantism. Where large samples are available, like the 2007 Pew Forum Landscape Survey, we find that Black Baptists and Methodists differ from BP, Holiness, and nondenominationals. The latter tend to be more involved in religious practice and somewhat more likely to take conservative political stands (data from the 2007 Pew Forum Landscape Survey, not shown).

Latino and Asian American Religion

The original article and its RELTRAD code did not deal with the assignment of non-Black minorities. The number of Latinos and Asians in the GSS (and most other national surveys prior to 2000) was small. In addition, most surveys were conducted only in English, leading to possible under-representation of these groups in the samples. In the Pew Forum survey, Asian Americans comprise 2.6 percent of the sample. They come from many countries, and many belong to non-Christian religious traditions or to Christian traditions that are distinct from predominantly white and Black denominations.[6]

The distinct religious traditions of the burgeoning Hispanic population also require greater attention. Gibson and Hare (2012) have attempted to identify important religious distinctions among Hispanics, as have John Green and his colleagues (Green 2007; Green et al. 2007). In the online appendix, we show that religious and political differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Protestants and Catholics are significant. We leave it to future scholars to make the theoretical case for treating Hispanics in this manner.

Coding the "Other" Denominations, "No Further Specifics" and Nondenominationals

In the earlier article, responses of "other" Baptist or "just a Baptist" were placed in the evangelical category based on the assumption that most Baptists were evangelical. Conversely, "other" or "just a" Methodist, Lutheran, or Presbyterian responses were coded "mainline." In GSS surveys since 2000, we estimate that these ambiguous Protestants account for approximately 20 percent of the sample. The 2007 Pew Forum Landscape Survey, with its extensive affiliation probes, still found that about 14 percent of the sample fell into these categories. The latter survey used race and born-again identification to assign respondents to the evangelical, mainline or Black Protestant traditions. In the future, individuals who do not believe in God or life after death and rarely if ever pray or attend church could be placed in a "nominal" religion category, one that likely would resemble the individuals who claim no religion (for analysis that does this, see the online appendix). Ideally, coding schemes should attempt

to assign these ambiguous responses based on doctrinal markers and/or religious movement identifications as well as other religious beliefs and practices. Unfortunately, most surveys do not have these requisite variables. Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson (2007) help solve the problem of ambiguous affiliations by asking respondents for the name and address of their local congregations. Scholars can then contact these churches to ascertain which religious tradition assignments should be made.

Nondenomination responses also pose a problem and their numbers are growing rapidly. In the original article, respondents with at least moderate levels of church attendance were placed in the evangelical tradition. The Pew Forum survey used born-again identifications to assign this group to the evangelical tradition, while non-born-again respondents were placed in the mainline. Scholars should consider assigning "nonbelieving," "nonattenders" to a nominal religion category. In sum, the categorization of "other" and "no further specific" Protestants, as well as nondenominationals, is in its beginning stages and demands serious research efforts given the size of these groups.

The Secular or Unaffiliated

Numerous recent studies have documented the growth of the secular or unaffiliated population (Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010). But just as evangelicals are not a monolithic group, neither are "seculars" monolithic. Atheists and agnostics should exhibit less religious characteristics than the larger group of respondents who simply respond "nothing in particular" to a religious affiliation question. In addition, there are the "religious unaffiliated" with relatively high levels of belief and practice. Finally, there are "nominal religionists," discussed above, who "name" an affiliation but have very low or nonexistent levels of belief and practice. These nominals are not coded as "secular" or unaffiliated in most surveys, but they closely resemble "nothing in particular" respondents in terms of both religious and political variables (see the online appendix for details). Much more research is needed to understand fully this important segment of the population (for some preliminary work, c.f. Baker and Smith 2009; Kellstedt 2009).

Mormons

RELTRAD places *Mormons* in the "other" category. Because the group is relatively large and growing, approximating the size of the Jewish population, they should be assigned a separate category. (See the online appendix for details.)

International Protestant Denominations

RELTRAD was developed for the United States. It would be helpful to develop a code for Protestant denominations born in other countries. With global immigration to North America, increasingly these distinct, foreign-born denominations are finding a foothold here.

Distinguishing Nonprotestant Groups

While RELTRAD has helped scholars divide Protestants into historically meaningful categories, less work has been done to measure diversity within other religious traditions. Clearly, the doctrinal markers and religious movements that help define evangelicalism do not define other religious traditions. Some research attempts to differentiate types of Catholics (Welch and Leege 1988; Leege and Welch 1989a, 1989b; Starks 2009), East Asian religion practitioners (Roemer 2009) or the nonreligious (Baker and Smith 2009). Robert Woodberry, Mark Regnerus, and Alex Weinreb developed detailed questions about Islam and African traditional religion for the *Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project* (also see Krauss, Idris, and Hamzah 2007). But questions designed to differentiate different non-Protestant religious groups and measure religiosity among their practitioners are rare. Careful research in this area is crucial because surveys are increasingly conducted in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. Many global surveys use religious questions originally designed for Christians, creating interpretation difficulties (Roemer 2009).

In terms of coding non-Protestant groups, the 2007 Pew Forum Survey is a model for identifying religious traditions and the subgroups within these traditions, while the GSS added categories like Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu to their RELIG question in 1998.

Other Problems

Other problems with coding all respondents into RELTRAD are caused by the vast (and growing) number of denominations. We based RELTRAD on a comprehensive list of denominations on the GSS at the time of publication. Since then, new denominations have appeared in the GSS OTHER variable, demanding a continual updating of the code. Most of these denominations turn out to be evangelical. A centralized database that employs RELTRAD across surveys and for subsequent years of the GSS, and is regularly updated, would benefit the scholarly community. When scholars attempt to place denominations into religious traditions, denominational websites are the first source to examine.

Moving Beyond RELTRAD

While denominations continue to be important markers of religious tradition, some scholarship has argued that divisions within traditions are more important than the traditions themselves for understanding religion in America (Wuthnow 1988). These divisions may be based on different religious beliefs and practices or differences between religious movements within the traditions (Pentecostals vs. fundamentalists, for example). To oversimplify somewhat, the conflicts tend to be between religious traditionalists and modernists. Some recent research has attempted to examine these divisions (Green 2007; Smidt et al. 2009). This research stresses the importance of measuring religious beliefs and practices, as well as religious movements, in addition to accurate categorization of denominations into religious traditions.

Testing the Causality of Religious Traditions

RELTRAD is often used to claim that religious traditions cause particular outcomes. Before accepting this claim, we would encourage careful tests of causality through natural experiments, instrumenting and interaction terms. For example, if membership in a religious tradition causes a dependent variable, then people who are more involved in and committed to that religious tradition should be more influenced by it. If they are not, then it suggests omitted variable bias.

For example, research shows both that evangelicals have *less* educational attainment than mainline Protestants *and* that people who attend church more regularly have *greater* educational attainment (Lehrer 2004; Fitzgerald and Glass 2008). Yet when we add an interaction term between evangelicalism and church attendance, the coefficient is positive, which suggests that, if anything, attendance promotes education more strongly among evangelicals (Lehrer personal communication). However, if evangelicalism teachings discourage education relative to mainline Protestant teachings, then why would greater exposure to those teachings via church attendance have a comparable or greater impact on evangelical than mainline respondents?

Conclusions

Assigning respondents to their proper religious tradition demands careful measurement of specific affiliations with in-depth probes like those in the 2007 Pew Forum Landscape Survey. These detailed probes may frighten designers of questionnaires, but they should not. It takes little time for a Protestant respondent to indicate that she is a Southern Baptist or a United Methodist, and efficient probes exist for more complex cases. For new surveys, prior coding schemes, like RELTRAD, or those developed by the American National Election Study or the Pew Forum, are helpful. If new denominations come up, denominational websites and beliefs of respondents can help scholars assign the denominations accurately.

In addition, our exploration of the concept evangelical has shown the value of the doctrinal markers. Similar markers should be developed for other religious traditions. Finally, religious movement identifications seem to move the most highly committed religionists to even higher levels of commitment and in a conservative direction politically. Further research efforts in these areas should take us beyond RELTRAD, while retaining RELTRAD, and to better explanations of the causal links between religion and social and political attitudes and behavior.

Notes

1. Our original article developed out of a weeklong graduate student summer seminar on religion and politics held at Wheaton College, Illinois in 1996, organized by political scientists Lyman Kellstedt, John Green, James Guth, and Corwin Smidt. While the RELTRAD project emerged from a group project that the six of us did for the seminar, our work was heavily influenced by theirs (e.g., Green et al. 1996). We

wish to thank them for their contribution to our earlier effort. We invited Lyman Kellstedt to participate in this update and reflection on the original article.

2. Although evangelical scholars often qualify these terms and prefer terms like "infallible" to "inerrant." Moreover, in this context "literal" often means true and authoritative, rather than implying that no figurative interpretations are ever made.
3. Note that part of the contradiction rests on the ambiguity between different uses of the term "evangelical."
4. For example, African Americans who identified as Southern Baptist were placed in the BP tradition. We did this because the Southern Baptist Convention is a relatively loose association and most African Americans who attend Southern Baptist congregations attend congregations that are predominantly African American.
5. In our original article, we showed several examples where BP adherence and African American ancestry had distinct relationships with the dependent variable, suggesting that the two variables were not measuring the same thing.
6. The Pew Forum's 2007 Landscape Survey is a useful starting point for comparing the religious affiliations of Asian Americans with non-Asians.

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Note

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