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Jackie Shane
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What the Polls Say

Possibly the most fascinating snapshot of Americans and their religious attitudes is collected at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life http://pewforum.org/
The Pew Forum seeks to deliver impartial national opinion research to journalists and government officials. The Forum is the branch of the Pew Center that deals solely with religious issues as they relate to politics, domestic policy, law, and world affairs. So for example, if you wanted to know whether the use of birth control was increasing or decreasing (it is on the decline), or if you sought to understand American attitudes toward gay marriage, this should be the first place you visit. Navigating this site is simple. Just select a category from the buttons on the left. Click on Religion & Public Schools, to learn that only 26 percent of Americans agree with Darwin that life evolved through natural selection. Sadly though this site is fantastic, in the world of natural selection, it does not rise to the top in most Google searches relating to religion and statistics; the reason being that most websites that deal with religion and statistics tend to not list this site as a recommended link. I found that the Roper Center, which does rise above the Pew Forum in search retrievals http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ to be far less useful.

Babies and Beer

The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) http://www.thearda.com/ is maintained by the Social Science Research Institute at the Penn State and funded, in addition, by the Lilly Endowment and the John Templeton Foundation. Though originally designed with American researchers in mind, the archive has come to also include international data. Though there are a variety of topics here, there are also so many points of entry that this site necessitates some exploration. There are four buttons asking who you are, so that data can be better geared toward the target audience. Since I am technically press, I clicked “press” expecting information about the site itself, but this link is actually built to help writers import statistics pertaining to religious affiliation into their writing. The data provided for the press, appears to be identical to that provided for researchers. There is a plethora of surveys and geographic charts on this site, but serendipity is the rule rather than the exception. While examining a chart of the United States I was distracted by the consumption of beer per capita by state. The reason is that selecting Maps & Reports links to census data, which in turn has the category, Crime, Voting, and other Measures, so presumably you could see which states voted for George Bush, drink the most beer, have the highest percent of births to teen mothers, and the highest percent of Christian adherents. (Hint, Texas, Texas, Texas, etc.). This site takes a little work, but there is a lot to be found. There is a slight Christian bias and an emphasis on the most popular religions.
Worldly Affiliation

Technically an adherent is someone who not only prescribes to a religion, but also spreads the gospel, so I was a bit put off by the name of http://www.adherents.com/. Despite the name, this site seems to simply view the distribution of world religions by geography. I found that sites often use the term “adherent” as a label for what I would normally refer to as “religious affiliation.” Click on the Religion by Location Index, located at the bottom of the home page. Preston Hunter, the webmaster and founder of Adherents is actually a computer programmer living in Texas. He grew enamored by the variety of world religions and decided to gather information. The strength of this site is that it documents thousands of lesser known religions and faiths. Hunter states that he hopes people won't judge any group by its size, since even the largest groups were at one time small, and some of the smallest groups were at one time the majority faith. Source data comes from books, other websites, journal articles, and social science researchers. Sample reports include the profile of U.S. Supreme Court justices by religion http://www.adherents.com/adh_sc.html and the Major Religions of the World chart http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html.

Intelligent Design and Pirates

No discussion on religion would be complete without the inclusion of The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, designed to be an answer to the Kansas’ School Board’s decision to teach Intelligent Design alongside the “theory” of evolution. You can read more about his Noodly Appendage and gather such statistics as the correlation of global temperature rise with the disappearance of pirates in the 20th century at http://www.venganza.org/.