

The Fragmented Sphere

According to the figures of the American Religious Identity Survey (ARIS) conducted in 2001, 93.99% of the population of United States identifies her or himself with one of 20 major religions.

Christianity	76.50%
Nonreligious/Secular	13.20%
Judaism	1.30%
Islam	0.50%
Buddhism	0.50%
Agnostic	0.50%
Atheist	0.40%
Hinduism	0.40%
Unitarian Universalist	0.30%
Wiccan/Pagan/Druid	0.10%
Spiritualist	0.05%
Native American Religion	0.05%
Baha'i	0.04%
New Age	0.03%
Sikhism	0.03%
Scientology	0.02%
Humanist	0.02%
Deity(Deist)	0.02%
Taoist	0.02%
Eckankar	0.01%
	93.99%

There is not one single explanation why the numbers do not add up to 100%. I will cover some methodology and statistics related reasons explaining the smaller portion of the discrepancy. I posit however that the larger segment of the gap can be best explained by the fragmentation of the religious sphere. By this I mean the proliferation of ever smaller of religions (in term of number of adherents) down to the religion of one, to the individual level.

Unfortunately the details of how ARIS was designed and executed is no longer online at the linked page and I did not manage to locate copies of it elsewhere neither. Thus all my

observations are based on the limited information provided by the webpage mentioned in the prompt. The primary finding—the top 20 religions covers only approximately 94% of the population—indicates that the remaining 6% either belongs to smaller religions or was not willing to answer the question. As I do not have access to the full table, I have no way of knowing whether I should disregard this last possibility (decline to answer) or whether the available numbers are already the adjusted ones, disregarding those who did not answer the survey in an assessable way.

ARIS was using adults (50,000 of them) as its sample. I suspect that the numbers and percentages would be different if the surveyors would have extended the sample to include children. Every religion has different views on family planning, contraception and has distinct teachings and social norms regarding the ideal family size, i.e., how many children a couple—the term in religious context is often limited heterosexual ones—should have. For example Catholics and orthodox Jews traditionally have more children than Protestants or Reform/Conservative Jews. When it comes to determining family sizes other factors are important as well, including ethnicity and social class, but religion plays a role in it to. At the same time it is a relatively safe assumption that the majority of children share the religion of their parents. Extending the numbers to include the whole age range of the population would probably change the numbers and percentages of the table in the attachment, but the total expressed in percentage may not change significantly. There would be still people though who do not belong to any of the top 20 religions.

A major limitation of this particular table is the (presumed) inflexibility of denominations. For example the umbrella label Christianity included 36 denominations and the ubiquitous "other" category. There are numerous other people who define themselves as

Christians, but did not make it to one of the 36+1 category. I assume that during the self-identification process any given person could label him/herself belonging only to one religion. This forces groups like Jews for Jesus to be classified only to one category, while in reality they probably should be in more than one. Also, there are religions that are not exclusive, allowing practitioners to practice other religions too. For example while being Buddhist one can be also Christian or Jewish. On the other hand if the researchers had allowed people to check more than one boxes it would have either created numbers that potentially could add up to more than 100% or the need to adjust the numbers with some statistical method.

A special case is Judaism, where ethnicity and religion should be separated for the purposes of the ARIS survey, but cannot know whether it was. According to the 2001 American Jewish Identity Survey a quarter of the 5.5 million American Jews belongs to other religion than Judaism and another quarter is secular. The definition of what religion in the above cases can move somewhat arbitrarily on a scale of being overtly inclusive or exclusive.

The methodology of the survey itself points to the challenging issue what religion is. ARIS is based on self-identification; therefore the issue is not of external judgment or validation. It is about how people identify themselves. A few hundred years or even decades ago measuring church attendance would have provided a more accurate picture of the American landscape. At that point religion was viewed more as a public matter and less as an internal issue. Practicing a religion, by attending services, clearly identified a person to belonging to that religion. Nowadays however one can be a non-practicing religious person. This makes it more difficult to create a map of contemporary religion. Church attendance can no longer be considered an objective and exclusive measurement; therefore social scientists have to rely on self-identification.

There are literally thousands, probably tens of thousands, religions present in the United States. Adherents.com lists 4300 groups, of which only a minority has no presence in the US. The religious sphere very much works like a marketplace in contemporary US. New groups form regularly when they see they have a "product", a new religious concept that can serve the needs of people. These groups grow or cease to exist depending how well their "wares" proposed faith systems are selling, i.e. how many followers they can recruit. Parallel to mergers in the business world, groups may combine forces and join efforts. Another noticeable process in both areas is the spin-off or splitting of units/groups when irreconcilable differences arise. These and other processes create a vibrant sphere with a wide variety of groups. As long as a survey is based on a representative sample the whole range of religious affiliation cannot be mapped. The smallest of the top 20 groups in the survey had 26,000 followers. There are numerous groups which much less number of followers and they make up the missing 6% from the statistics. While each of them has limited scope, but the sheer number of the groups make them a sizable section. Combined together they would constitute the third largest religion in the US.

In the Old World, i.e. Europe where the majority of the ancestors of Americans came from, for centuries the rule was one country - one religion. Although, technically speaking it was never 100 percent true, not everybody belonged to the state supported religion. The US never followed this rule, never supported any church's hegemony. Thus it allowed the fragmentation of the religious "pie" into ever smaller pieces. As more and more people and organizations wished to grab a slice of the pie it became inevitable that the "crumbs" are making up larger and larger proportion of the pie. Unless some radical change will occur in politics of religion, or the major religions find new tools to fight the process, the missing 6% will never be recovered.

The Prompt:

Go to <http://www.adherents.com> to Summary Statistics Page where you will find "[Largest Religions in the USA](#)." Make a list of the country's major religion, rank ordered by size using percentages. Total the percentages; see if they total to 100 percent. Comment on why the figures do or do not add up and why it is difficult to get a good overview of American religion. (3-4 pp)