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The Measure of American Religion: Toward Improving the State of the Art FREE

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Abstract

Recently scholars have devoted renewed attention to the role of religion in American life. Thus, it is important that they use the most effective means available to categorize and study religious groups. However, the most widely used classification scheme in survey research (T.W. Smith 1990) does not capture essential differences between American religious traditions and overlooks significant new trends in religious affiliation. We critique this scheme based on its historical, terminological, and taxonomical inaccuracy and offer a new approach that addresses its shortcomings by using denominational affiliation to place respondents into seven categories grounded in the historical development of American religious traditions. Most important, this new scheme yields more meaningful interpretations because the categories refer to concrete religious traditions. Because of increased accuracy in classification, it also improves model fit and reduces measurement error.

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