WEB REVIEW: *The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA)* http://www.thearda.com

by Shaneé Yvette Murrain

The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) is an essential access point for quantitative data sets on religion. Founded as the American Religion Data Archive in 1997 and going online in 1998, the initial archive was targeted at researchers interested in American religion. The target audience and data collection have greatly expanded since 1998, now including American and international collections and developing features for educators, journalists, religious congregations, and researchers. The site, which is freely accessible, aggregates data from a wide variety of sources, covering a range of subjects, from congregational statistics to basic religious profiles for countries worldwide. Data included in the ARDA are submitted by the foremost religion scholars and research centers in the United States, including the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), Pew Research Center, Portraits of American Life Study (PALS), National Studies of Youth and Religion (NSYR), and U.S. Census Bureau Research Data Center. Users can view reports, maps, and charts, or download raw data files for analysis with statistical software. While some international data sets are available, the greatest strength of the ARDA is its collections of data on religion in the United States.

The search feature is excellent and provides intuitive results. For example, a basic search of "Quakers" returned results organized by relevance ranking, listing matches in each of the primary resource categories. Included in the results were religious membership reports for all 50 states, citations of both "Quakers" and "Friends" from the Sociology of Religion Searchable Bibliographic Database, and denominational profiles (Evangelical Friends Alliance, Friends General Conference, Rocky Mountain Yearly Meeting of the Friends Church). Latest available map data reported from 2000 do seem a bit dated, however.

Each report in the archive begins with brief biographical and historical information about the denomination, data sources, important variables in data collection, and notes about how members are counted. The data source on Quakers, for example, comes from the 2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study (RCMS), a county-by-county enumeration of religious bodies in the United States published (since 1990) by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB). The study is an update of the 1952, 1971, and 1980 studies originally done by the National Council of Churches and the Glenmary Research Center. The county-level detail of the ASARB study expands the U.S. Census Research Data Center's national-level detail.

The top of the ARDA homepage features an image menu with four featured "research centers": *The Learning Center, Religion Research Hub, The Press Room*, and *Congregational Resource Center*. The navigation tabs with drop-down menus across the top of the page are duplicated in the main body of the page including lists of links and multiple search boxes. While this duplication provides alternative means of getting around and discovering resources, the visual clutter can be a bit overwhelming, detracting from the overall appeal of the site.

One can browse ARDA files by category, alphabetically, view the newest additions, most popular files, or search for a file. Selecting a report entitled "Cross-National Socio-Economic and Religion Data, 2005" from the Cross-National section under the International Surveys and Data category includes a preview of the survey results. The funding source, collection and sampling procedures, principal investigators, and variable information are outlined in addition to an option to search the entire report by phrase or keyword. Users are required to agree to conditions of usage and copyright before downloading data files.

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One exceptional feature of the archive is the "Question Bank," which allows users to develop their own questionnaires. Users can also create categories for maintaining groups of questions for future use. Of special interest for the study of American religion are the denominational family trees under the "Religious Groups" tab. The most recent membership data and quick fact information for a "family member" (highlighted in red) appears in a new dialog window when selected.

Interactive GIS Maps provide demographic and geographic information on religious groups and congregations across the United States by ZIP code, address, or other place of interest. Users are able to customize reports on religious adherence data down to the county level to reveal relationships, beliefs, and membership trends over a particular time span. The ARDA's interactive GIS maps are powered by Social Explorer, an online research tool distributed by Oxford University Press. (*Social Explorer* was named "Outstanding Reference Source" by the ALA's Reference and User Services Association [RUSA] in 2010.) In addition to visually interpreted population densities and quantities, users are able to download variable details and reports from sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau and the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research.

As alluded to earlier, one criticism of the ARDA is the site's usability and visual inconsistency. Though the ARDA immediately demonstrates its value to the user, the site is plagued by imbalanced images, text, and multiple and varied points of entry that can be overwhelming to the first-time user. The site lacks a sense of professional cohesiveness, organization, and intuitive navigation one would expect from a modern website. Another disappointing aspect of the ARDA is its limited international data. Though useful, currently available content tends to be limited to country and regional profiles, encyclopedic descriptions of religious groups, and maps on various social and political indicators.

Despite these criticisms, the time spent getting familiar with and using the ARDA is well worth the reward of discovering standardized data that are transparent and well cited, especially for the study of religion in the United States. The data archive assists users with collecting quantitative data providing a context for placing such questions as prevalence, growth/decline, and intensity of religious belief. The numbers reported in ARDA profiles, maps, and reports constitute broad cultural categories, demographic characteristics, social and political views, and beliefs and practices, which undergird the importance of sources for theological research, teaching, and service.