

The American Religious Landscape

Facts, Trends, and the Future

Ryan P. Burge. *The American Religious Landscape: Facts, Trends, and the Future*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2025. 272pp. \$24.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9780197762844.

In *The American Religious Landscape*, Ryan Burge (political scientist and former Baptist minister) seeks “to provide a broad view of the American religious landscape” (2) using survey data. He tracks the numbers and relative strength of various religious groups in the United States over time, focusing on the current patterns. His book includes Christian denominational families and numerically smaller groups including Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, atheists/agnostics, and those whose religious affiliation is nothing in particular. His intended readers are those interested in contemporary American religion.

This review first discusses the data sources that Burge uses and outlines the book’s contents. Then strengths and weaknesses are assessed from the point of view of the work of reference librarians.

Burge uses empirical data about beliefs and membership counts to document patterns of American religious involvement. He relies on four large datasets: the General Social Survey (first administered in 1972 and based at the University of Chicago), the Cooperative Election Study (first deployed in 2006 by researchers at Harvard), the Religion Census (conducted every ten years by the Association of Statistics of American Religious Bodies), and the Nationscape Survey (begun in 2019 by UCLA and The Democracy Fund). These instruments ask different questions and have different sample sizes. The Religion Census asks religious groups directly about the numbers of their members and congregations, producing “one of the richest datasets that is available to scholars of American religion” (24), albeit a resource of narrow focus. Burge notes that “every dataset has its own strengths and weaknesses” (26). Using all four data sets in combination, he has made judgements to produce as accurate an overall picture of American religious life as possible.

The book is organized as follows: The first chapter sketches the history of American religious affiliation from the colonial period to the present. The second discusses data sources, noting that his work uses only quantitative data. The next chapters (approximately 20 pages in length) discuss five Christian theological families: evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Black Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and Catholics. Chapters eight through fourteen discuss other significant groups: Jews, Latter-day Saints, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, atheist/agnostics, and those espousing no religion in particular. Each chapter provides some salient statistics about a given group, such as its size relative to the national population and the long-term pattern of growth or decline. Burge makes some comparisons between groups on social or political issues. For instance, he charts the differences between mainline Protestants, evangelicals, and Black evangelicals on the question of whether homosexual couples should have the right to marry (81).

Chapter 15 looks ahead to the future of American religion. Based on the data, Burge identifies five trends that will continue into the future. They are the continuation of Christianity as the largest religious group in the United States for the foreseeable future, the acceleration of individuals leaving the denomination of their childhood for another (membership switching), the virtual disappearance of mainline Christianity, a slowing in the relative growth of those espousing no religion in particular, and increased difficulty in making projections about the future religious landscape. The difficulty

arises in large part because of the unknown effects of generational replacement (i.e., the fact that “younger generations look, think, and worship differently than their parents or grandparents” [262]).

Throughout the book, Burge uses charts, graphs, and maps to report data in useful ways. For instance, the map of the “share of all adherents who are mainline Protestants” (63) dramatically shows their concentration in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Minnesota and Iowa. The graph “religious activity among religious groups” (82) shows that Black Protestants report praying daily at a rate higher than any other group, including other evangelicals, Latter-day Saints, and Muslims. Graphs based on survey data clearly show the rise and decline over time of the proportion of the general population who identify as born again (46) or as members of mainline denominations (57).

Burge has written a book that is admirable in many respects. He synthesizes large amounts of data and presents them in a digestible way. Maps and graphs use black and gray tones and were legible in the paperback edition available to me. His explanations are clearly written. He presupposes that readers are familiar with statistical terms like scatterplot and outlier. He reports data over time, helping readers see enduring trends. Reporting how anonymous respondents answered survey questions allows readers to notice the difference between the views of believers and the official positions of their church bodies. Burge is judicious in making suggestions about what might happen in the future (he calls them “educated guesses” about major trends [2]), but he pulls no punches when a long-term trend shows no signs of changing. He writes, for instance, “faced with an aging demographic and declining birth rates... mainline Protestantism must confront tough decisions about their future viability and the responsible management of their assets in accordance with their faith” (70-71).

Regarding limitations, the book is an exercise in statistical reporting and interpretation. This book is not a source to read to discover the main teachings of any religious tradition or to engage the lived religious experience of adherents. Because Burge does not discuss the same set of topics in each chapter, readers cannot compare the frequency of opinions of one religious group with others. For instance, one cannot compare what evangelicals or Hindus or agnostics think about capital punishment. Because Burge aggregates data at a “fifty thousand foot level,” many nuances about beliefs or the composition of various groups are necessarily left unreported. For example, Pentecostalism is mentioned as a variety of evangelicalism and receives little explicit attention. On the other hand, Burge documents his sources and points readers to the online datasets on which he bases his conclusions. Readers looking for in-depth explanations about *why* certain groups are gaining or losing members will need to read other sources. Readers looking for more statistical detail will need to consult sources like The Association of Religious Data Archives (thearda.com) and official denominational data. Given Burge’s purpose, these limitations in a work of two hundred seventy pages are surely not defects.

How would this book serve a reference librarian? Although not written as a ready reference book, the volume helpfully pulls together demographic information on a wide variety of American religious groups. Since atheists and agnostics generally do not hold conferences and collect member dues, the book is an authoritative source providing some data about such folk, whose numbers are increasing. (For example, atheists and agnostics, Burge reports, are overwhelmingly white.) Because the book uses quantitative statistics based on sampling methods, helping students make sense of its contents also provides librarians with a teaching moment about different kinds of data sources used in the study of religion. At a modest price of \$25, the book provides a lot of scholarly bang for the collection manager’s buck. It is a worthy purchase.

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