



## Is West Virginia A Religious Void? An Investigation

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### Abstract

A recent map depicting levels of religious adherence across the United States appeared to show that West Virginia has a very low level of religious adherence, similar to some areas of the West coast and New England. Using individual-level survey data we investigate if this is an accurate portrayal of religion in the state. We find that West Virginia is more similar to states presented as highly religious in the map, such as Texas and Alabama, when looking at measures of individual belief, behavior, and belonging. Further examination of the affiliations of West Virginia residents suggest that a high rate of belonging to independent or unaffiliated congregations is likely responsible for the undercounting of religious adherence in the state. We conclude by considering the challenges of measuring religion in poor, rural communities, especially when the culture and history of those communities has not favored strong organizational ties.

**Keywords** Adherence · Measurement · West Virginia · Belief · Belonging · Independent · Non-denominational

Early in 2018 a map produced by Alex Egoshin, an environmental scientist and creator of the website Vivid Maps, began to circulate in both social and traditional media outlets (e.g., Gehrz 2018; Jorgensen 2018). The map, titled *Faithland*, utilized data

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Replication Statement: Data for the Pew Religious Landscape Study 2014 can be downloaded from <[http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Downloads/RELLAND14\\_DL.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Downloads/RELLAND14_DL.asp)>. Data for the Religious Congregations and Membership Study 2010 can be downloaded from <<http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/RCMSCY10.asp>>.

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from the 2010 Religious Congregations and Membership Study (Grammich et al. 2012) to depict the rate of religious adherence across the continental United States in the form of a heat map, with orange areas representing highly religious “hotspots” and blue areas representing highly irreligious “coldspots” (Egoshin 2018). The map is still listed as one of the most popular maps on the Vivid Maps website.

Figure 1 presents a version of the map we created using the same data, although our version is admittedly not as attractive as the Faithland map. Nonetheless, Fig. 1 highlights the same features found in Egoshin’s version. Many commentators focused on the “cold” or irreligious West Coast or the religiously “hot” area centered on Utah, the latter of which Egoshin called the “Utah Island.” When we saw the Faithland map, however, we were most interested in the religious void that appeared centered on West Virginia. Although this void spills somewhat into parts of Kentucky and Ohio, it seems to envelop WV, the only state that resides completely within Appalachia. Indeed, if we look simply at the bottom fifth of states based on religious adherence, as seen in Table 1, we find that WV appears in this list as a bit of an anomaly surrounded by states in the West and New England.

The aim of this research note is to investigate this anomaly in more detail. In short, we ask whether WV really is a haven of irreligiosity (or void of religiosity, if one prefers). In other words, is WV really more similar to states like Washington and Maine than, say, Alabama? By investigating this question, we aim not only to contribute to our knowledge about religion in WV in specific, but also to our knowledge about how religiosity is measured and presented for rural places.



Data: 2010 Religious Congregations and Membership Study

**Fig. 1** County-level religious adherence across continental United States presented as quintile groups. Data 2010 Religious Congregations and Membership Study

**Table 1** Ten states with lowest religious adherence

Overall rank	State	Percentage of population that is a religious adherent (%)	Census region (division)
41st	Colorado	37.8	West (Mountain)
42nd	Arizona	37.2	West (Mountain)
43rd	West Virginia	35.5	South (South Atlantic)
44th	New Hampshire	35.2	Northeast (New England)
45th	Washington	34.6	West (Pacific)
46th	Nevada	34.4	West (Mountain)
47th	Alaska	33.9	West (Pacific)
48th	Vermont	33.6	Northeast (New England)
49th	Oregon	31.2	West (Pacific)
50th	Maine	27.6	Northeast (New England)

*Data* 2010 Religious Congregations and Membership Study

## Religion in West Virginia: What (Little) We Know

What we now call West Virginia, once a part of Virginia until 1863, was largely settled by Scotch-Irish immigrants, making Presbyterianism the dominant religion at the time (Pritchett 2010). Around 1790, circuit riders began traversing the Appalachian Mountains and converting those on the frontier to Baptist and Methodist faiths, which remain the dominant denominations in the state today (Ibid.). The Baptist congregations founded in WV began in the eastern panhandle in the mid-1740s and did not reach the southern tip of the state until forty years later.

The spread of Methodism in the state is attributed to its organizational structure at the time which was complementary to WV's mountainous geography: small groups of Methodists would gather for worship, led by a lay person and often connected to other small groups and circuit riders who would fellowship at quarterly and annual conferences. Another likely factor is the democratic non-predestination theology of the Methodist message, which states that salvation is not reserved for a few, but can be achieved by all. This type of egalitarianism was favored in frontier societies like those in WV (Pritchett 2010).

The Civil War impacted both Baptist and Methodist congregations as disagreements over ideology and theology ensued. Such disagreements often led to groups splitting off from one another to found separate congregations. However, increased religious diversity was achieved after the civil war when more immigrants were drawn to WV for coal mining and manufacturing jobs. This included Eastern Europeans bringing Catholicism and Judaism to the state as well as more recent Muslim immigration (Dorgan 2010).

Data and statistics on WV generally stem from studies of the state's characteristic problems of poverty, and more recently, the opioid epidemic. Such a focus draws attention away from understanding other social intricacies in the state, including religious life. It is possible that WV represents a true religious void as

shown in the *Faithland* map, and with the use of relevant data, this assumption is evaluated in contrast with two other potential explanations.

### Three Possibilities

The 2010 Religious Congregations and Membership Study, the dataset on which the *Faithland* map is based, relies on counts of religious adherence reported by larger governing bodies of denominational affiliation. “Adherence” in this case is constituted by frequent attendance at services and other congregational events. For example, data regarding frequent attendance in a WV Baptist congregation might be reported to the RCMS by the Southern Baptist Convention, or for Methodists, by the United Methodist Church. Consequently, the accuracy of the RCMS data is dependent on individual congregations being connected to these larger conventions or other such organizations, which poses a substantial measurement issue if congregations are not connected to these larger bodies, are not reporting accurate counts, or if congregations are in the midst of conflict, transition, or separation.

One possibility, then, is that WV is much more religious than it appears in the *Faithland* map, but this religiosity is not being measured due to the lack of central organization of WV congregations. This tendency has been mentioned in previous work by other scholars. For example, independent evangelical congregations may not submit their numbers (Silk and Walsh 2008). Hill (2005) argues that this is exactly what is occurring: “It can hardly be doubted that a disproportionately large number of West Virginians (and, by extension, Appalachian folk generally) go to churches that simply are not counted” (151). He states that in Appalachia “[t]he old indigenous form of congregational life, still frequently found in the southern highlands, prefers the local unit to any organized forms. Typically, these churches are not denominationally affiliated. While the church names of many may be familiar—Baptist, Pentecostal, Holiness, Brethren—they do not imply affiliation with national or regional bodies” (143–144).

The mountain churches of Appalachia tend to emphasize the local and thus many are not connected to any larger religious organizations (Hill 2005). They also value privacy and do not appreciate the interference of outsiders, which could easily cause them to not respond to requests for adherence rates. For example, Primitive Baptists typically do not report their numbers making it difficult to accurately estimate their numbers (Dorgan 2010). We label this the “invisible congregations” possibility.

Missing counts of congregational adherence is not the only possibility, though. It is possible that WV is religious when it comes to more subjective or individualistic measures, but it is not religious when it comes to measures of organizational participation and membership. This might be called the “believing without belonging” possibility (Davie 1990). In fact, as stated in historical records maintained by the WV Humanities Council, “West Virginians continue to attend church at lower rates than other Americans, but it is likely that a majority of [West Virginians], churched and unchurched, still subscribe to [a] fundamentalist creed” with that creed being “characterized by biblical literalism, fundamentalistic morality, revivalism, and the preeminence of Protestantism” (Pritchett 2010).

A final possibility is that the *Faithland* map's presentation of religion in WV is entirely accurate. That is, it is possible that WV is a void of religiosity, both in terms of its population's subjective religiosity and its organizational participation. We call this the "religious void" possibility.

## Data

To examine these three options, we need individual-level data that can speak to the overall nature of religious life in WV. This can prove to be difficult as most surveys of any type usually boast, at best, only a handful of WV residents, and many datasets do not allow an analyst to breakout responses at the state level. However, the U.S. Religious Landscape Study (2014) provides ideal data for exploration of our possible explanations.

This dataset was compiled through a nationally representative telephone survey of over 35,000 US adults between June and September of 2014. The data covers 97% of non-institutionalized adults and utilizes population weights for large urban centers. Most importantly, a minimum of 300 respondents from each state were interviewed, including 309 respondents from WV. This provides us much more statistical power to assess religion in WV. Moreover, the data includes individual-level religious behavior and belief measures, such as church attendance and belief in god, that can help us discern an explanation for the "religious void" problem.

## Measures

### Religious Affiliation

The Pew Landscape Survey asks detailed questions regarding religious affiliation. First, respondents are asked "What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?" Within these religious traditions, respondents were further asked what particular denomination or sect they are a part of, if any. Protestants were asked "As far as your present religion, what denomination or church, if any, do you identify with most closely? Just stop me when I get to the right one. Are you Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Episcopal or Anglican, Church of Christ or Disciples of Christ, nondenominational or independent church, something else, or none in particular?" Within these denominations, respondents were further asked to indicate which churches they identify with the most. For example, non-black Baptists were asked "Which of the following Baptist churches, if any, do you identify with most closely? The Southern Baptist Convention, the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., an independent Baptist church, or some other Baptist church?" and non-black Methodists were asked "Which of the following Methodist churches, if any, do you identify with most closely? The United Methodist Church, Free Methodist Church, or some other Methodist church?"

## Religious Belonging

To measure belonging, we use two variables: religious service attendance and membership of a congregation. Respondents were asked “aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services...more than once a week, once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, seldom, or never?” Responses of “more than once a week” and “once a week” were combined to represent weekly or more frequent attendance. Respondents were also asked “are you personally a member of a local [synagogue/mosque/temple/church] or other house of worship, or not?” We use “yes” responses to measure whether a respondent belongs to a congregation.

## (Non-belonging) Religiosity

To operationalize high religiosity as distinct from religious belonging, we use the following variables: religious importance, prayer, and believing in god. Respondents were asked “How important is religion in your life - very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important?” We use the “very important” category as a measure of high religiosity. Frequency of prayer was also used: “People practice their religion in different ways. Outside of attending religious services, do you pray several times a day, once a day, a few times a week, once a week, a few times a month, seldom, or never?” We use the response “several times a day” to capture high prayer frequency. Lastly, we measure the belief in god/universal spirit by “yes” responses to the question, “Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?”

## Results

In order to examine religious adherence, measures of religious behavior and beliefs were analyzed for select “hot” (high adherence) and “cold” (low adherence) comparison states and WV. These results are displayed in Table 2. First, West Virginians reported the second-highest rate of religious importance at 64.03%, preceded by Alabama (76.56%) and followed by Texas (62.62%), which both appear as highly religious states according to the *Faithland* map. The same order holds true for belief in God with WV at 93.21% and Alabama and Texas at 96.10% and 92.47% respectively. In measures of prayer behavior, WV is again beaten by Alabama, but rates are somewhat similar (52.40% and 58.58%, respectively). From these measures we can see that WV appears to be fairly religious and on par with other states deemed “hotly” religious by the *Faithland* map. It does not appear to be a true “religious void.”

If WV is not a religious void, then we must explore the possibility that the state is full of “believers without belonging,” or individuals who are religious but not connected to a religious organization. When investigating belonging to a church, the rate for WV (46.03%) is again on par with other religious states, falling slightly behind Alabama (66.96%) and Utah (52.54%) but having higher rates than Texas (41.85%). For attendance, WV has a somewhat higher rate (61.62%) than other religious states—with attendance rates for AL at 50.50%, UT at 52.54%, and TX at

**Table 2** Individual-level measures of religion in West Virginia, select comparison states, and United States overall

	"Blue States" (not religious)				"Orange States" (religious)				United States overall (%)
	West Virginia (%)	Washington (%)	Maine (%)	Alabama (%)	Texas (%)	Utah (%)			
<b>Belief, behavior, and belonging</b>									
Percent saying religion "Very Important"	64.03	43.58	33.86	76.56	62.62	57.91	53.21		
Prayer <sup>b</sup>	52.40	28.55	22.06	58.58	43.38	44.50	37.66		
Percent belonging to Church	61.62	39.48	32.49	66.96	53.03	65.53	49.34		
Percent believing in God	93.21	84.57	82.04	96.10	92.47	90.02	88.58		
Attendance <sup>a</sup>	46.03	29.77	22.18	50.50	41.85	52.54	35.69		
<b>Religious identity</b>									
Catholic	5.6	16.64	20.65	6.74	23.26	5.01	20.80		
Protestant	69.00	35.55	35.18	76.38	48.54	7.90	44.00		
Baptist	43.13	13.44	31.92	56.12	41.31	9.89	34.95		
Methodist	19.16	3.57	17.53	11.45	9.81	5.97	10.48		
Lutheran	1.53	13.87	0.40	1.63	3.13	0.00	8.05		
Pentecostal	10.38	13.20	5.42	7.59	11.59	9.70	10.48		
Presbyterian	4.26	6.03	4.97	3.38	2.45	9.07	4.90		
Episcopal	0.64	2.96	8.49	1.14	2.03	14.36	2.88		
Nondenominational or independent Church	8.61	25.69	5.01	9.10	18.36	32.09	1.42		
Other protestant	12.29	21.24	26.26	9.59	11.32	18.92	26.84		
Other religion	7.38	15.52	13.32	5.29	9.8	64.59	12.38		
Agnostic	1.01	4.95	4.02	1.47	3.34	2.21	3.96		
Atheist	1.39	5.37	2.38	1.49	1.66	2.67	3.08		
Nothing in particular	15.62	21.97	24.45	8.63	13.4	17.62	15.78		
% belonging to Church	61.62	39.48	32.49	66.96	53.03	65.53	49.34		

Data 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Survey

<sup>a</sup>Religious attendance aside from weddings and funerals; percent reporting "once a week" or "more than once a week"

<sup>b</sup>Percent praying several times a day outside of religious services

53.03%. These measures show that the “believers without belonging” possibility is not an adequate explanation for the appearance of the religious void on the *Faithland* map.

Finally, we explore the possibility that the religious void on the map is due to a larger measurement issue where, for some reason, a large portion of WV religious adherents are not being counted by the RCMS. As discussed above, exploration of available data shows that WV is similar to other religious states, especially Alabama where Baptist and Methodist denominations are also the most common. However, as can be seen in Table 3, WV boasts a large population of Independent Baptists uncharacteristic of other states (37.21% in comparison to 6.70% for AL). This insight lends support to the possibility that the RCMS is missing almost 40% of WV religious adherents because these individuals do not belong to congregations linked to larger governing bodies that would report such data to the RCMS.

## Discussion

Evaluation of the *Faithland* map’s assumptions regarding WV as a religious void against relevant Pew Religious Landscape data shows that WV is just as or more religiously adherent as other “hot spot,” historically religious states. Therefore, WV does not represent a religious void. This discrepancy stems from the “invisible congregations” measurement problem where a large portion of Independent Baptist congregations in the state are not counted by the RCMS. This is likely because such congregations are not affiliated with or tracked by larger governing organizations, like conventions or associations that report counts to the RCMS (Hill 2005; Silk and Walsh 2008). In this way, our results concur with previous research by Hill (2005) and Silk and Walsh (2008) on West Virginia.

This study highlights a common methodological issue in rural research. The geographic spread and isolation of rural populations and their distal relations with larger organizations and infrastructure often make accurate measures difficult to

**Table 3** Detailed affiliations of West Virginia and Alabama Baptists and Methodists

	West Virginia (%)	Alabama (%)
<i>Baptist</i>		
Southern Baptist	17.44	62.68
Other affiliated Baptist	29.07	21.05
Independent Baptist	37.21	6.70
Don't know Baptist\not further specified	16.28	9.57
<i>Methodist</i>		
United Methodist	93.33	65.38
Other affiliated Methodist	4.44	28.85
Independent Methodist	0.00	0.00
Don't know Methodist\not further specified	2.22	5.77

Data 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Survey

achieve. Moreover, measurement difficulties often preclude rural locations from being considered in needed research, leaving little or often inaccurate data in the pursuit of understanding the trends, changes, and idiosyncrasies of rural life. Creative and comparative strategies are needed to increase the accuracy of data and the conclusions drawn from such data.

Some researchers have attempted to overcome these obstacles by gathering data via internet surveys or other online methods. In fact, RCMS estimates of non-denominational/independent Christian congregations were primarily collected through searching the Internet (Grammich et al. 2012). Caution is warranted here as recent estimates suggest that, on average, only one in four rural residents have access to reliable broadband internet (Tomer et al. 2017). West Virginia, in particular, ranks 43rd among U.S. states for households having access to the internet (U.S. Department of Commerce 2015).

Additionally, the mountain churches of Appalachia are often against evangelizing, subscribing to a Calvinist theology emphasizing that God calls those he has chosen in his own time (Hill 2005). That combined with a focus on local organizing would provide little reason for establishing a web presence even if a reliable internet connection was available. Moreover, mailing lists—the secondary method used by RCMS to estimate non-denominational Christian congregations (Grammich et al. 2012)—is also unlikely to garner accurate numbers in WV, and Appalachia more broadly, as congregations in these areas stress privacy, localism, and no interference from outsiders (Hill 2005). These characteristics make non-response likely. This highlights how theology and regional culture need to be taken into consideration when attempting to collect adherence rates. Congregations that are wary of outsiders will likely be undercounted.

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