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Validating Protestant Denominational Classifications Using the Chaves Inerrancy Scale

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Abstract: We validate the classification of 16 "mainline" and 97 "evangelical" Protestant denominations in *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000* based on Mark Chaves' five-point Biblical "inerrancy" scale. Using Glenmary county data, nearly perfect correlations were derived between the percentage of adherents in "evangelical" denominations and levels three-four on the Chaves scale and between the percentage of adherents in "mainline" denominations and level 1 on the Chaves scale. The distinguishing characteristic of Evangelical or Mainline Protestant denominations, therefore, is Biblical inerrancy or its absence. As a guide for future empirical research, this comprehensive listing of Evangelical and Mainline Protestant denominations should be employed in aggregate studies, especially where county-level analysis is applied to one state or a subset of states.

Over the past three decades there has been renewed interest by sociologists and political scientists in understanding the impact of religion on American politics and policies. Undoubtedly this interest was ignited by Jerry Falwell's founding of the Moral Majority and Pat Robertson's founding of the Christian Coalition, and the pundits' claims that the Religious Right played a decisive role in electing Ronald Reagan president in 1980. What added intellectual fuel to this scholarly endeavor was the argument that a new "Culture War" divides Americans according to

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whether their religious beliefs are "orthodox" or "progressive" (Hunter 1991; also see Wuthnow 1988). Although there is scholarly evidence that calls this thesis into question (Williams 1997; Davis and Robinson 1996), the fact remains that religious values and cultural conflicts now affect both American political parties (Layman 2001), with "conservative" Protestants shifting toward the Republican Party (Kellstedt and Noll 1990).

In 1972, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) began its General Social Survey (GSS). The seminal work by then NORC co-director Tom Smith (1990) classified 154 religious denominations, with Protestants categorized into "liberal" or "moderate" or "fundamentalist" denominations. But researchers soon collapsed Smith's "moderate" and "liberal" categories into "mainline" Protestants to differentiate them from "evangelical" Protestants (see Leege and Kellstedt 1993). A substantive improvement on Smith's scheme came when Steensland et al. (2000) further classified the GSS denominations as mainline or evangelical (white) Protestant but also as black Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and others. Today Steensland et al. (2000) is considered the "gold standard" for denominational classifications.

Unlike survey research, students of morality policy utilize state-level or county-level aggregate data on religious denominations to assess their political and policy impacts. These studies take advantage of the denominational statistics that have been periodically estimated since the 1950s by the Glenmary Research Institute (e.g., see Jones et al. 2002). Although use of the Glenmary database is common among policy analysts, rarely do they include the entire denominational population that belongs to "conservative" Protestantism, as did Camobreco and Barnello (2008, 63) in tracking state abortion policies over three decades or as did Pierce and Miller (2001) in showing their opposition to the adoption of state lotteries. More often narrower classifications are derived for purposes of analysis.

In his pioneering research on morality policy, Kenneth Meier included 13 "Protestant fundamentalist" religions and other non-fundamentalist but anti-drink churches to analyze state alcoholic beverage policies in 1985 (Meier and Johnson 1990, 426). Following Meier's lead, later researchers included the same 13 "Protestant fundamentalist" churches to study abortion policies in the 50 states (Mooney and Lee 1995, 623; Meier and McFarlane 1993, 99), county-level votes on abortion referenda (Roh and Berry 2008, 82; Roh and Haider-Markel 2003, 22), county-level votes on gay rights referenda (Haider-Markel and Meier 1996, 338), and hate crime enforcement in Unite States cities (Haider-Markel 2002, 157).

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This entire morality policy research agenda, based as it is on aggregate data, presumes that the *size* of conservative religious denominations, whether Protestant or Catholic depending upon the issue, is a vitally important constraint on politics and policymakers. Including only a limited number of denominations, as has been the norm in most morality policy research, raises the possibility that our understanding of the political and policy impacts of conservative Protestantism has been affected by this measurement decision.[1]

VALIDATING DENOMINATIONAL CLASSIFICATIONS

Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000 (RCMS), collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) and distributed by the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.theARDA.com), is essentially a decennial census of religious congregations that is published by the Glenmary Research Institute (these data can be found at http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/RCMS_Notes.asp). ASARB categorized the 150 RCMS denominations as Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Other. To differentiate between Evangelical and Mainline Protestant denominations, ASARB first accepted any of the RCMS denominations so classified by Steensland et al. (2000). For other denominations, ASARB relied on the historical documentation in Melton (2009) as well as Mead and Hill (2001).

Whereas Steensland et al. (2000) aggregated individual-level responses to the General Social Survey (GSS), the RCMS reports actual counts of religious adherents throughout the country. For that reason, RCMS contains more denominations than the GSS. For those denominations not listed in the GSS, RCMS utilized the same types of historical and doctrinal analysis employed by Steensland et al. (2000) to classify Protestant denominations as Mainline, Evangelical, or Other. RCMS does not list Black Protestants because its data collection did not include the individual-level data on race available to Steensland et al. (2000).

Smith (1990) originally coded denominations according to (1) prior classification systems, (2) membership in ecumenical associations, (3) surveys of denominational members, (4) surveys of denominational clergy, and (5) theological beliefs. The primary criticism by Steensland et al. (2000, 292) was that Smith (1990) failed to "capture essential historical differences between American religious traditions" such as the

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distinctiveness of Black Protestantism. The Steensland et al. (2000, 297) scheme was "more grounded in the development of American religious traditions" and, therefore, classified "religious groups by affiliation rather than by ideology" by looking at "denominational creeds" and "denominational membership" in national religious organizations. Both Steensland et al (2000) and RCMS emphasized denominational history and membership in religious associations as being more determinative than doctrinal statements. In sum, Smith (1990), Steensland et al. (2000), and the RCMS relied on a variety of religious sources to derive their classification systems, but none relied exclusively on any measure of Biblical inerrancy. Therefore, our replication offers a true validation of the RCMS classification of Mainline and Evangelical Protestant denominations by applying a Biblical "inerrancy" Scale that was independently constructed by Mark Chaves (1997). It ranges from 0 to 4 as follows:

0 = Bible made explicitly subordinate or relative or somehow subject to an external authority.

1 = Bible has pride of place regarding faith, salvation, religious matters, but not necessarily for social organizations.

2 = Bible is more than merely "inspired" and/or relevant for social organization as well as faith, but not quite "inerrant" or "infallible."

3 = Bible is "inerrant" or "infallible" regarding faith and practice but not necessarily completely without error in every literal word.

4 = Bible is completely and utterly without error in every sense.

We combined levels 3 and 4, and then derived the rate of adherence (numbers of adherents per 1000 population) in each county for level 3/4, level 2, level 1, and level 0 denominations. Although level 4 explicitly embraces inerrancy whereas level 3 mentions both inerrancy and infallibility, as a practical matter research shows that most people cannot differentiate between those two Biblical authorities (Jelen 1989). To derive our classification system, we used the Chaves coding[2] for 42 of the denominations (labeled "Chaves" in Table 1), used Lindner (2006) for another 32 and Mead and Hill (2001) for 11 more, and finally checked the websites for 52 denominations to ascertain their statements of belief. Those classifications derived from Lindner (2006) or Mead and Hill (2001)

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Table 1. Classification of Protestant, Catholic and Other Denominations and Churches

ASARB/RCMS Classification	Biblical Inerrancy	Source
Mainline Protestants		
American Baptist Churches in the USA	1	Chaves
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	1	Website
Congregational Christian Churches, Additional (not part of any national CCC body)	1	Website
Episcopal Church	1	Chaves
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	1	Lindner
Friends (Quakers)	0	Chaves
International Council of Community Churches	1	Lindner
Moravian Church in America–Alaska Province	1	Lindner
Moravian Church in America–Northern Province	1	Lindner
Moravian Church in America–Southern Province	1	Lindner
National Association of Congregational Christian Churches	1	Website
Presbyterian Church (USA)	1	Chaves
Reformed Church in America	1	Chaves
United Church of Christ	1	Website
United Methodist Church	1	Chaves
Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches	1	Website
ASARB/RCMS Classification	**Inerrancy**	**Source**
Evangelical Protestants		
"Old" Missionary Baptists Associations	3/4	Website
Allegheny Wesleyan Methodist Connection	3/4	Website
American Baptist Association	3/4	Chaves
Amish; Other Groups	1	Lindner
Apostolic Christian Church of America, Inc.	3/4	Lindner
Apostolic Christian Churches (Nazarean)	3/4	Lindner
Assemblies of God	1	Chaves
Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church	3/4	Website
Association of Free Lutheran Congregations	3/4	Lindner
Baptist General Conference	3/4	Chaves
Baptist Missionary Association of America	3/4	Chaves
Beachy Amish Mennonite Churches	3/4	Lindner
Brethren Church, The (Ashland, Ohio)	3/4	Website
Brethren in Christ Church	2	Website
Bruderhof of Communities, Inc.	1	Website
Calvary Chapel Fellowship Churches	3/4	Website
Christian and Missionary Alliance	3/4	Website
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	3/4	Lindner
Christian Reformed Church in North America	3/4	Chaves
Christian Union	3/4	Website

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Table 1. Continued

ASARB/RCMS Classification	Inerrancy	Source
Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)	3/4	Chaves
Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.)	2	Chaves
Church of God General Conference	2	Chaves
Church of God in Christ, Mennonite	1	Website
Church of God of Prophecy	2	Chaves
Church of the Brethren	2	Chaves
Church of the Nazarene	2	Chaves
Churches of Christ	2	Chaves
Churches of God, General Conference	2	Chaves
Community of Christ	1	Website
Conservative Baptist Association of America	3/4	Chaves
Conservative Congregational Christian Conference	3/4	Website
Conservative Mennonite Conference	3/4	Website
Cumberland Presbyterian Church	1	Chaves
Duck River and Kindred Baptists Associations	3/4	Website
Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church	1	Lindner
Enterprise Baptists Association	2	Website
Evangelical Covenant Church, the	3/4	Chaves
Evangelical Free Church of America	2	Chaves
Evangelical Mennonite Church	1	Lindner
Evangelical Presbyterian Church	3/4	Website
Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches	3/4	Lindner
Free Methodist Church of North America	2	Chaves
Fundamental Methodist Conference, Inc.	3/4	Website
General Association of Regular Baptist Churches	3/4	Chaves
General Six Principle Baptists	2	Website
Hutterian Brethren	1	Website
Independent Free Will Baptists Associations	3/4	Mead & Hill
Independent, Charismatic Churches		Not classified
Independent, Non-Charismatic Churches		Not classified
International Church of the Foursquare Gospel	2	Chaves
International Churches of Christ	2	Lindner
International Pentecostal Church of Christ	2	Website
International Pentecostal Holiness Church	1	Lindner
Interstate & Foreign Landmark Missionary Baptists Association	3/4	Website
Jasper Baptist and Pleasant Valley Baptist Associations	3/4	Website
Landmark Missionary Baptists, Independent Associations and Unaffiliated Churches	3/4	Website
Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod	3/4	Chaves
Mennonite Church USA	1	Chaves
Mennonite Brethren Churches, U.S. Conference of	1	Lindner
Mennonite; Other Groups	1	Lindner
Midwest Congregational Christian Fellowship	1	Lindner
Missionary Church	2	Chaves

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Table 1. Continued

ASARB/RCMS Classification	Inerrancy	Source
National Association of Free Will Baptists	3/4	Chaves
National Primitive Baptist Convention, USA	2	Lindner
Netherlands Reformed Congregations	1	Lindner
New Hope Baptist Association	3/4	Website
New Testament Association of Independent Baptist Churches and other Fundamental Baptists	3/4	Website
North American Baptist Conference	3/4	Website
"Old" Missionary Baptist Association	3/4	Website
Old Order Amish	1	Mead & Hill
Old Order Mennonite	1	Mead & Hill
Old Order River Brethren	3/4	Website
Original Free Will Baptists	3/4	Website
Orthodox Presbyterian Church	3/4	Website
Pentecostal Church of God	3/4	Chaves
Presbyterian Church in America	3/4	Chaves
Primitive Baptist Church – Old Line	2	Chaves
Primitive Baptists, Eastern District Association of	2	Website
Primitive Methodist Church in the USA	3/4	Website
Progressive Primitive Baptists	2	Website
Protestant Reformed Churches in America	1	Lindner
Reformed Baptist Churches	3/4	Website
Reformed Church in the United States	2	Chaves
Reformed Mennonite Church	1	Lindner
Salvation Army	2	Chaves
Separate Baptists in Christ	3/4	Lindner
Seventh-day Adventist Church	2	Chaves
Southern Baptist Convention	3/4	Chaves
Southwide Baptist Fellowship	3/4	Lindner
Strict Baptists	3/4	[Baptist]
Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists	2	Website
United Reformed Churches in North America	1	Lindner
Vineyard USA	3/4	Website
Wayne Trail Missionary Baptist Association	3/4	[Baptist]
Wesleyan Church, The	3/4	Website
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	3/4	Chaves
Catholic		
Catholic	0	Chaves
Orthodox		
Albanian Orthodox Diocese of America	0	Lindner
American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church	0	Lindner
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America	0	Lindner
Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, North American Dioceses	0	Lindner
Armenian Apostolic Church/Catholicossate of Cilicia	0	Mead & Hill

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Table 1. Continued

ASARB/RCMS Classification	Inerrancy	Source
Armenian Apostolic Church/Catholicossate of Etchmiadzin	0	Mead & Hill
Bulgarian Orthodox Diocese of the USA	0	Mead & Hill
Coptic Orthodox Church	0	Lindner
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America	0	Chaves
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Vasiloupulis	0	Website
Holy Orthodox Church in North America	0	Website
Macedonian Orthodox Church: American Diocese	0	Website
Malankara Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church in North America	0	Mead & Hill
Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, American Diocese of the	0	Mead & Hill
Orthodox Church in America: Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese	0	Lindner
Orthodox Church in America: Bulgarian Diocese	0	Website
Orthodox Church in America: Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America	0	Website
Orthodox Church in America: Territorial Dioceses	0	Chaves
Patriarchal Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church in the USA	0	Website
Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese in America and Canada	0	Website
Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia	0	Mead & Hill
Serbian Orthodox Church in the USA	0	Website
Serbian Orthodox Church in the USA (New Gracanica Metropolitanate)	0	Website
Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch	0	Mead & Hill
Ukranian Orthodox Church of the USA	0	Mead & Hill
Other		
Bahá'ís		Not classified
Buddhists		Not classified
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	2	Website
Hindus		Not classified
Jains		Not classified
Jewish		Not classified
Muslims Estimate		Not classified
Sikhs		Not classified
Taoists		Not classified
Unitarian Universalist Association	0	Chaves
Zoroastrians		Not classified

typically were based upon one of two conditions: either the denomination was described as being fully in communion with another denomination for which we had a Chaves classification or the denomination was a precursor or a successor denomination to a denomination classified by Chaves.

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These sources are labeled in Table 1 as either "Lindner" or "Mead & Hill" classifications. In the 52 cases where we had to research their websites ("Website" in Table 1), we looked for a belief statement that indicated their stance on the Bible, information provided by virtually every denomination.[3] After these exhaustive coding procedures, only 11 of the 150 denominations remain unclassified (see Table 1).

When we correlated the Chaves "inerrancy" rates of adherence against our Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, and Catholic adherents by county, these simple correlations were derived: 0.976 between level 3/4 and the RCMS Evangelical rate of adherence, 0.979 between level 1 and the RCMS Mainline Protestant variable, and 0.999 between level 0 and the RCMS Catholic variable[4] (when calculated for the 50 states, even stronger correlations were found). This is strong evidence for the validity of the RCMS classification system for Evangelical and Mainline Protestant denominations.

What about Ken Meier's 13-denominational measure of fundamentalist Protestants that had been employed in previous studies? It is also highly correlated with the Chaves "inerrancy" level 3/4 rates of adherence ($r =$ 0.954), principally due to the high correlation at the county level between level 3/4 adherence and the rate of adherence of the largest Evangelical Protestant denomination, Southern Baptists ($r = 0.926$). (The correlation for 50 states is similar.) But we urge caution when doing county-level analysis *within* states, because the correlations between Meier's 13-denominations and the Chaves "inerrancy" Scale drop in most within-state county-level analyses, sometimes markedly so.[5]

In conclusion, Evangelical Protestants are especially important to studies of morality politics, and this analysis indicates that the distinction between Evangelical and Mainline Protestants is empirically valid, whether based upon a close Biblical reading of doctrinal stance or on denominational family histories and membership in broad religious associations. The readily available RCMS classification is very highly correlated with the Chaves classification based on Biblical inerrancy. Comparison of these two classifications with a third commonly used measure, which is based on a smaller number of Evangelical Protestant denominations, shows that the Ken Meier classification performs much better in a national analysis than in single state analyses. Going forward, therefore, researchers seeking to use RCMS county or state level data on adherence rates can safely rely on these data in order to continue building a common and valid knowledge base in this research area.

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NOTES

1. Misspecifying this religious variable can lead to the counter-intuitive finding that "liberal" Protestants were more opposed to alcoholic beverages, gambling, and Sunday sales in Oklahoma than were "fundamentalist" Protestants (Morgan and Meier 1980, 147).

2. We owe a special thanks to Professor Mark Chaves of Duke University, a highly regarded sociologist of religion, who shared with us his coding of religious denominations based on the five-point "inerrancy scale" he originally developed in his study of women clergy (Chaves 1997).

3. In the case of two RCMS denominations (Strict Baptists and Wayne Trail Missionary Baptist Association), we were unable to identify a statement of belief but found other information which allowed us to classify them as 3/4 on the Chaves Inerrancy Scale, which is the most common classification for Baptist denominations; these are labeled (Baptist) in Table 1.

4. Therefore the percentage of Catholics in counties or states is a perfect "proxy" for those other 26 denominations coded as level 0 in the Chaves Inerrancy Scale (25 Orthodox denominations and also Quakers, who are listed with Mainline Protestants).

5. We calculated two sets of within-state county-level correlations for each state: between the Chaves Inerrancy Scale and the RCMS classification and between the Chaves Inerrancy Scale and the Meier classification (based on the 12 denominations that were included in the 2000 RCMS data-set). For all 50 states, the average within-state county-level correlation was 0.869 between the Chaves Inerrancy Scale and the RCMS classification and 0.761 between the Chaves Inerrancy Scale and the Meier classification, a difference of 0.108, but this disparity was higher in these ten states: AR (0.534), IN (0.303), IA (0.146), MD (0.115), MI (0.292), NY (0.421), OR (0.589), SD (0.163), WA (0.344), and WY (0.165).

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