



Eurel

Measuring religious belonging in France

General presentation

It is forbidden, in France, to differentiate people in a census on the ground of their religious belonging. There is, therefore, no information concerning religious affiliation in the national censuses, and no information regarding religion can be found on the website of the French National Institute of Economic and Statistical Information (INSEE).

In order to know about religious demography, one has to rely on information found in studies carried out by specialised institutes. These are usually commandeered by private collectives.

Legal Aspect

It is forbidden in France to differentiate people on the ground of their religious belonging in a census since 1872. Additionally, Article 8 of the Law of January 6, 1978, forbids to ‘collect any personal data showing, directly or indirectly, racial or ethnic origin, political, religious or philosophical opinions, belonging to trade unions – or related to health or sexual behaviour of individuals (*Loi Informatique et liberté*, 1978).

The French constitution provides that the State “neither recognises nor funds any religious denomination” (art. 2 de la loi de 1905). The State does not provide any definition of what is or could be religious belonging, since this is not used for any State funding or subsidies.

Sociological Aspect

Since it is impossible to gather data concerning personal convictions, religious belonging or adherence, no information regarding religion, but only general demographic information can be found on the website of the French National Institute of Economic and Statistical Information (INSEE). It also publishes thematic studies concerning religion, a detailed study concerning religious practice in 1998 ([Xavier Niel, *État de la pratique religieuse en France*](#)), and a more general presentation of religious practice in 2008 (chapter 8.5 – [INSEE statistics 2008](#)), but these studies only provide the general level of religious practice, it is not broken down according to religious groups and, therefore, does not provide information on belonging. A new website, the *portail de la*

statistique publique (portal of public statistics), has been set up upon demand of the Conseil national de l'Information statistique to allow public access to all statistical information provided by public institutions, but no information concerning religious belonging can be found there either.

It is possible, under strict conditions regarding anonymity, if all legal conditions described in the 1978 law are respected, and if the *Commission nationale informatique et liberté* (CNIL) gives its authorisation, to carry out surveys regarding religion. Thus, the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) occasionally also offers information on religion. The July 2008 edition of their journal *Populations et Société* dealt with religious practice ([pratique religieuse](#)). In 2008, INED also led an important survey on trajectories and origins of individuals ([Trajectoires et origines](#)), its report contains has a chapter dealing with religious belonging. Besides, there are websites providing the results concerning France for two European surveys: the European Values Study (EVS – [valeurs-France](#)), and the International Social Survey programme ([ISSP-France](#)). Any other information regarding religious affiliation is found through surveys carried out by **specialised institutes**, generally at the request of newspapers, magazines, religious groups, political parties, or associations. The results of these surveys are usually available, totally or partly, on the polling organisation's websites: CSA, IFOP, BVA, TNS-SOFRES, IPSOS¹.

Finding data concerning religious belonging only via private polls raises two main points of difficulty. Firstly, since these surveys are carried out by private businesses for customers who pay for the results, access is only possible to the display of the final results, never to the raw data. Besides, only the information that these polling organisation choose to broadcast is available. The second problem is that, given the cost of such surveys, the samples are usually kept as small as possible. This consequently provides broad outlines, but not precisely defined information. Namely, the results concerning small religious groups (Jews, Buddhists, Orthodox Christians for example) are either non-existent or unreliable. Information concerning religious belonging, most commonly, is distributed between "Catholic", "Non-religious", and "other religions".

Altogether, incomplete data and lack of precision provide only a fuzzy picture of religious belonging in France.

Besides, one also knows that the way a question is asked in a survey, the way it is delivered, and the terminology used (classically, "which religion do you belong to" does not bring the same results as "Do you belong to a religion, and if so, which one") can trigger different outcomes. In France, there is no real consensus between the different polling organisations as to how to ask questions about religious belonging, which may differ from one survey to

¹ A detailed list can be found on the Eurel website, <http://www.eurel.info/spip.php?rubrique351>.

another, rendering the results even more difficult to interpret. One can only observe a shift from using the terms “religious belonging” to “religious affiliation”, which probably reflects better people’s contemporary fuzzy and shifting relationships to religions².

A general observation can be made, nevertheless: the information gathered in France concerning religious affiliation seems strongly the result of history.

France is historically a predominantly Catholic country, and sociology of religion was at first led in France on Catholicism, often by Catholic scholars (Gabriel Le Bras, Fernand Boulard, François-André Isambert, Jean-Pierre Terrenoire). As a result of these two sets of influence, the question of religious belonging is related to some kind of a “Catholic” understanding of religion, in which collective ritual practice is the most important factor in measuring people’s link with religion. As an illustration, an IFOP survey of 2011 [*Les Français et la croyance religieuse*](#) (the French and religious beliefs) provided the following detailed results (most recent such data available):

| Question: “Are you, personally ... ?” | (%) |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| • TOTAL Catholic | 61 |
| —practising Catholic | 15 |
| —non-practising Catholic | 46 |
| • Protestant | 4 |
| • Muslim | 7 |
| • Jew | 1 |
| • Other religions | 2 |
| • No religion | 25 |
| TOTAL | 100 |

The results provided call for several comments. Firstly, the religious belonging is provided according to an order which is not explained, but is neither alphabetical nor the ranking by decreasing importance. One can only notice, nevertheless, the importance given to Christian groups over others, since Protestants are listed before Muslims although being a smaller group. Listed under “other religion” are the groups which count less than 1% of members, which would include denominations as diverse as Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs... Catholics are the only religious group broken into “practising” and “non-practising”. The survey, given the phrasing of the question, obviously rests heavily on self-perception. All these comments would probably be applicable to all other survey results, and illustrate the way society, and some sociologists (those who are not specialists of religion) view religious belonging.

A final point of concern is the diminishing importance of religion, both in terms of membership and in terms of impact. This leads to a diminution of surveys

² See Jean-Paul Willaime, « sociologie de l’affiliation », in Francis Messner (dir.), *L’affiliation religieuse en Europe*, Strasbourg : Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2017, p. 13-25.

concerning religion or taking religion into account: on the one hand, there is a decrease of possible funders, since religious groups have declining income. On the other hand, the religious factor becoming less likely to influence people's opinions, surveys which used to provide information linked to religion (very often at the occasion of elections) nowadays tend to leave this factor out. The surveys taking religion into account, whether as a direct object or as a factor of influence, are nowadays less numerous.

Several scholars have already voiced out their concern about this lack of information, claiming that times have changed and that the regulations of the French government concerning data on religious affiliation should be changed. We can only hope that their demand will be heard.

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