Americans and Religious Diversity

The United States is perhaps the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Due to immigration and lively religious competition, the United States has grown immensely in its religious diversity over the course of its history. How do Americans think and feel about religious diversity? On the one hand, religious freedom and diversity are in general highly valued by Americans. On the other, many Americans see the United States as a “Christian Nation” and feel threatened by growing religious diversity. Let’s use the Association of Religion Data Archives website to examine some empirical data on attitudes toward religious diversity and toward growing numbers of non-Christian Americans.

Open your web browser and go to the homepage for the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.theARDA.com).

The Faith Matters Survey, conducted in 2006 and 2011, is a valuable resource for examining Americans’ attitudes about religious diversity. It is a nationally representative survey of over 4,000 American adults. Search for the 2011 Faith Matters Survey from the ARDA homepage. Search for it by typing “Faith Matters Survey 2011” into the search field in the upper right corner.

Let’s search for a variable that would allow us to look at Americans’ attitudes toward religious diversity. Using the grey “Search” tab, look for the word “diversity” in the survey.

One of the variables that you should find is number 299, called “RELDIV11.” It asks respondents whether they agree with the statement: “Religious diversity has been good for America.”

1. What percent of respondents “agree strongly” with this variable’s statement? What percent “agree somewhat”?

2. As you can imagine, whether someone agrees with this statement might depend on things about that person’s background. What kind of variables or factors do you think might affect how someone would respond to this question?
Let’s use the ARDA’s online data analysis tool (“Analyze results) to look at some variables that could predict how someone would respond.

3. Does age make much of a difference? Are younger or older individuals more likely to believe that religious diversity is good?

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4. What about education? Why do you think education has the effect it does?

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5. Briefly describe any trends you find interesting with regard to gender, political party, or race.

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6. As you can imagine, one’s religious background has an impact on how he or she views religious diversity. Describe that impact. Which religious group is most likely to value religious diversity? Which is least likely?

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What kind of attitudes do Americans have toward religious minorities themselves, particularly toward non-Christians? Let’s find a question on the survey that measures the extent to which Americans might be bothered by Muslims or Buddhists building a place of worship in their community. Search for the word “bother” in the survey.

You should find variable numbers 306 and 307, called “BLDBDH11” and “BLDMUS11”, asking about Buddhists or Muslims building a temple or mosque.
7. What percent of respondents respond that Buddhists building a temple in their community would “bother you a lot”, “bother you a little”, “not bother you”, or “be something you welcome”?

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8. Before you click on “Analyze results” to see how respondents differ on their response to this question based on certain background characteristics, make a few predictions about what you expect to see. Remember, the variables include age, education, gender, income, race, and religion.

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9. Now look at the results. Were your hypotheses right? Which variables matter most? Which ones matter least? Why do you think this is the case?

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10. Turning variable 307, what percent of respondents respond that Muslims building a mosque in their community would “bother you a lot”, “bother you a little”, “not bother you”, or “be something you welcome”?

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11. After clicking on the “Analyze Results” link, what characteristics seem to influence attitudes toward Muslims building a mosque? Are these similar to your findings reported above concerning a Buddhist temple? How are the different? Why do you think there are differences in how Americans respond?

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Religious congregations can also respond differently to religious diversity. Go to the Data Archive on the ARDA and scroll down and select “Instructional Data Files” once there. Click on the “National Congregations Study, Cumulative Dataset” link.

Now, click on the grey Search tab and enter “service project” in the search bar. Find variable 441 named “INTFTHWK”.

12. This variable asks US congregations if they have participated in a service project or volunteer activity with people from another faith. What percent of congregations report having worked with people from another faith?

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13. After clicking the “Analyze Results” link, compare the percent of congregations answering “yes” in the 2012 survey to the percent answering “yes” in the 2006 survey. Why is there such a difference between survey years?

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14. Choose a couple of other variables to compare. Are congregations in different regions of the country more or less likely to partner outside their faith? Does the political or theological ideology of a congregation matter? What about religious tradition or size of the congregation? Pick two variables and report on if and how they matter. Then, describe why this might be so.

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15. How might congregational responses to partnering with other religious faiths influence religious diversity in the United States? How might it influence the views of individuals who attend those congregations?

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