

Census will yield no data on religion, but it wasn't always that way

WASHINGTON - When Americans fill out their census forms April 1, none of the 10 questions will ask about their religion.

That's because the U.S. Census Bureau has been forbidden by law since 1976 from including any mandatory questions about a person's "religious beliefs or membership in a religious body."

Instead it has collected data on places of worship and other establishments operated by religious bodies through its annual survey of county business patterns, which reports on most of the nation's economic activity.

A recent report prepared by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life quoted Vincent P. Barabba, Census Bureau director from 1973-76 and 1979-81, about why a religion question would not be included in the 1980 census.

"The decision not to add this question is based essentially on the fact that asking such a question in the decennial census, in which replies are mandatory, would appear to infringe upon the traditional separation of church and state," Barabba said in April 1976.

"Regardless of whether this perception is legally sound," he added, "controversy on this very sensitive issue could affect public cooperation in the census and thus jeopardize the success of the census."

That view became law when Congress amended the basic census law in October 1976, permitting the U.S. Census Bureau to ask questions about religious practices only on a voluntary basis in some population and household surveys, although it has not opted to do that.

The Census Bureau does publish information about religious affiliation and religious

organizations in its annual Statistical Abstract of the United States, but the information is gathered from noncensus sources, such as the American Religious Identification Survey and church-published directories.

The first U.S. census in 1790 looked only at population, dividing the nearly 4 million residents of the young nation into five categories - free white males 16 and older; free white males under 16; free white females; all other free persons (by sex and color); and slaves.

Beginning in 1850, census takers started asking clergy and other religious leaders about their houses of worship, seating capacity and property values. The 1850 census found there were 18 principal denominations represented in the U.S., a number that grew to 145 by 1890.

In 1906, the first Census of Religious Bodies took place in the United States as a stand-alone survey conducted through questionnaires mailed to religious leaders.

In addition to questions from the earlier religious surveys, the Census of Religious Bodies asked the amount of congregational debt, the language in which services were conducted, the number of ministers and their salaries, demographic characteristics of congregation members, and information about church-run schools and their teachers.

The Census of Religious Bodies was held every 10 years until 1946. But the results of the 1946 census were not published because Congress did not appropriate funds for its tabulation. By 1956, Congress had eliminated the religion census altogether.

Robert W. Burgess, an economist and statistician who was director of the Census Bureau from 1953 to 1961, joined some researchers and Catholic leaders in a campaign to put a religion question back into the 1960 census but was ultimately unsuccessful.

"At this time a considerable number of persons would be reluctant to answer such a question," Burgess said in 1957. "Under the circumstances, it was not believed that the value of the statistics based on this question would be great enough to justify overriding such an attitude."

But that same year, the bureau's Current Population Survey, which provides data on the nation's labor force, included a few questions on religious affiliation, marking the first time that individuals rather than religious leaders were asked about religion.

Although the Census Bureau was able to produce from that data a set of tables showing intermarriage, fertility, employment, income, urban residence and education among various religious faiths, most of the data was never published, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life report.

Census takers in some other English-speaking countries have discovered in the last decade that asking a religion question can yield some unusual results.

An international campaign, conducted primarily by e-mail, urged those taking the census in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada to give their religion as "Jedi," from the popular "Star Wars" series of movies.

The argument was that enough such answers could result in Jedi becoming "an officially recognized religion, which would be a laugh," as one widely circulated e-mail put it. It was also, the e-mail said, "a bit of an experiment in the power of e-mail."

The Australian Bureau of Statistics warned before its 2001 census, for example, that false answers of "Jedi" to the religion question could affect decisions by religious groups on what facilities they might open or social services they might provide.

Nevertheless more than 70,000 Australians declared themselves to be Jedis in the 2001 census, as did 53,000 people - or 1.5 percent of the population - in New Zealand. About 390,000 people listed their religion as Jedi in the 2001 census for England and Wales; in Scotland the figure was a reported 14,000.

So far none of those jurisdictions has declared Jedi an official religion; most lumped those answers into the category of "atheist" or "not defined."