

Religion and Metropolitan Status in the United States

Dale E. Jones

Because the U.S. Religion Census reports information at the county level, this provides a ready source of information for each of the nation's metropolitan areas. The government uses counties (and their equivalents, such as Louisiana's parishes) to define metropolitan areas based on population clusters and commuting patterns. By using those definitions, it is easy to add a religious perspective to other metropolitan area data, such as poverty levels or housing values.

In March, 2020, 384 metropolitan areas were defined for the United States by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Another 558 micropolitan areas were also named at that time. Religion data is available for each of these County Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs). With this data, we can discover trends that are often hidden in national totals.

This chapter will focus on the data from the U.S. Religion Census, organized by metropolitan size and status. That is, we will examine the religious makeup of different-sized metropolitan and

micropolitan areas as well as the religious makeup of areas outside any metropolitan or micropolitan area.

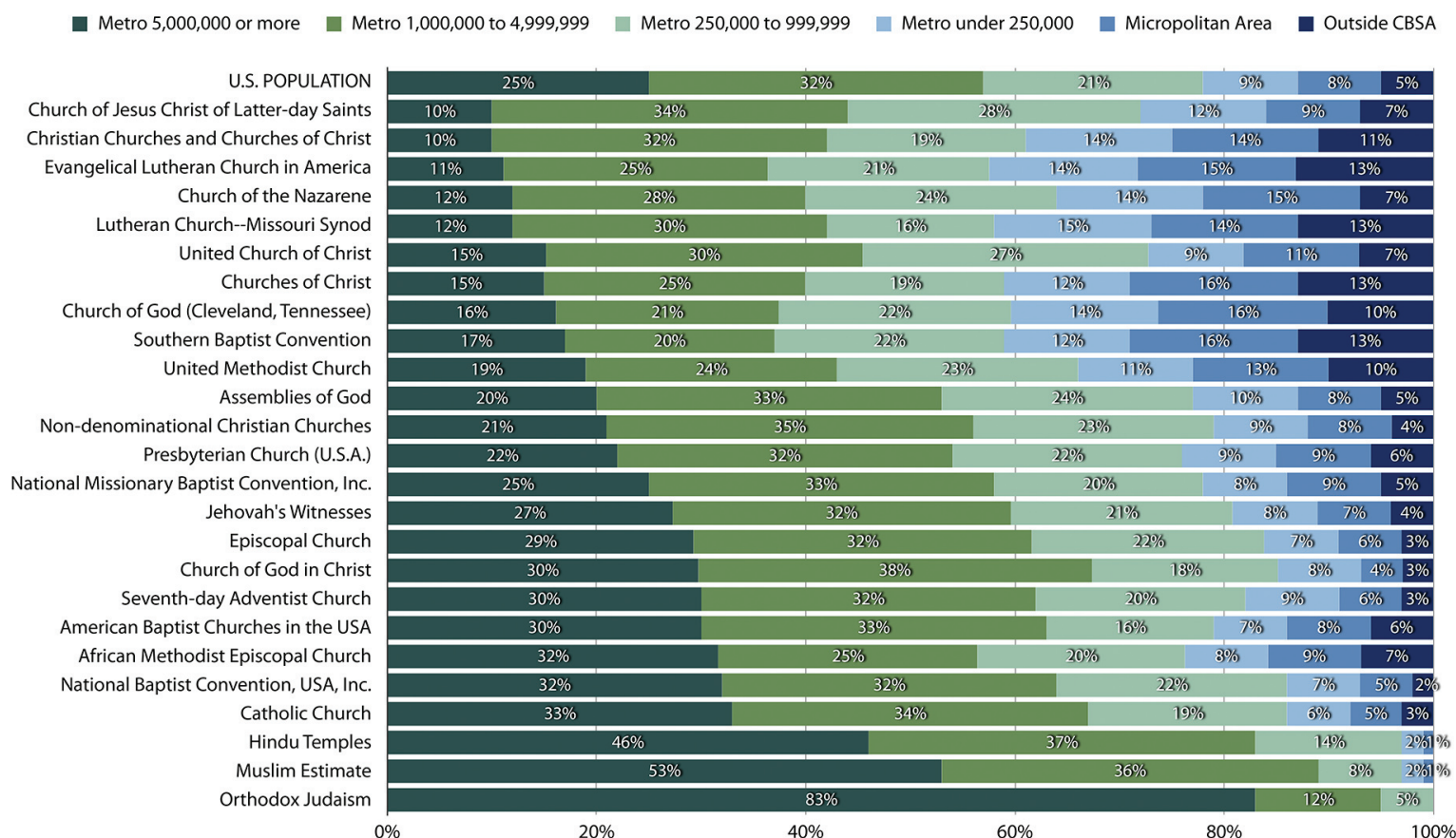
Large Metro vs. Rural Concentrations

Essentially, any county with an urban area of at least 10,000 people is assigned to a CBSA by the OMB, along with any neighboring counties with a strong commuting tie to that county.¹ This means that any county outside of a CBSA can be loosely defined as rural.

It will not be surprising that fully one-third of Amish adherents are in counties not classified as either metropolitan or micropolitan. But the two largest Lutheran bodies also have a higher concentration of people in those rural counties than they have in the nation's largest metropolitan areas (see Figure 1).

¹ A more detailed definition was available online at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro/about.html> as of July 27, 2023.

Figure 1: Adherents in the 25 Largest Religious Bodies, Classified by Metropolitan Status and Size, 2020



Some bodies, such as Orthodox Judaism or Islam, have more than half their adherents in metropolitan areas of at least 5 million population. Nearly half of Hindu Temple adherents are found in the same areas.

One-third of Catholics are found in the largest metros.

For comparison, 25% of Americans live in metropolitan areas with at least 5 million population. Only 5% of Americans live in counties not assigned to either metropolitan or micropolitan areas.

This means that adherents in the two largest Lutheran bodies, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, each make up less than half the national population concentration in America's largest metros and make up more than twice the national population concentration in the rural counties. In fact, both these groups have a higher percentage of their adherents in rural areas than in the nation's largest metros.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church has traditionally served the African American population. Its adherents are more highly concentrated in the biggest metros (32% are found there) than the national population is (25% of Americans live in these metros). But this body also has a higher-than-average presence in rural counties. This somewhat mirrors the concentration of the non-Hispanic Black population in the large cities of the North and Midwest along with its concentration in the rural South.

Other bodies with a larger than average presence in the nation's largest metros are the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Episcopal

Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses. All of these are also under-represented in the nation's rural counties.

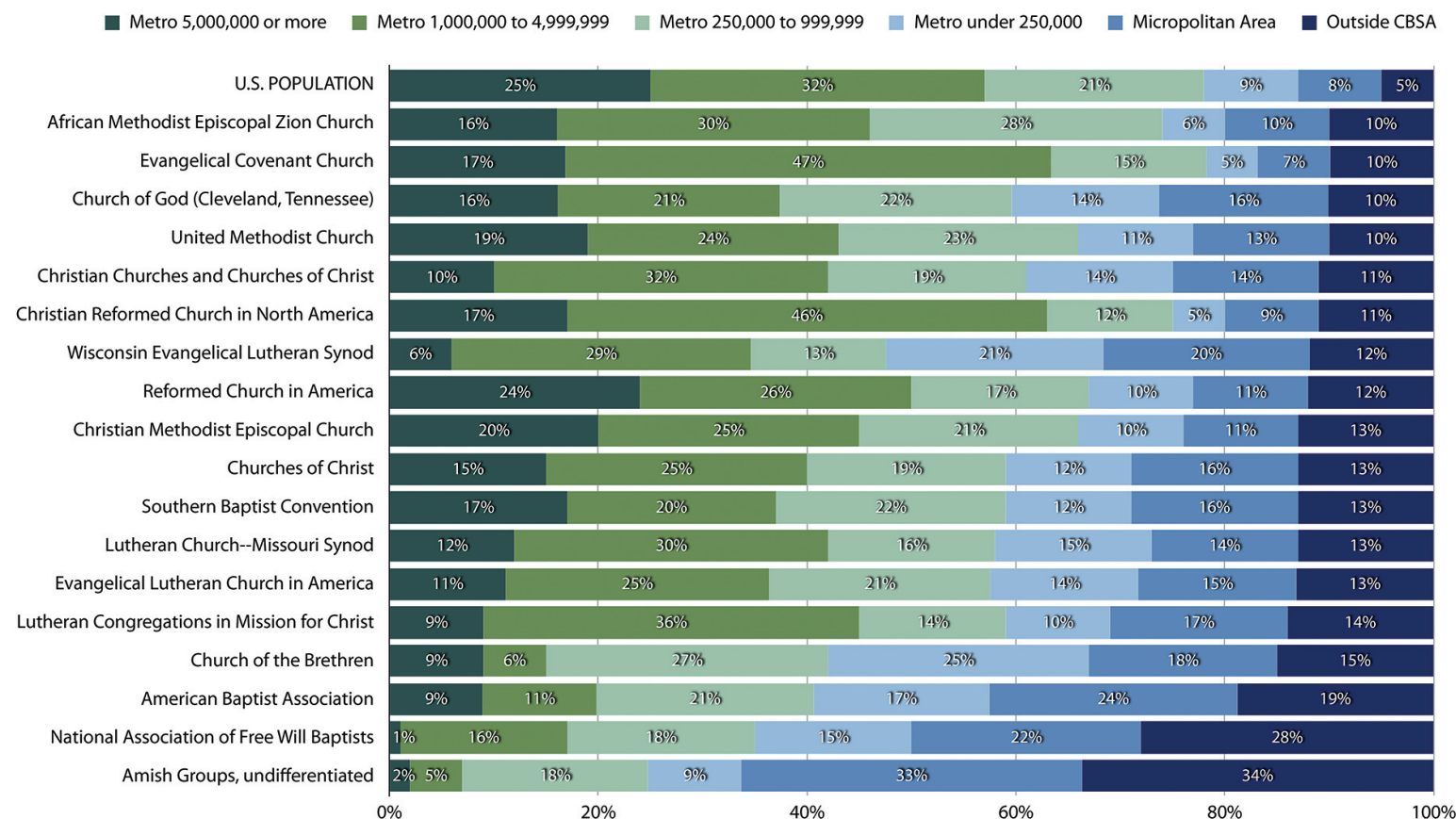
Both the United Methodist Church and the Church of the Nazarene have a strong presence throughout the Midwest, increasing their rural percentages. The Southern Baptist Convention and other denominations with a strong Southern presence, such as the Church of God (Cleveland) and Church of Christ, have similar patterns.

The United Church of Christ is especially strong in the New England states, an area without a 5 million population metropolitan area. This affects their denominational percentage in the largest metros. That is, since they are strong in an area without a very large metro area, their percentage of adherents in such metros is lower than the national average of 25%. Likewise, the strength of the Latter-day Saints in the mountain states, and especially in the Salt Lake City area, lowers its ratio of large metro adherents.

Largely Rural Denominations

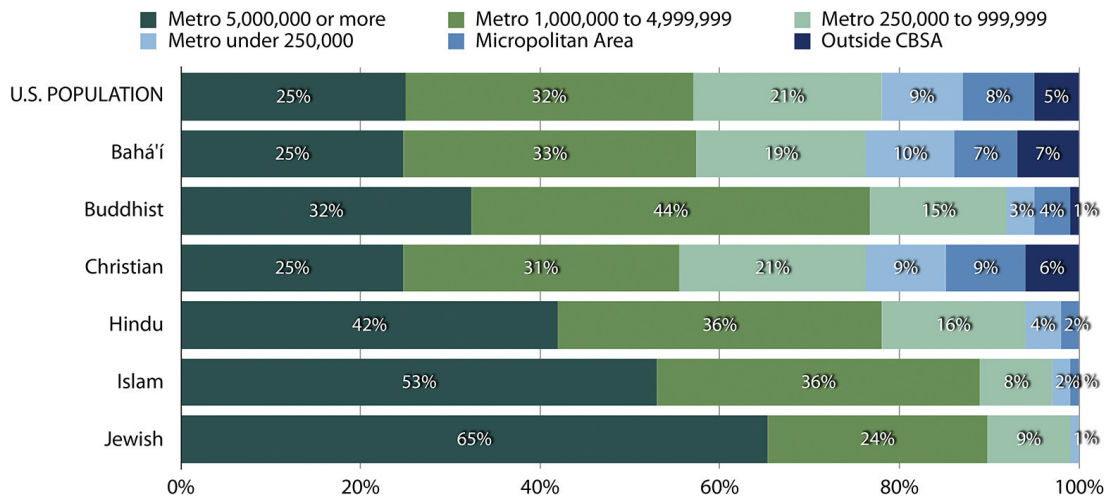
There are 32 religious bodies in the 2020 U.S. Religion Census reporting a larger proportion of rural adherents than the Amish, at 34 percent. But only two of these, the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, and the Association of Free Lutherans, have more than 10 thousand adherents nationally. Of those bodies with at least 100 thousand adherents, eighteen have at least 10% of their adherents in rural counties, at least twice the ratio of the total population in those counties (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Religious Bodies of at Least 100,000 Adherents that are Concentrated in Rural Areas, 2020



Note that some of these groups were also listed in Figure 1.

Figure 3: World Religions Classified by Metropolitan Status and Size, 2020



Two additional Lutheran groups, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, show up on this list, besides the two mentioned earlier. Each of them also has less than half the adherent percentage of the national population percentage in the largest metro areas.

Likewise, two additional African American bodies are on this list, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. They are better represented in the largest metros than any of the Lutheran groups, but still don't reach the national population percentage.

Two additional Baptist bodies, the National Association of Free Will Baptists and the American Baptist Association, also appear on this list, with three to four times the rural concentration of the nation as a whole.

Two reformed bodies, the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America, have twice the nation's rural concentration, but the first has adherents nearly equal to the national population average in the largest metro areas.

Observations like these invite further study. For instance, does the ratio of adherents in large metros or in rural counties affect the

practices of various religious groups? Would this difference help to explain any of the tensions sometimes reported between or among any of the groups?

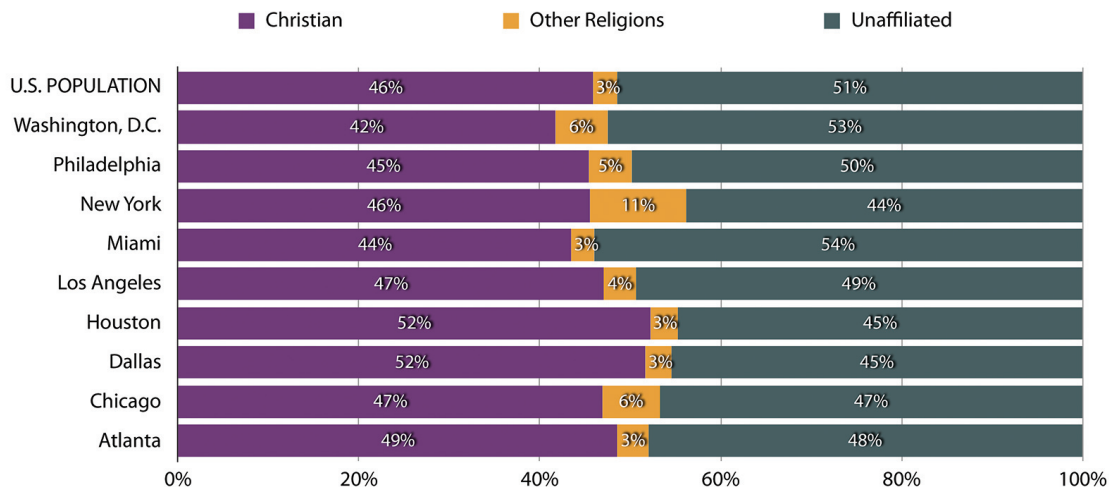
Large Metros Tend to be Less Christian Than the Rest of the Nation

Non-Christian religions are clustered in the largest cities (see Figure 3). Another chapter in this volume addresses this in greater detail, but the fact is confirmed in this related study.

Every world religion reporting adherents in the U.S. Religion Census had at least 25% of its adherents located in metros of 5 million population, equal to the national population average in metros of that size, and two had more than twice that ratio. Since Christians are the most populous religious tradition throughout the country, it is not surprising that their proportions come close to the population ratios in the various community types. It is more surprising that the Bahá'í also match those proportions closely.

In 2020, nine metros had a population of at least 5 million (see Figure 4). All but one of them (Miami) had a higher concentration

Figure 4: Adherents of World Religions and Those Unaffiliated in Metros with at Least 5 Million People



Note that the official names for each metro have been truncated for this figure, listing only the largest city.

of “Other religion” adherents than the national average of 2.7%, with three of the metros more than doubling that ratio.

While the Christian population is significant in the Miami metropolitan area, it is even larger in seven of the other eight metros with at least 5 million people. However, of these nine metros, Miami has the largest concentration of people not affiliated with any religious body. This effectively reduces the percentages of the metro population who are affiliated, including the non-Christian religion adherents.

Four of these nine large metros have a smaller percentage of Christians than the national average of 45.9%. Of course, Christianity still claims by far the largest proportion of religious adherents within every metropolitan area of any size, even in these large metros.

Again, these insights raise questions. Does the smaller ratio of Christian adherents in major metros affect the attitudes of persons in less populated areas toward these large population centers? Or does the higher concentration of additional religions help to spread an attitude of tolerance to those areas without such a presence?

Large Metros Tend to Have Catholic or Conservative Protestant Pluralities

The Christian bodies in the U.S. Religion Census can be combined into a smaller number of more generic categories: Catholics, Orthodox, Mainline Protestants, Conservative Protestants (often called Evangelicals), Latter-day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Other Christian, which we have done here for this part of the analysis (see Map 1).

Among the nine largest metropolitan areas, Catholics are the largest religious tradition in six and Conservative Protestants are the largest in three (see Table 1). Of the 56 metro areas with at least one million people, 33 have Catholic pluralities and 22 have Conservative Protestant pluralities. Only Salt Lake City does not follow that pattern with its largest group being Latter-day Saints.

Nearly all the mid-size metropolitan areas, those with at least 250 thousand people but less than a million, have Catholic or Conservative Protestant pluralities. The only mid-size metros to have a Mainline Protestant plurality are Des Moines, Iowa, and York, Pennsylvania. Three mid-size metros in Utah and Idaho are Latter-day Saints strongholds.

Map 1: Largest Religious Tradition in Metropolitan Areas of 1,000,000 or More:
Based on Number of Adherents Reported, 2020

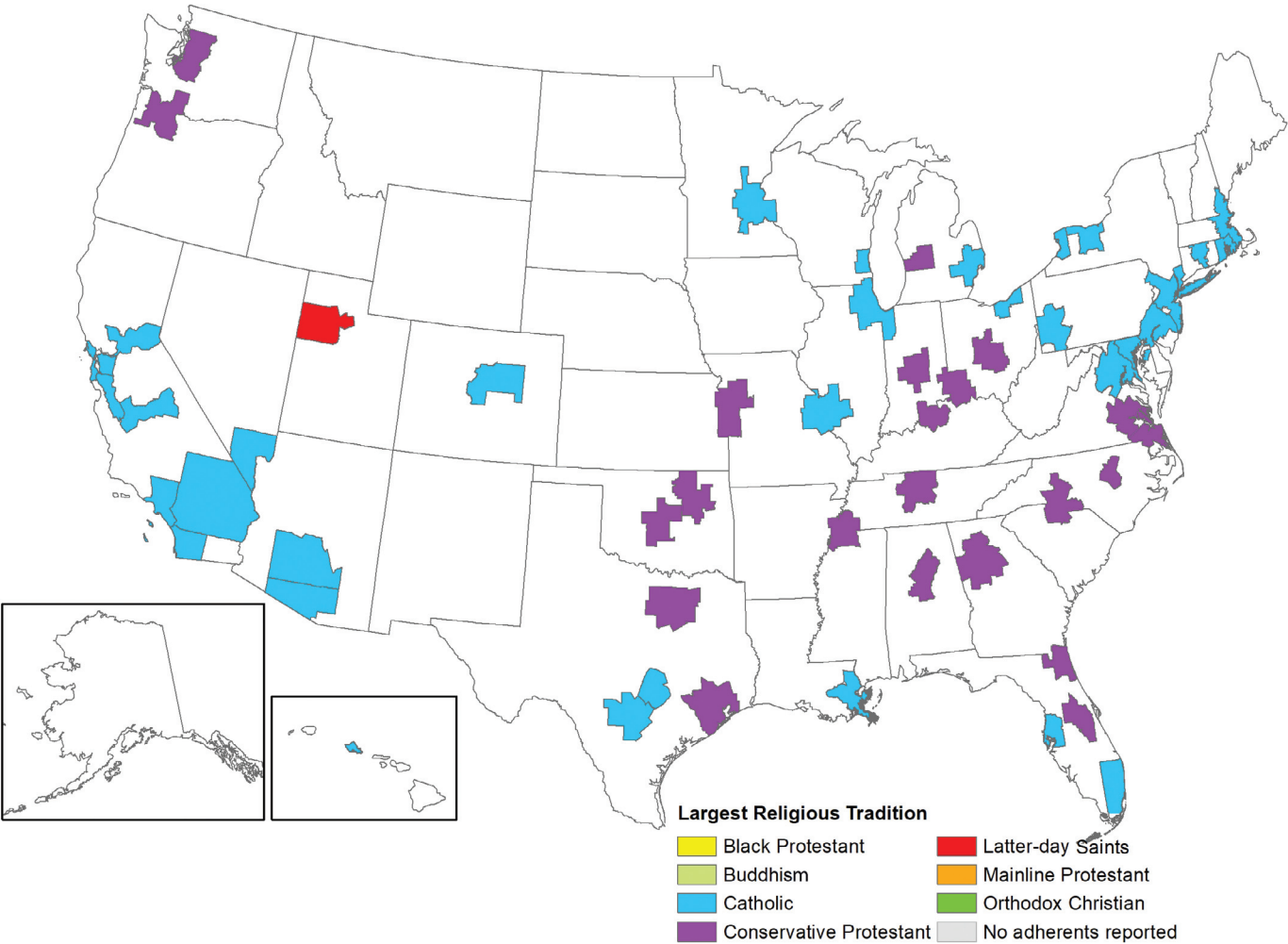


Table 1: Count of Largest Religious Tradition by Metropolitan Size

Metro Population	Total Number of Areas	Catholic Areas	Conservative Protestant Areas	Mainline Protestant Areas	Latter-day Saints Areas	Black Protestant Areas	Orthodox Christian Areas	Buddhist Areas
5,000,000 or More	9	6	3					
1,000,000 to 4,999,999	47	27	19		1			
250,000 to 999,999	135	61	69	2	3			
Under 250,000	193	64	114	10	5			
Micropolitan Areas	543	142	349	41	11			
Counties Outside CBSAs	1,301	226	800	222	42	5	4	2

Outside metropolitan and micropolitan areas, Catholics and Conservative Protestants still dominate many rural counties. However, Mainline Protestants are the largest tradition in much of the Midwest, Orthodox churches are the largest in several of Alaska's divisions, Black Protestants are the largest tradition in five Southern counties, and the Latter-day Saints in many Western counties. Two Colorado counties have more Buddhists than any Christian tradition.

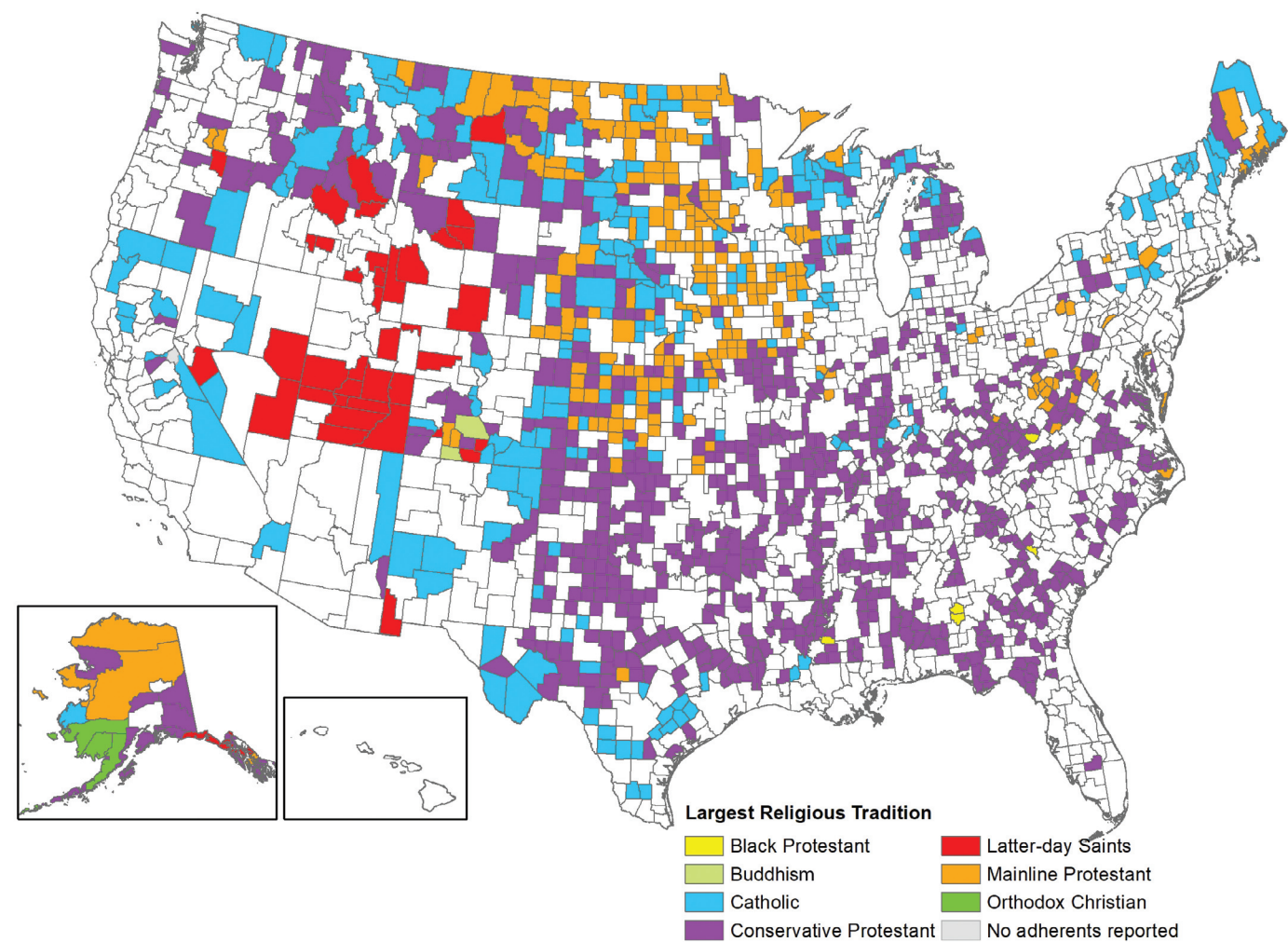
While there does appear to be more diversity outside metropolitan areas, it is also much easier for a small group to dominate in an area with a small population. As the population grows, the area

attracts more people from the rest of the country, and the nationally dominant groups may be more likely to be the new arrivals.

More Detail Available

Individual denominations or related groups can be analyzed as well with the U.S. Religion Census data. None of the Eastern Orthodox bodies included in the Religion Census is large enough or rural enough to have shown up in the previous charts. But as a family, they comprise well over half a million adherents.

Map 2: Largest Religious Tradition in Counties Outside Metropolitan and Micropolitan Areas: Based on Number of Adherents Reported, 2020



Grouping the 15 Eastern Orthodox bodies into one metropolitan/micropolitan report demonstrates that this group is overwhelmingly found in the country’s major metropolitan areas (see Figure 5).

Similar studies can be done for any family of religious bodies or for individual groups. The U.S. Religion Census provides religious congregation and adherent information for hundreds of religious bodies, and this information is easily compiled into information for each of the nation’s metropolitan areas.

Further details can be found online at <https://www.usreligioncensus.org/>, with links to additional reports available for metropolitan and micropolitan areas.

Figure 5: Adherents in 15 Eastern Orthodox Bodies Classified by Metropolitan Status and Size

