

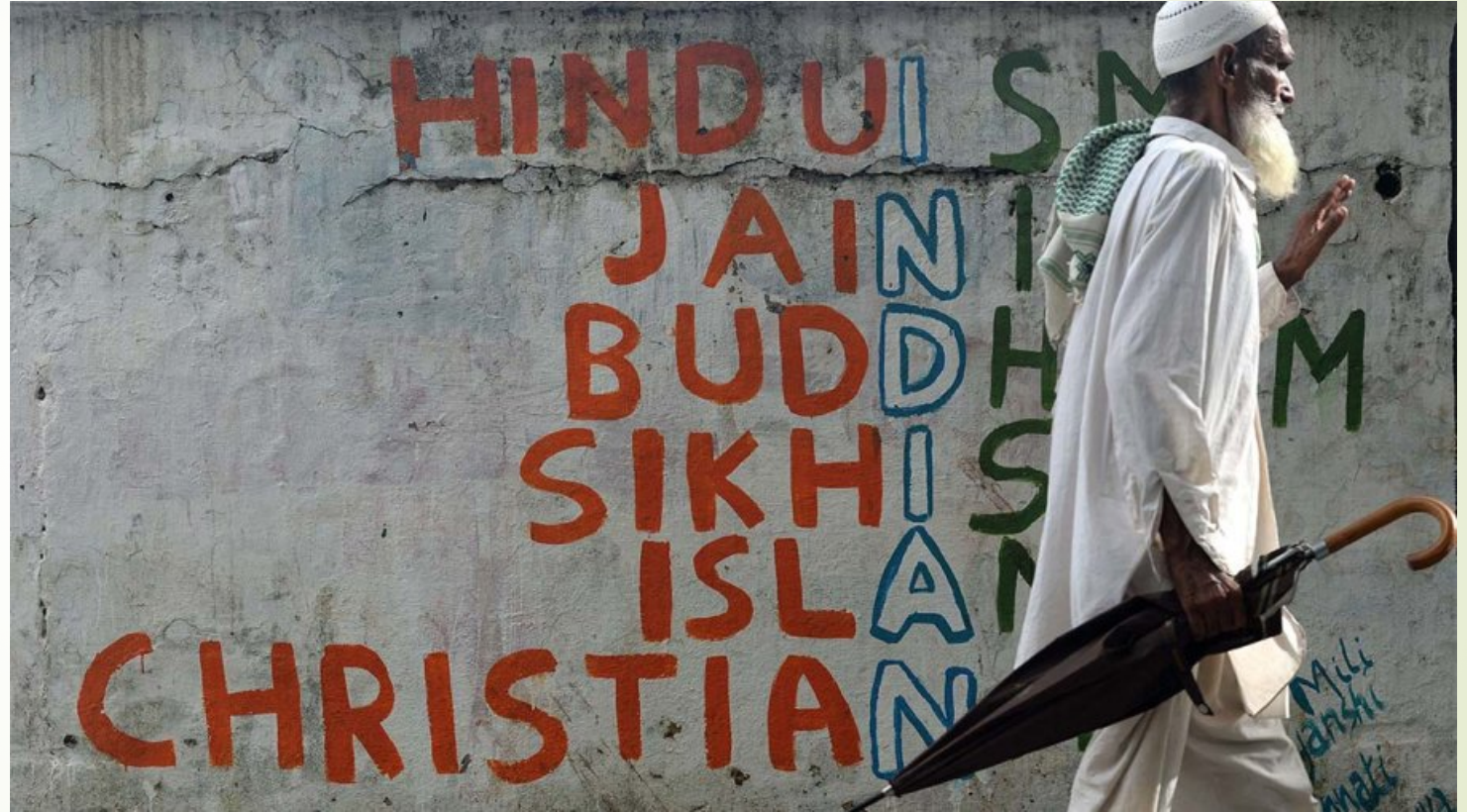


Census and Other Controversies in Counting Scientologists

Massimo Introvigne
European Association for the Study of Religions Conference
Tartu, Estonia, 25 June 2019

An International Problem

- From Eastern Asia to United States and Europe, scholars of new religious movements suspect that members of recently established religions are under-counted in censuses and census-like reports. They may have a different understanding of the word “religion” and report that they have “no religion,” meaning “no *traditional* religion”



An Example: Jeungsanism in Korea



Kang (left) as played by senior Korean actor Jeon Un (1938-2005) in the 1984 movie *The Road to Peace and Harmony*

- Kang Il-Sun was known to his disciples as Kang Jeungsan (1871-1909) and recognized as the incarnation of the Supreme God of the Universe, Sangje
- Kang did not appoint a successor, and his movement generated more than 120 different new religions in Korea
- The largest branch originates from Jo Jeongsan (1895-1958), who was not a direct disciple of Kang Jeungsan but claimed to have received a revelation from him

Daesoon Jinrihoe

- ▶ Park Wudang (1917-1995, or 1918-1996 according to the solar calendar) reorganized Jo's branch of the movement under the name Daesoon Jinrihoe in 1969, and led it to become the largest Korean new religion



Success in Korea



- Statistics of Korean new religions are a matter of controversy since, as a specialist of the field such as Donald Baker clarified, censuses and media surveys are structured in a way inducing members of new religions not to declare their affiliation. New religions' own statistics may perhaps be inflated, but they are closer to reality than the censuses

Daesoon Jinrihoe: How Many Members?



- The Korean census in 1995 found 62,000 Koreans who indicated Daesoon Jinrihoe as their religious affiliation, and they were even less in the census of 2005. However, in addition to five large temples, Daesoon Jinrihoe maintains 200 Fellowship Buildings, and more than 2,000 smaller Centers for the Propagation of Virtue, all over South Korea.

This is a typical case of census fallacy. The movement's own figure of six millions may include also sympathizers, but seems to Baker (and me) more believable than the census



Rigal-Cellard vs Kent

- In January 2019, senior French scholar, Bernadette Rigal-Cellard published a long article on Scientology in California. She noted that, "I did my longer research just one month after [Canadian scholar and anti-cultist] Stephen Kent was quoted by Geoff McMaster in the University of Alberta online journal, as affirming that: '[o]nce thriving Church of Scientology faces extinction.' Yet, according to my own observation over the last few years, and in particular in 2016 and 2018, the Church has truly been experiencing expansion"

Scientology and Statistics

- ▶ How many Scientologists are there? Is Scientology gaining or losing members? The answer depends on how a "Scientologist" is defined. Scientology's constituency is made of concentric circles. A core circle of "members" regards Scientology as its primary religious identity and devotes to the religion a substantial amount of time. Another circle includes those who visit Scientology center ("orgs") with some regularity. And there is a larger circle of those who only visit an org occasionally





But Is This Unique to Scientology?

- There are problems of defining “members” peculiar to Scientology. But the definition is not easy with respect to many other religions
- The Catholic Church releases world statistics based on those who have been baptized. However, many leave the church after baptism or become inactive. In Italy, 97,9% of the population has been baptized into the Roman Catholic Church, but those regularly attending Mass are around 18%. The Italian Catholic Church itself, since the year 2000, acknowledged that its official statistics refer to a “baptismal community,” while the “eucharistic community” (i.e. those in fact attending Mass) is much smaller

ECONOMIC IMPACT of the CHURCH of SCIENTOLOGY

on Clearwater, Florida & Surrounding Areas

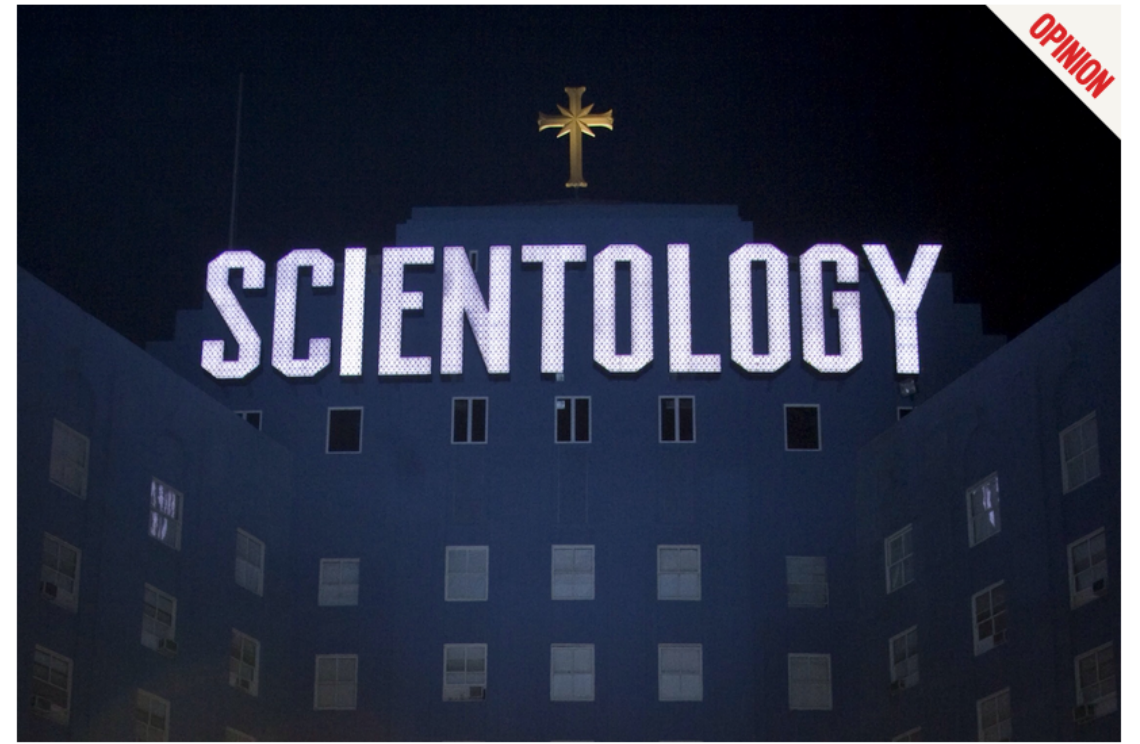


Some Experiments

- Even if an agreement would be reached on how to define a “member” of Scientology, counting would not be easy. In 2006, the Italian Church of Scientology called an internal census, whose results were made public in 2011. In 2014, Scientology sponsored a study by Florida State University scholars on the economic impact of its headquarters on the Clearwater area, showing that the number of Scientologists moving there because of the church’s presence or visiting was both substantial and growing. Not unexpectedly, anti-cultists dismissed the report as propaganda, although the authors were respected scholars

Fake News: Misusing Census Data

- A completely different matter is the fake news spread by some anti-cult sources, and repeated uncritically by mainline media, Wikipedia, and even respectable scholars. A case in point is the article “Growth and Challenges of Scientology” by Brian Schmied, published by the *International Policy Digest* in 2013. Schmied writes that “the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) found a strong decline from 55,000 to 45,000 members between 1990 and 2001”



Wikimedia

CULTURE + RELIGION / 16 JUL 2013

Brian Schmied

Growth and Challenges for Scientology



Misinterpreting Data

- Schmied links to an anti-Scientology Web site, which links in turn to the ARIS table. However, when reading the table, one discovers that Schmied had it all wrong. In fact, the table shows exactly the contrary of what he claims. The figure of 45,000 members refer to 1990 and the one of 55,000 members to 2001. Schmied should have mentioned “a strong growth” rather than “a strong decline.” Unfortunately, Schmied keeps being quoted. Even a senior scholar, Hugh Urban, mentioned Schmied as if he was a reliable source

No. 67. Self-Described Religious Identification of Adult Population: 1990 and 2001

[In thousands (175,440 represents 175,440,000). The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2001 was based on a random digit-dialed telephone survey of 50,281 American residential households in the continental U.S.A (48 states). Respondents were asked to describe themselves in terms of religion with an open-ended question. Interviewers did not prompt or offer a suggested list of potential answers. Moreover, the self-description of respondents was not based on whether established religious bodies, institutions, churches, mosques or synagogues considered them to be members. Quite the contrary, the survey sought to determine whether the respondents themselves regarded themselves as adherents of a religious community. Subjective rather than objective standards of religious identification were tapped by the surveys]

Religious group	1990	2001	Religious group	1990	2001
Adult population, total ¹	175,440	207,980	Fundamentalist	27	61
Total Christian	151,496	159,506	Salvation Army	27	25
Catholic	46,004	50,873	Independent Christian Church	25	71
Baptist	33,964	33,830	Total other religions	5,853	7,740
Protestant - no denomination supplied	17,214	4,647	Jewish	3,137	2,831
Methodist/Wesleyan	14,174	14,150	Muslim/Islamic	527	1,104
Lutheran	9,110	9,580	Buddhist	401	1,082
Christian - no denomination supplied	8,073	14,150	Unitarian/Universalist	502	629
Presbyterian	4,985	5,596	Hindu	227	766
Pentecostal/Charismatic	3,191	4,407	Native American	47	103
Episcopalian/Anglican	3,042	3,451	Scientologist	45	55
Mormon/Latter-Day Saints	2,487	2,787	Baha'i	28	84
Churches of Christ	1,769	2,593	Taoist	23	40
Jehovah's Witness	1,381	1,331	New Age	20	68
Seventh-Day Adventist	668	724	Eckankar	18	26
Assemblies of God	660	1,106	Rastafarian	14	11
Holiness/Holy	610	569	Sikh	13	57
Congregational/United Church of Christ	599	1,378	Wiccan	8	134
Church of the Nazarene	549	544	Deity	6	49
Church of God	531	944	Druid	(NA)	33
Orthodox (Eastern)	502	645	Santeria	(NA)	22
Evangelical ²	242	1,032	Pagan	(NA)	140
Mennonite	235	346	Spiritualist	(NA)	116
Christian Science	214	194	Ethical Culture	(NA)	4
Church of the Brethren	206	358	Other unclassified	837	386
Born Again ²	204	56	No religion specified, total	14,331	29,481
Nondenominational ²	195	2,489	Atheist	(NA)	902
Disciples of Christ	144	492	Agnostic	1,186	991
Reformed/Dutch Reform	161	289	Humanist	29	49
Apostolic/New Apostolic	117	254	Secular	(NA)	53
Quaker	67	217	No religion	13,116	27,486
Full Gospel	51	168	Refused to reply to question	4,031	11,246
Christian Reform	40	79			
Foursquare Gospel	28	70			

NA Not available. ¹ Refers to the total number of adults in all fifty states. All other figures are based on projections from surveys conducted in the continental United States (48 states). ² Because of the subjective nature of replies to open-ended question, these categories are the most unstable as they do not refer to clearly identifiable denominations as much as underlying feelings about religion. Thus they may be the most subject to fluctuation over time.

Source: 1990 data, Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, "One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society", 1993; 2001 data, The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, New York, NY, Barry A. Kosmin, Egon Mayer and Ariela Keysar, American Religious Identification Survey, 2001 (copyright).



Problems with Scholars, Too

- In 2017, Urban also mentioned that “the Church’s numbers had plummeted from 55,000 in 2001 to just around 25,000 in 2008.” This was footnoted with a reference to Schmied. However, the reference to “25,000 in 2008” did not come from Schmied. In fact, Schmied wrote that “the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) found a strong decline from 55,000 to 45,000 members between 1990 and 2001, but mysteriously their survey fails to report its findings on minor religions in its 2008 survey”



... and even with *The New York Times*

- Rather than from Schmied, the often cited claim that the American Religious Identification Survey found only 25,000 Scientologists in the U.S., comes from an article in the New York Times written by Fred A. Bernstein in 2010 and claiming that “the American Religious Identification Survey found that the number of Scientologists dropped to 25,000 in 2008 from 55,000 in 2001.” Unfortunately, Wikipedia and several scholarly studies also reported the figure of 25,000 as if it came from ARIS. But it didn't

The New York Times

In Pasadena, a Model for Scientology's Growth Plan

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN NOV. 9, 2010

Whether the church's current membership needs all these new buildings, or can sustain them, is an open question. Mr. Davis said membership is “in the millions,” with one third in the United States. But the American Religious Identification Survey found that the number of American Scientologists dropped to 25,000 in 2008 from 55,000 in 2001.

What ARIS Really Said

11. **New Religious Movements and Other Religions:** *Scientology, New Age, Eckankar, Spiritualist, Unitarian-Universalist, Deist, Wiccan, Pagan, Druid, Indian Religion, Santeria, Rastafarian.*

12. **Nones:** *None, No religion, Humanistic, Ethical Culture, Agnostic, Atheist, Secular.*

NRMs & Other Religions	1,296,000	0.8	1,770,000	0.9	2,804,000	1.2
Nones/No Religion	14,331,000	8.2	29,481,000	14.1	34,169,000	15.0

- In fact, the ARIS *did not* “find” this figure. Its report about 2008 was published in 2009. The number of American Scientologists was not mentioned, but there was nothing “mysterious” about it. The report clearly explained that it no longer counted Scientologists autonomously but included them in a larger category of “new religious movements and other religions.” The general figure for this category was actually growing, from 1.7 in 2001 to 2.8 million in 2008 and one can in fact speculate that Scientology was a component of this growth

The Real Source

2008 ARIS study on Scn membership in US. IMPORTANT DATA

by plockton » Sat Mar 28, 2009 6:16 am

Still, I think the disaggregated data is of interest, and they have published it for the 1990 and 2001 surveys. Thanks to a direct inquiry I made to the research team at ARIS, I was provided with the disaggregated (albeit summary) data for Scientology membership in the 2008 study. PLEASE see my comments after the data before drawing any conclusions; treat these fluctuations with caution:

Self-identified Scientology membership:

1990	45,000
2001	55,000
2008	25,000

- Where did the information of the *New York Times* come from? The source was the message board of an anti-Scientology Web site where, on March 28, 2009, somebody called Plockton claimed he gave a call (or wrote) to the ARIS team and was told that the figure for Scientology was 25,000. However, "Plockton" was also told that these were no reliable data (and this is why they did not publish them). "Plockton" reported: "Should you conclude from this data that Scientology membership has more than halved between 2001 and 2008? NO! Again, there is a significant chance of error ([...]possibly as much as +/- 40%)"



hartley

Enter Patterson

[added Jan 2011] The ARIS 2008 figure the OP posted is now 'officially' available on the US Census Bureau website. To emphasise, the Bureau did NOT conduct the survey, they just republished the ARIS raw data in an Excel file:

<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/...0s0075.xls>

- In the same page, anti-Scientologist Hartley Patterson, commented that the alleged ARIS non-published figure was based on interviews with “half a dozen Scientologists” only and, as such, not very useful. However, he stated that the figure had become somewhat “official” by being reproduced in the Web site of the U.S. Census Bureau. This was, again, inaccurate. The table is still in the U.S. Census Bureau’s Web site and does not mention Scientology at all

Table 75. Self-Described Religious Identification of Adult Population: 1990 to 2008

[In thousands (175,440 represents 175,440,000). The methodology of the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2008 replicated that used in previous surveys. The three surveys are based on random-digit-dialing telephone surveys of residential households in the continental U.S.A. (48 states): 54,461 interviews in 2008, 50,281 in 2001, and 113,723 in 1990. Respondents were asked to describe themselves in terms of religion with an open-ended question. Interviewers did not prompt or offer a suggested list of potential answers. Moreover, the self-description of respondents was not based on whether established religious bodies, institutions, churches, mosques or synagogues considered them to be members. Quite the contrary, the surveys sought to determine whether the respondents themselves regarded themselves as adherents of a religious community. Subjective rather than objective standards of religious identification were tapped by the surveys]

Religious group	1990	2001	2008	Religious group	1990	2001	2008
Adult population, total ¹	175,440	207,983	228,182	Church of the Brethren	206	358	231
Total Christian ²	151,225	159,514	173,402	Nondenominational ³	194	2,489	8,032
Catholic	46,004	50,873	57,199	Disciples of Christ	144	492	263
Baptist	33,964	33,820	36,148	Reformed/Dutch Reform	161	289	206
Protestant-no denomination supplied	17,214	4,647	5,187	Apostolic/New Apostolic	117	254	970
Methodist/Wesleyan	14,174	14,039	11,366	Quaker	67	217	130
Lutheran	9,110	9,580	8,674	Christian Reform	40	79	381
Christian-no denomination supplied	8,073	14,190	16,834	Foursquare Gospel	28	70	116
Presbyterian	4,985	5,596	4,723	Total other religions ²	5,853	7,740	8,796
Pentecostal/Charismatic	3,116	4,407	5,416	Jewish	3,137	2,837	2,680
Episcopalian/Anglican	3,043	3,451	2,405	Muslim	527	1,104	1,349
Mormon/Latter-Day Saints	2,487	2,697	3,158	Buddhist	404	1,082	1,189
Churches of Christ	1,769	2,593	1,921	Unitarian/Universalist	502	629	586
Jehovah's Witness	1,381	1,331	1,914	Hindu	227	766	582
Seventh-Day Adventist	668	724	938	Native American	47	103	186
Assemblies of God	617	1,105	810	Wiccan	8	134	342
Holiness/Holy	610	569	352	Pagan	(NA)	140	340
Congregational/United Church of Christ	438	1,378	736	Spiritualist	(NA)	116	426
Church of the Nazarene	549	544	358	Other unclassified	837	386	735
Church of God	590	943	663	No religion specified, total ²	14,331	29,481	34,169
Orthodox (Eastern)	502	645	824	Atheist	(*)	902	1,621
Evangelical/Born Again ³	546	1,088	2,154	Agnostic	* 1,186	991	1,985
Mennonite	235	346	438	No religion	13,116	27,486	30,427
Christian Science	214	194	339	Refused to reply to question	4,031	11,246	11,815

Did Anti-Cultists Talk to ARIS?

Barry A. Kosmin

05/05/2017



RE: 2008 ARIS Report

[Details](#)

To: Massimo Introvigne

Dear Massimo Introvigne,

You are correct we never reported adherent figures for small religious groups in ARIS 2008 because of their unreliability. We were approached by several scholars and media outlets interested in Scientology. Our informal response – caveat emptor- was that our data suggested 25,000 +/- 300,000.

Best wishes,

[Barry A. Kosmin Ph.D.](#)

[Research Professor of Public Policy & Law](#)

[Director, Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society & Culture](#)

[Trinity College](#)

[300 Summit Street](#)

[Hartford, CT 06106](#)

- Did “Plockton,” or somebody else associated with anti-Scientology Web sites, talk to the ARIS team in 2009? Perhaps yes. But what were they told exactly? I wrote to the principal author of the ARIS reports, Professor Barry Kosmin, Director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society & Culture at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He wrote back to me that “we never reported adherent figures for small religious groups in ARIS 2008 because of their unreliability. We were approached by several scholars and media outlets interested in Scientology. Our informal response – caveat emptor – was that our data suggested 25,000 +/- 300,000”

Fake News (and Fake Statistics) Travel Fast

Scientologists: How Many Of Them Are There, Anyway?

by TONY ORTEGA
JULY 4, 2011

In 1990, ARIS had found about 45,000 Scientologists. In 2001, it found 55,000, and in 2008, it found 25,000.

“The Third Wall of Fire”

Scientology and the Study of Religious Secrecy

Hugh B. Urban

in the last decade. According to one recent poll of religious affiliation in the United States, the Church's numbers had plummeted from 55,000 in 2001 to just around 25,000 in 2008; meanwhile, its membership in Europe and other parts of the world witnessed similar declines.⁸⁶ As ex-member

- A tentative range between 25,000 and 300,000 got transformed into a firm “25,000” by “Plockton” and his friends. The number of 25,000 Scientologists that the anti-Scientologists themselves described as most probably inaccurate, after having misinterpreted or distorted communications from ARIS, traveled from one anti-cultist to another and to the *New York Times*, and from there to Wikipedia and articles by respected scholars, where it was treated as a fact

But Can We Use ARIS for NRMs?

- It is well-known to scholars of new religious movements that general surveys such as ARIS, valuable as they may otherwise be, are not a valuable tool for assessing membership in smaller religions. ARIS interviewed in 2008 54,461 respondents. This is certainly a valid sample for assessing trends in the numbers of the largest religious bodies, but not adequate to assess with any accuracy the membership in smaller groups (and this quite apart from the crucial problem of how a “Scientologist” is defined). ARIS admits this itself





Disguised As “None”?

- As the Korean case shows, members of new religious movements are often persuaded that their belief is “something different” from traditional religions. Looking for them among those who reported they believe to “other religions” is not enough. In fact, they may be mostly included among those who reported their religion as “none”

Conclusion: Beware of Fake News



- These comments, obviously, do not solve the problem of how to calculate the number of Scientologists, nor were they intended to solve it. They only show that fake news poison the well and that, when approaching this very delicate field, both media and scholars would be well advised to double-check their sources



For more information: maxintrovigne@gmail.com