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THE GRAVESTONE INDEX: TRACKING PERSONAL RELIGIOSITY ACROSS NATIONS, REGIONS, AND PERIODS*

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ABSTRACT. Given shortcomings in traditional methods of gauging levels of religious sentiment in national or local communities—affiliation with a congregation, church attendance, responses to opinion polls—this exploratory article proposes a novel, arguably more sensitive measure of personal religiosity, the Gravestone Index; that is, the incidence of religious symbols, iconography, or text on permanent memorials. Its application to 58,490 grave markers observed in 111 community, or nondenominational, cemeteries in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain yielded substantial findings, some expected but others violently at odds with the conventional wisdom. Seemingly reflecting the secularization of society, the Gravestone Index declines throughout the early twentieth century but, contrariwise, has rebounded strongly since the 1960s, indicating some sort of ongoing religious revival in all three lands. However, it fails to show any of the anticipated regional variation within the United States, notably that between South and non-South. Even more surprisingly, it records a level of British and Canadian religiosity persistently far above the U.S. value. *Keywords:* cemeteries, Gravestone Index, religiosity, religious revival, secularization.

One need only glance at our newspaper headlines to realize that religion has become an urgent factor in U.S. public life, to a degree seemingly without precedent in the nation's history.¹ Thus we can hardly ignore the lively current discourse involving matters of faith in U.S. foreign policy, in domestic political business from the federal level down to the most local, in medical research and practice, in school curricula, and questions of public prayer and religious displays. Such a situation prompts this geographer to pose three interrelated questions: Are we indeed witnessing a meaningful recent upsurge in religiosity in the United States? Whatever may have been happening of late, can we detect regional differences in the phenom-

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