

Caliber White Paper:
Rationale for the inclusion of religion questions on the VA Burial Evaluation Survey
April 9, 2007

Background

As the contractor conducting the 2007 Evaluation of the VA Burial Program, Caliber, an ICF International Company, has proposed the development and administration of a survey instrument (*VA Burial Benefits Survey*) to answer the research questions that form the framework of the evaluation. Pending OMB approval, the survey will be administered to a random sample of approximately 28,000 veterans and will cover issues related to veterans' preferred burial options (e.g., cremation vs. full casket), likelihood they will choose to be buried in a national or state veterans cemetery, and many others. Research Question 4F in the Statement of Work (SOW) states that the evaluation is to provide VA information about the "factors that influence burial choice." Very little empirical research is currently available to inform this issue. Thus, the proposed survey will fill an information gap for VA Burial Program leadership and decision makers.

Currently at issue is whether or not questions about religion should be included on the *VA Burial Benefits Survey*. A long list of public laws and executive orders prevent government agencies from discriminating on the basis of Religion, as well as Race, Sex, Color, National Origin, Disability, Age, and/or Sexual Orientation. Note that other questions in the VA burial benefits survey will cover Race, Sex, Disability, and Age. While all of these personal questions are sensitive, nothing about the survey should suggest that VA might discriminate in providing burial benefits on these bases. Survey responses to a question on Religion will be privacy sensitive. Survey responses on Religion must and can be protected by Caliber and by VA in the same way that responses on Race, Sex, Disability, and Age will be protected.

The U.S. Census Bureau, like VA a part of the Federal Executive Branch, no longer collects data on religious affiliation in its demographic surveys or decennial census. In 1976, Congress passed Public Law 94-521 which prohibits the Census from asking a question on religious affiliation on a mandatory basis. However, the Census states on its public web site that "in some person or household surveys, however, the U.S. Census Bureau may collect information about religious practices, on a voluntary basis." We think the VA can ask a question about religion as long as the survey or any survey item is not mandatory.

While acknowledging that questions on religion are sensitive, there is consensus among the Caliber research staff developing the survey that collecting limited information about religion from respondents (i.e., religious affiliation) is critical to provide valid, reliable conclusions about the factors influencing veterans' burial choices. Our rationale for including each of these items is provided below. Supporting documentation is provided in the bibliography, and in the appendix at the end of this paper.

Religious Affiliation: Rationale

Caliber proposes that one item about religion be included on the *VA Burial Benefits Survey*. The item (see below) will capture the respondent's religious affiliation.

What is your religious preference? (Mark only ONE)

- Protestant
 - Catholic
 - Jewish
 - Other (Please specify) _____
 - No Religion
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The wording of the draft question is substantially the same as a question in the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted periodically by the National Opinion Research Center. We propose not to include other questions in the GSS such as "IF PROTESTANT: What specific denomination is that, if any?" and "IF JEWISH: Do you consider yourself Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or none of these?"

Frequency statistics from the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey conducted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York suggest that roughly 50% of respondents will choose Protestant, 25% Catholic, 1% Jewish, and 14% None.

For Roman Catholicism, cremation is permitted but with certain reservations. In 1963, an Instruction from the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) lifted the ban on cremation by allowing it in certain circumstances provided that the reasons for choosing cremation were not contrary to Christian belief. However, burial of the body was clearly to be preferred. The further revised funeral rites, Order of Christian Funerals, in use since 1989, maintain this tradition of preference for burial of the body: "Since in Baptism the body was marked with the seal of the Trinity and became the temple of the Holy Spirit, Christians respect and honor the bodies of the dead and the places where they rest..." (Cremation: New Options for Catholics by Fran Helner, <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac1097.asp>)

Orthodox Judaism has specific prohibitions against cremation. We considered breaking out Judaism into Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox so that we could identify these respondents. However, Orthodox Judaism is a small population group, likely even a smaller portion of the U.S. veterans. And our literature search suggested that many U.S. Jews regardless of the distinction between these branches feel an aversion towards cremation because of an association of cremation with the Holocaust.

Protestant groups in the U.S. are numerous and diverse. We considered breaking Protestantism into a number of denominations (e.g. Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran). We were particularly interested in identifying Southern Baptists as distinct from other Protestant groups since this group is expected to avoid cremation. However, reviewers in

deemed draft questions that included a breakdown of Protestant Christianity too intrusive. We anticipate that survey respondents affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention will mark Protestant.

We anticipate that survey respondents who are not Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or “None” will choose “Other.” We anticipate that three groups of special interest for Research Question 4F will choose “Other:” Mormons/Church of Latter Day Saints¹, Eastern Orthodox and Islam. All three discourage cremation. We anticipate that respondents affiliated with Buddhism, and Hinduism will choose “Other.” Although large world-wide, Buddhism and Hinduism represent small segments of the U.S. population. Our literature search suggests that these religious families have similar burial practices (favoring cremation).

We believe that the placement of the religious affiliation immediately after the questions about likelihood of cremation will send a clear signal to veterans about why this item is being asked. By employing this strategy we believe the item will be not be seen as offensive, particularly to a respondent who has agreed to complete a survey on burial issues—itself a highly sensitive topic. Caliber will fully probe the validity of these assumptions during the survey pretest.

¹ “So You Are Going into Military Service”, www.lds.org

Appendix: Prevalence of Religious Groups

There are hundreds of religions, denominations, and sects in the U.S., so we could not list them all in a survey. We reviewed frequency statistics from the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey conducted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Group		Est. 2001 U.S. Adults
Christian Religious Groups		
Catholic	24.5%	50,873,000
Baptist	16.3%	33,830,000
Christian - no denomination supplied	6.8%	14,190,000
Methodist/Wesleyan	6.8%	14,150,000
Lutheran	4.6%	9,580,000
Presbyterian	2.7%	5,596,000
Protestant - no denomination supplied	2.2%	4,647,000
Pentecostal/Charismatic	2.1%	4,407,000
Episcopalian/Anglican	1.7%	3,451,000
Mormon/Latter-Day Saints	1.3%	2,787,000
Churches of Christ	1.2%	2,503,000
Nondenominational	1.2%	2,489,000
Congregational/United Church of Christ	0.7%	1,378,000
Jehovah's Witness	0.6%	1,331,000
Assemblies of God	0.5%	1,106,000
Evangelical	0.5%	1,032,000
Church of God	0.5%	944,000
Seventh-Day Adventist	0.3%	724,000
Orthodox (Eastern)		645,000
Holiness/Holy		569,000
Church of the Nazarene		544,000
Disciples of Christ		492,000
Church of the Brethren		358,000
Mennonite		346,000
Reformed/Dutch Reform		289,000
Apostolic/New Apostolic		254,000
Quaker		217,000
Christian Science		194,000
Full Gospel		168,000
Christian Reform		79,000
Independent Christian Church		71,000
Foursquare Gospel		70,000
Fundamentalist		61,000
Born Again		56,000
Salvation Army		25,000
Subtotal Christianity	76.5%	159,030,000
Other Religion Groups		
Judaism	1.4%	2,831,000
Islam	0.5%	1,104,000
Buddhism	0.5%	1,082,000

Hinduism	0.4%	766,000
Unitarian Universalism		629,000
Neo-Paganism		140,000
Wiccan		134,000
Spiritualism		116,000
Native American Religion		103,000
Bahaism		84,000
New Age		68,000
Sikhism		57,000
Scientology		55,000
Deism		49,000
Taoism		40,000
Druidism		33,000
Eckankar		26,000
Santeria		22,000
Rastafarianism		11,000
Ethical Culture		4,000
Other unclassified		386,000
Total Other Religions	3.7%	7,740,000
No Religion		
Agnosticism	0.5%	991,000
Atheism	0.4%	902,000
Humanism		49,000
Secular		53,000
No Religion	13.2%	27,486,000
Subtotal No Religion	14.2%	29,481,000
Refused	5.4%	11,246,000

Many of the groupings are matters of judgment. Protestant denominations may be subdivided by belief or governance distinctions. For example, Baptists could have been broken into Southern Baptist Convention, National Baptist Convention, USA and American Baptist Churches USA.