



Evaluating the Denominations of Senders of Letters to the FBI About Communist Infiltration of Religion in the 1950s and 1960s



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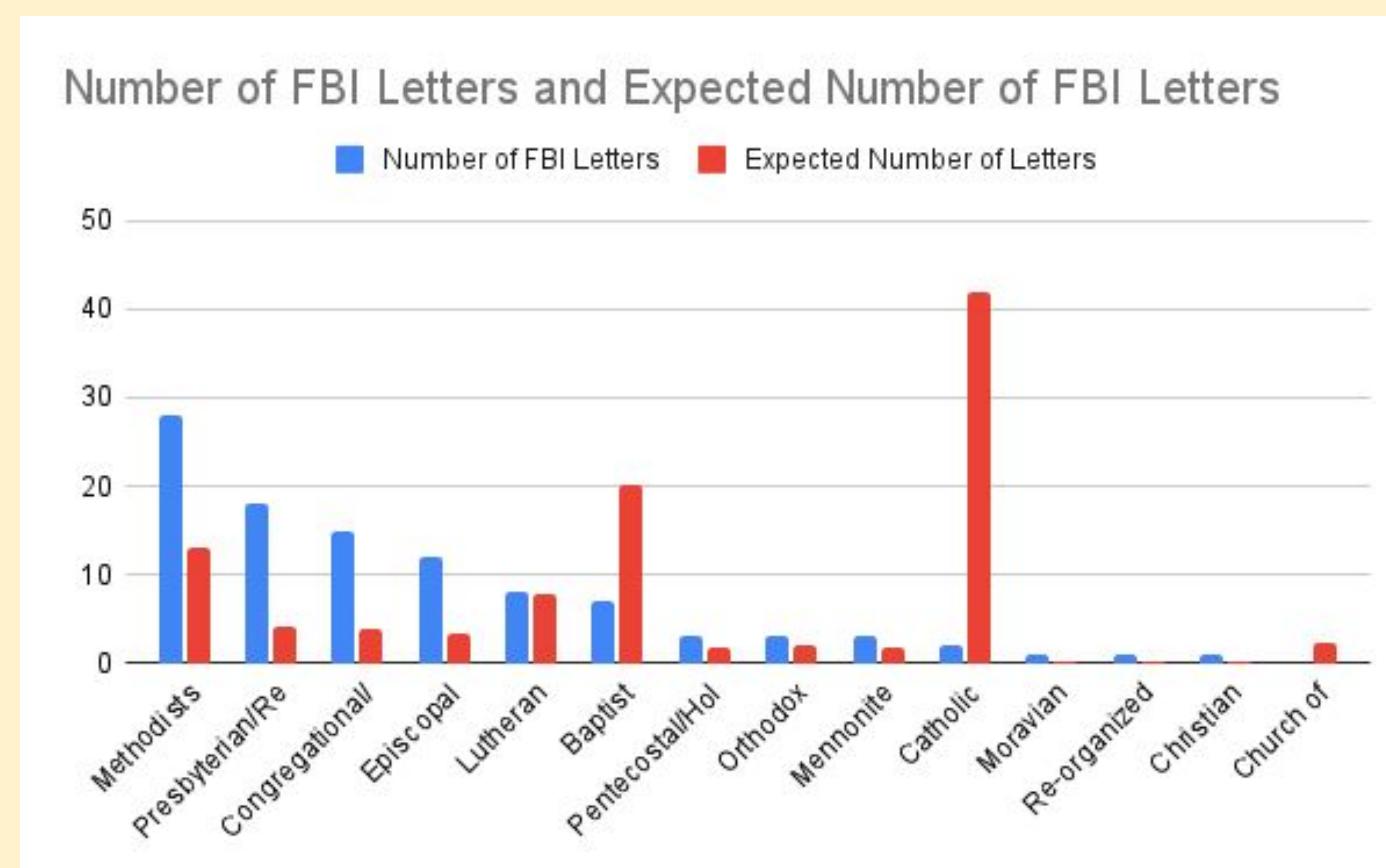
Introduction

In the 1950s and 1960s, during the Cold War, the FBI received hundreds of letters from citizens, organizations, and church groups asking about communist infiltration into religion in America. There was enough correspondence and concern that the FBI put a special agent in charge of the issue, Ed Sullivan. These letters were put into their own FBI file which has since been declassified by the FBI (with redactions of certain names or locations), allowing us to observe information about the types of people who were writing to the FBI. This project classifies the organizations that sent letters to the FBI by denomination, allowing us to get a picture of which denominations saw more or fewer letters to the FBI seeking information about Communist infiltration into religion. This will be interesting as it may help us to understand who was most concerned about communist infiltration of religion, as well as the nature of their concerns.

Methods

FBI files pertaining to Communist Infiltration in Religion in the 1950s/1960s were obtained via a Freedom of Information Act Request. These files were then parsed by the authors of this study, as well as by some other UROP students in previous years, and key information was put into a Google Sheets spreadsheet. This information included the type of correspondence (letter, memorandum, references, etc.), the locations involved, and the organizations involved, as well as a summary of the underlying material. Additionally, the authors of this project, as well as our UROP mentor, classified the letters by the type of denomination of the sender where possible. Many of these senders described themselves as church officials or used some type of religious organization letterhead (such as First United Presbyterian Church). Following this, we tabulated the number of letters sent from organizations of different denominations. We then created an “expected letters” statistic to evaluate how many letters we would expect to see if all denominations were equally likely to send them. This was done based on the 1960 denominational membership statistics.

Denominational Statistics For FBI Letters & 1960 United States Population				
	Number of FBI Letters	1960 Percent of US Population	1960 Percent of Denominational Christians	Expected Number of Letters
Methodists	28	7.30%	12.84	13.10
Presbyterian/Reformed	18	2.28%	4.01	4.09
Congregational/UCC	15	2.12%	3.73	3.80
Episcopal	12	1.91%	3.36	3.43
Lutheran	8	4.41%	7.76	7.91
Baptist	7	11.19%	19.69	20.08
Pentecostal/Holiness	3	0.96%	1.69	1.72
Orthodox	3	1.16%	2.04	2.08
Mennonite	3	0.92%	1.62	1.65
Catholic	2	23.39%	41.15	41.97
Moravian	1	<0.1%	<0.2	<0.2
Re-organized LDS	1	<0.1%	<0.2	<0.2
Christian Science	1	<0.1%	<0.2	<0.2
Church of Christ	0	1.20%	2.11	2.15
Incomplete Information	12	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	114	56.84%	100.00	102



References

Cox, Wendell. “Christian Church Membership in the United States: 1960-2002.” Demographia, 2005. <http://demographia.com/db-religusa2002.htm>.
 Federal Bureau of Investigation, Communist Infiltration of Religion. 1-12, Washington DC, 1953-1964.
 Mennonite Publishing House. (1958). Mennonite Yearbook & Directory (Vol. 49).

Results

Based upon our research, we were able to figure out the denomination of the senders of 114 letters to the FBI in the 1950s and 1960s. The largest denomination was Methodists, with 28 letters coming from Methodists. Next were Presbyterians, with 18 letters coming from either Presbyterian or Reformed churches/clergy/members. Rounding out the top three, 15 were Congregationalists/in the United Church of Christ. 12 more senders were Episcopalians. 8 were Lutherans and 7 were Baptists. Following this, there were several churches that saw three letters: the Orthodox, Pentecostals/Holiness, and Mennonites. There were two Catholic letters, and one from each of Moravian, reorganized LDS, and Christian Science. Finally, twelve letters had incomplete information on the denomination of the sender. These results show that protestant denominations which are more mainline than evangelical (Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Mennonites) were responsible for 84 out of 102 letters that were sent to the FBI. Meanwhile, primarily evangelical denominations (Baptists, Pentecostal/Holiness, Church of Christ) were responsible for ten letters, and Catholics were responsible for just 2, in spite of being one of the largest denominations.

Discussion

It is apparent that Catholics were very unlikely to send letters relative to Protestants; in fact, neither of the two Catholic-sent letters had any complaints with the Catholic Church itself. This suggests a much higher degree of institutional trust of the Catholic Church amongst Catholics, which makes theological sense. Additionally, it appears that Mainline Protestants were much more likely than Evangelicals to send letters. This possibly has to do with the fact that Mainline denominations were often more on the frontline of changing cultural norms. As with today, Mainline denominations are likely to be the homes of progressive or norm-challenging churches, which can make other less progressive churches within those denominations uncomfortable. This has caused a number of schisms over the past several decades, and as this poster is created, several major denominations (Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians) have undergone within the last decade or are in the midst of potential schisms. These denominations have generally had greater internal conflict; therefore, it makes sense that members of these denominations were most suspicious of other members of these denominations. It casts the religious aspects of the “Red Scare” in an interesting light to think of it as primarily a confound within inter-denominational conflict.