

RELIGIONS IN CONTEXT: THE RESPONSE OF NON-MORMON FAITHS IN UTAH

RODNEY STARK
BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

ROGER FINKE
PENN STATE UNIVERSITY

REVIEW OF RELIGIOUS RESEARCH, 2004, VOLUME 45:3, PAGES 293-298

Utah provides a rare opportunity to see how minority religious bodies respond when faced, not with a lazy "monopoly" faith, but one that is energetic and effective. Based on our theoretical work, we predict that faced with Mormon competition, even liberal Protestant bodies will display far higher levels of commitment in Utah than elsewhere in the nation. The data agree.

Although sociologists pay a great deal of lip-service to "group effects" and "social contexts," in practice they often tend to be psychologists, stressing individual sources of human action. This has been especially true of quantitative research in the sociology of religion. Not only are variations in religiousness usually attributed to such individual traits or circumstances as age, sex, and social class, religious consequences also are typically assessed in individual terms such as attitudes toward abortion, party identification, prejudice, or mental health.

This focus on the individual has produced a body of surprisingly weak and unreliable findings in contrast with the results obtained when religion is treated as a group or collective phenomenon. For example, it has long been known that even when accounting for variations in individual religious commitment, traits such as age, sex, and social class are dwarfed by the group variable: denomination (Stark 1984; Stark and Glock 1965). Thus, while it is true that American women attend church more frequently than men, male members of conservative denominations attend far more regularly than do women in liberal denominations. Indeed, this finding holds throughout Europe (as can easily be found by examination of data from the World Value Surveys). Nor can this denominational effect be dismissed on grounds that people sort themselves into denominations on the basis of their piety. The great majority of people, Americans as well as Europeans, remain in the religious group to which they were born, hence denominational effects are rooted in socialization, of both childhood and adult varieties (Kluegel 1980; Sherkat and Wilson 1995).

Besides denomination, many other group or collective variables overshadow individual traits to such an extent that some religious contexts even determine whether individual measures of religiousness will have any effects. For example, whether or not their individual level of religiousness influences whether teenagers commit crimes, depends entirely on the overall level of religiousness in their community (Stark 1996). In similar fashion, it is not variations in the demographic composition of Catholic populations that cause the immense regional and cross-national differences in Catholic piety, but the religious composition of their environment. That is, Catholics are more active in their faith to the extent

that they are a minority, whether in different regions of the United States or in comparisons based on nations. American Catholics living in the deep South are far more committed than are their counterparts in the most Catholic states (Stark and McCann 1993; Stark 1998) and Catholics are far more observant in Scandinavia than in Spain (Stark 1992). In similar fashion, in a study of Jewish fund-raising appeals, per capita contributions were found to be inverse to the percentage of Jews in a metropolitan area—the smaller the Jewish minorities, the more each person gave (Silberstein, Rabinowitz, Ritterband, and Kosmin 1987). This was replicated for American Christians by another study that found that per capita church contributions varied across Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and Methodist congregations inversely to each denomination's share of the local religious membership (Zalenski and Zech 1995). Subsequently, the effect of market share on contributions was supported by Perl and Olson (2000), using congregational-level data for Roman Catholics, the Assemblies of God, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Southern Baptist Convention.

In previous work we have attributed these contextual effects on religious commitment to competition: "Individual religious groups will be more energetic and generate higher levels of commitment to the degree that they have a marginal market position—lack market share. That is, other things being equal, small religious minorities will be more vigorous than will firms with a large local following" (Stark and Finke 2000:219).

Recently, a study reported that this principle does not hold for American Mormons (Phillips 1998). Rather than being highest in areas of the United States having few Mormons, their commitment is higher the *more* Mormon the area. This exception could be due to a combination of two factors: that Mormons everywhere feel themselves to be an embattled minority within the general context of American religion and that the motivation provided by this perception is more effective, the more frequently that Mormons confront other Mormons during their daily lives. That is, their local majority status in Utah does not erode Mormon commitment while their dense social networks amplify it. When we offered this interpretation of Phillips' findings we suggested that Utah might provide a valuable special case, worth special study (Stark and Finke 2000:227).

In this paper we pursue our own suggestion, not by further study of Mormon behavior in Utah, but by concentrating on the response of many leading Protestant bodies to the challenge of life in a Mormon-dominated culture. How do even relatively "lax," liberal denominations respond when confronted with an aggressive and conversionist Mormonism? This question is of special theoretical interest because we know of no other case in which a virtual monopoly religion offers energetic and effective competition to minority faiths. Ordinarily, monopoly faiths are lazy and inefficient, relying on law, official preference, and custom to thwart their potential competitors. What happens when, rather than rely on repression, the "monopoly" fully exerts itself? For example, are non-Mormon parents more careful to enrol their children in Sunday school when the many Mormon children in the neighborhood, not only set an example, but are more than willing to invite non-Mormon neighbors as guests? There is a second aspect here as well. Contexts differ not only in the amount of competition among religious organizations they sustain, but in their overall level of religiousness. In Utah, Mormons not only compete with other denominations, but being a huge majority, they set the religious tone for everyone. As a non-Mormon resident of a suburb of Ogden remarked to one of us, "Even though there are many non-Mormons living here, you simply never hear a power mower on Sunday." Indeed, the Utah religious

tone includes frequent, matter-of-fact, references to religion and to church activities in daily interaction, even among strangers. It seems likely that Methodists or Presbyterians, for example, are prompted by the example of the Mormon majority to make their religious life a more explicit part of their informal social interaction. The result ought to be higher than normal levels of religious commitment by non-Mormons in Utah.

Stated as an hypothesis: *Non-Mormon faiths will exhibit substantially higher levels of commitment in Utah than in other parts of the United States.*

THE DATA

The needed data are simple, but required some negotiating to secure. What we sought was information on congregational-levels of commitment with Utah broken out from the national summary data. As to specific denominations, our choices were limited to those having a meaningful number of congregations in Utah. It turned out that many of these denominations gather data on three very appropriate measures: attendance at Sunday morning worship services and Sunday school as a percentage of total membership, and annual contributions per member.

Guided by data on church membership in Utah, we approached all nine denominations having more than ten congregations in the state (in 1990). Data were not available for three of them. Despite the considerable efforts of Paul Perl and others at the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate (CARA), reliable Roman Catholic data could not be found. We were unable to establish communications with the Churches of Christ. We were able to secure data from the Episcopal Church, but they were obviously unreliable, being implausibly volatile.

In the end we obtained solid data from: the Assemblies of God, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Southern Baptist Convention, and the United Methodist Church. We must acknowledge the aid and cooperation of Sherri L. Doty, Statistician, The General Council of the Assemblies of God; Steve Zekoff and the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration; Scott Kostencki, John O'Hara, and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Business Services; Kenneth Inskeep and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Department of Research and Evaluation; Ida Smith Williams, John Marcum, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) Research Services; and the Southern Baptist Convention for making their data publicly available via the American Religion Data Archive (www.thearda.com).

RESULTS

Table 1 permits sixteen comparisons (spread across six denominations) between congregations in Utah and in the other 49 states. Tests of significance are inappropriate since the data are a census, not a sample, and unneeded because the results are so consistent.

Beginning with the Assemblies of God, members in Utah attend worship services and Sunday school at a far higher rate in Utah than elsewhere. Indicative of the rapid growth rates of this evangelical body, in all states they attract far more people to Sunday worship services than their total membership. In Utah this applies to Sunday school attendance as well. As for contributions, Assemblies' members in Utah contribute \$1.69 for every dollar contributed by members in other states.

TABLE 1:
Utah Versus the Other 49 States

	Utah	Other States
<i>Assemblies of God</i>		
Average Worship Attendance	244.0%	148.9%
Average Sunday School Attendance	124.4%	84.9%
Annual Contributions per Member	\$4,074	\$2,411
	n*= (33)	(9,565)
<i>Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</i>		
Average Worship Attendance	37.9%	30.5%
Annual Contributions per Member	\$414	\$31
	n= (16)	(10,617)
<i>Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod</i>		
Average Worship Attendance	38.0%	38.0%
Annual Contributions per Member	\$672	\$481
	n= (18)	(6,124)
<i>Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)</i>		
Average Worship Attendance	61.1%	51.6%
Average Sunday School Enrollment	59.8%	47.0%
Annual Contributions per Member	\$914	\$824
	n= (17)	(8,669)
<i>Southern Baptist Convention</i>		
Average Worship Attendance	46.3%	31.9%
Average Sunday School Attendance	30.6%	24.9%
Annual Contributions per Member	\$392	\$396
	n= (54)	(34,498)
<i>United Methodist Church</i>		
Average Worship Attendance	51.8%	39.9%
Average Sunday School Attendance	23.3%	20.7%
Annual Contributions per Member	\$545	\$400
	n= (17)	(35,774)
* number of congregations reporting		

Evangelical Lutherans also are better attenders in Utah than elsewhere and far surpass the national level of contributions. Among the Missouri Lutherans there is no difference in church attendance, but a very substantial difference in annual contributions. As for the Presbyterians, Utah members substantially exceed other Presbyterians on all three measures. Southern Baptists in Utah do not surpass members elsewhere in terms of contributions, but are much better attenders of worship services and Sunday school. Finally, Utah Methodists excel on all three measures of commitment. Thus, on fourteen of the sixteen comparisons, the hypothesis is supported.

CONCLUSION

Rather than withering in the "unfavorable" soil of Mormon Utah, the so-called Gentile religious bodies in Utah thrive in its highly religious climate and in the face of a serious

challenge. To many not schooled in the sociology of religion this would seem an obvious outcome: that, other things being equal, groups are invigorated and solidified by external pressures. But, for most of the past century, sociologists mostly have treated small religious minorities as irrelevant, as oddities, as reactionary spasms, or as helpless victims (Niebuhr 1929; Wilson 1970). Recently, of course, some sociologists have learned better as some of these former small minorities have become the most influential religious groups in many parts of Latin America (Martin 2002; Chesnut 2003). These groups achieved this remarkable feat by exploiting a lazy religious monopoly. However, the situation in Latin America only provided the *opportunity* for these groups, the religious groups had to provide their own *energy*. That is, the Catholic Church did not serve as a sufficient challenge to energize Protestant bodies. Consequently, only the highly committed, self-energized groups, mainly the Pentecostals, grew in Latin America; the liberal denominations such as the Presbyterians and Methodists have not shared in the "Protestantization" of the Southern Hemisphere. Thus, Utah serves as a very unusual case in that it features a very effective and challenging "monopoly" faith, able to energize even liberal Protestant groups. Elsewhere in the nation, faced with unrelenting pressure from evangelical Protestant bodies, the liberal denominations seem unable to cope as their membership continues to ooze away. It would seem to take dramatic and highly visible competition, such as an overwhelming Mormon majority, to stir the liberals to effective, defensive action.

Finally, a reviewer (whose critique was nearly as long as this paper) chided us for not considering alternative explanations. This reflects her or his failure to grasp the connection between theory and research. When an area is blessed with two credible theories, then one tries to identify contrary empirical predictions in order to provide crucial tests that may, in sufficient number, eliminate one theory. But if, as is very often the case, there is only one theory, then one tries to confront it with tests of its predictions, especially of what would appear to be its less likely predictions. *Ad hoc* hypotheses are not theories, and nothing is gained by proposing such hypotheses as pretentious 'alternatives.' For example, the reviewer urged that the higher Utah rates of attendance and giving for non-Mormons might be caused by high rates of non-Mormon defection, leaving only the most active behind. One can easily respond, "where did they go?" Since Utah has the highest church membership rate in the nation, it would seem unlikely that they dropped out. But, far more important, there is no counter-theory here. *Ad hoc* hypotheses can be adduced endlessly and pointlessly. Perhaps there is something about living near a great salt lake, or about high fertility. And perhaps not. The point being that this paper is not primarily about Utah. It is about the impact of an energetic majority on minority competitors and we would have pursued such an opportunity wherever and whenever it could be found. It just happened to be in Utah rather than in ninth century China.

*Address correspondence to Rodney Stark, 170 Camino Rayo del Sol, Corrales, NM 87048. E-mail: socstark@aol.com

REFERENCES

- Chesnut, R. Andrew. 2003. *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kluegel, James R. 1980. "Denominational Mobility." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19:26-39.
- Martin, David. 2002. *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.

- Niebuhr, H. Richard. 1929. *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Perl, Paul and Daniel V. A. Olson. 2000. "Religious Market Share and Intensity of Church Involvement in Five Denominations." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39:12-31.
- Phillips, Rick. 1998. "Religious Market Share and Mormon Church Activity." *Sociology of Religion* 59: 117-130.
- Sherkat, Darren E. and John Wilson. 1995. "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in Religious Markets: An Examination of Religious Switching and Apostasy." *Social Forces* 73:993-1026.
- Silberstein, Richard, Jonathan Rabinowitz, Paul Ritterband, and Barry Kosmin. 1987. "Giving to Jewish Philanthropic Causes: A Preliminary Reconnaissance." *Spring Research Forum Working Papers*, New York: United Way Institute.
- Stark, Rodney. 1998. "Catholic Contexts: Competition, Commitment, and Innovation." *Review of Religious Research* 39:197-208.
1996. "Religion as Context: Hellfire and Delinquency One More Time." *Sociology of Religion* 57:163-173
1992. "Do Catholic Societies Really Exist?" *Rationality and Society* 4:261-271.
1984. "Religion and Conformity: Reaffirming a Sociology of Religion." *Sociological Analysis* 43:53-68.
- Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke, 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Stark, Rodney and Charles Y. Glock. 1965. "The New Denominationalism," *Review of Religious Research* 7:17-28.
- Stark, Rodney, and James C. McCann. 1993. "Market Forces and Catholic Commitment: Exploring the New Paradigm." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32:111-124.
- Wilson, Bryan. 1970. *Religious Sects*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Zalenski, Peter A. and Charles E. Zech. 1995. "The Effect of Religious Market Competition on Church Giving." *Review of Social Economy* 3:350-367.

Copyright of Review of Religious Research is the property of Religious Research Association Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.