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## Increasing Sex Ratio Imbalance Among Utah Mormons: Sources and Implications

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## Abstract

Most Christian denominations in the United States have more female than male adherents. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is no exception. However, the sex ratio imbalance within Mormonism is not uniform across the nation. The imbalance is more pronounced in Utah, a traditional Mormon stronghold and site of the church's headquarters. In this article, we examine potential causes and consequences of the sex ratio imbalance among Utah Mormons. We argue that Mormon men in Utah are abandoning the church at higher rates than they were a decade ago, leaving a surplus of women. We show how this trend coincides with a decline in the LDS Church's religious market share in Utah. We close by discussing the implications of our findings for the sociology of religion.

There has been a shift in the ratio of male to female members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS, or Mormon Church) in Utah. This shift is indicative of changes in the religious subculture of the state. Understanding the social forces that undergird this shift is relevant for a literature demonstrating that levels of religious participation within a denomination tend to be inversely correlated with that denomination's market share in a given locale. We begin by appraising this literature. Next, we evaluate various explanations for the imbalanced sex ratio among Utah Mormons. We conclude by discussing the implications of our analysis for the sociology of religion.

### *THE MARKET SHARE THESIS*

Numerous studies have found that when a denomination's share of a given religious market is small, its members tend to exhibit high religiosity. As market share increases, religiosity tends to wane. The mechanism that produces this effect is contested, but empirical observations abound (for a review, see Olson 2008a). A negative correlation between religiosity and denominational market share is robust to units of analysis (Stark and McCann 1993; Zalesky and Zech 1995). The correlation holds for Protestants (Pena Lopez and Sanchez Santos 2008), Catholics (Stark 1998a; Stark and McCann 1993), and Jews (Alper and Olson 2013; Rabinowitz, Lazerwitz, and Kim 1995). It is observed for various manifestations of religious commitment, such as church attendance and financial contributions (Brewer, Jezefowicz, and Stonebraker 2006; Perl and Olson 2000). Parents who belong to denominations with small market share are more likely to enroll their children in religious schools (Cohen-Zada 2006; Cohen-Zada and Elder 2012). The strength of religious identity is greater for people who belong to denominations with small market share (Hoeverd, Atkinson, and Sibley 2012; see also Achterberg et al. 2009).

The market share thesis is a component of the religious economies paradigm, which uses the logic of economics to explain religious behavior. Some hypotheses that have been derived from this paradigm are controversial (see Chaves and Gorski 2001; Hungerman 2010; Olson 2008a; Voas, Olson, and Crockett 2002), but the market share thesis is well attested. Hill and Olson (2009: 631) conclude that "[t]he general finding that small market share religious groups have higher member commitment levels may currently stand as the most consistent and, so far, unquestioned confirmation of predictions made by . . . the religious economies model."

Nevertheless, there is an exception to the market share rule. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have traditionally been more religious in Utah, where the church predominates (Phillips 1998, 2004). None of the mechanisms that have been theorized to produce the market share effect adequately

accommodate this observation. Scholars acknowledge the Mormon exception, and some have offered ad hoc explanations for it. Stark and Finke (2004: 294) argue that negative attitudes toward the LDS Church throughout the United States prompt Mormons in Utah to see themselves as “an embattled minority within the general context of American religion.” High levels of church activity supposedly evince this perception. Olson (2008a) suggests that the wide disparity between the number of self-identified Mormons and the number listed on official church rolls may obfuscate true levels of LDS Church activity. Alper and Olson (2013) posit that Utah’s status as the Mormon homeland might prompt highly religious Latter-day Saints to move there, raising mean levels of participation. None of these explanations are offered with evidence.

Mormonism—one of the nation’s largest denominations—continues to challenge the market share thesis. However, the claim that Mormons are more religious where they predominate is based primarily on data from the 1960s and early 1980s and on analyses of the cumulative General Social Survey, which mixes recent observations with cases that are forty years old (see Bennion and Young 1996; Mauss 1994; Phillips 1998, 1999). No one disputes that Mormons were more active in Utah when these data were collected. But we suspect that recent demographic trends are transforming Utah’s religious subculture. These changes may be altering religious activity within Mormonism in ways that are consistent with the market share thesis (see Phillips 2014). Specifically, we propose that an increasingly imbalanced sex ratio among Utah Mormons is both a manifestation and a harbinger of declines in religiosity in the Mormon homeland.

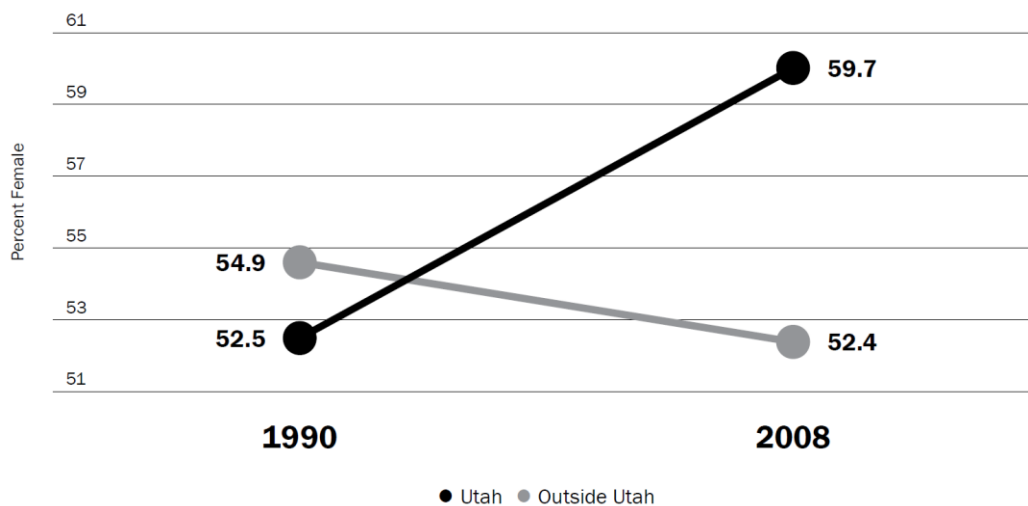
#### *SEX RATIOS WITHIN AMERICAN MORMONISM*

The Mormon Church has a surplus of female members in the United States. In 2008, the U.S. Religious Landscape survey reported that 56 percent of American Mormons were female (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008). The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey put the number of female members at 55 percent (Kosmin and Keysar 2009). Women outnumber men in most Christian bodies in the United States, but the sex ratio in Mormonism is more imbalanced than that in any other large denomination except Jehovah’s Witnesses (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008). A skewed sex ratio is more problematic for Mormonism than for most other faiths. Mormon doctrine states that the most glorious afterlife is reserved for members who were married in an LDS temple (Larson 2007). Marriage between Mormons and non-Mormons is considered less than ideal (Hammarberg 2013; Holman and Duke 1992; Raynes and Parsons 1983). Because the church does not perform interfaith temple marriages, some LDS women who want to marry in a temple cannot. For most other Christians, marriage within the denomination may be preferred, but it is typically not imbued

with this kind of theological import. Putnam and Campbell (2012) found that Mormons are more likely to say that marriage within the faith is “very important” than are Jews, Evangelical Protestants, or Catholics.

Mormonism’s sex ratio imbalance is not uniform across the nation, and it has changed over time. The regional variation and temporal change can be observed by examining data from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), displayed in Figure 1.<sup>1</sup> The ARIS shows the percentage of female Mormons living outside Utah dropped from 54.9 percent in 1990 to 52.4 percent in 2008. This difference is not statistically significant. By contrast, the sex ratio in Utah became more imbalanced. In 1990, 52.5 percent of Utah Mormons were female. By 2008, 59.7 percent of Utah Mormons were female. This shift is statistically significant ( $t = 2.37, p < 0.05$ ) (Phillips and Cragun 2011).

**Figure 1: Percentage of Mormons Who Are Female: 1990 and 2008**



Why would sex ratios in the Mormon Church be stable or possibly inching toward parity outside Utah while becoming more imbalanced within the state? There are several possible explanations. First, the imbalance could be due to a surge of young men in Utah leaving for proselytizing missions. Second, more non-LDS women in Utah could be converting to Mormonism. Third, sex ratios

<sup>1</sup> The ARIS is a multiwave census of American religion based on data collected in 1990, 2001, and 2008. The surveys sample the noninstitutionalized adult population in the contiguous forty-eight states. It employs a random-digit telephone-dialing technique to ensure that every noninstitutionalized adult in the United States has an equal chance of being contacted to participate in the survey. The first survey was conducted in 1990 and included 113,723 respondents. The 2001 wave had 50,281 respondents, and the 2008 wave had 54,461 respondents (Kosmin and Keysar 2009).

could be affected by migration into and out of Utah. Mormon women could be immigrating to the state in large numbers, Mormon men could be emigrating in large numbers, or some combination of the two. Finally, increasing numbers of LDS men in Utah could be abandoning the church.

Unfortunately, data to test these explanations are unavailable. The LDS Church collects data on its membership but rarely releases the data to outside researchers. Social scientists studying Mormons can sometimes glean LDS respondents from larger datasets (such as the General Social Survey), but this generally yields too few cases for fine-grained analyses. Censuses of religion such as the ARIS or the Religious Congregation Membership Study are useful for examining the distribution of Mormons but lack comprehensive measures of religious attitudes or behavior. Finally, scholars sometimes generalize about Mormons from surveys of Utah or use surveys with nonrepresentative samples, but this approach has obvious shortcomings. For these reasons, investigating the sex ratio imbalance among Utah Mormons using conventional sociological methods is not possible. There are no available data that permit testing competing hypotheses with standard models. However, by treating extant data like clues in a forensic investigation, we can appraise the merits of these explanations by assessing them against what *can* be known about Mormons in Utah and the United States.

In the analysis that follows, we proceed like detectives, sifting through imperfect, imprecise, and sometimes conflicting strands of evidence to rule out implausible “suspects” as we attempt to find the source of the imbalanced sex ratio among Utah Mormons. The “prime suspect” will emerge as the explanation that best fits the facts. This approach is unorthodox, but without proper data, it is the only way to say anything useful about this issue. Thus we offer our conclusions as food for thought and as an invitation for rigorous data collection and subsequent analyses. Given these methodological caveats, we investigate possible four possible explanations for the increasing sex ratio imbalance among Utah Mormons: (1) a surge of young men in Utah going on missions, (2) more non-LDS women in Utah converting to Mormonism, (3) changes in migration in and out of Utah, and (4) Utah Mormon men leaving the church in greater numbers than their female counterparts.

### *Proselytizing Missions*

A surplus of LDS women in Utah could be caused by increasing numbers of Mormon men leaving the state for proselytizing missions. The church sends young people on extended missionary trips around the world. Young men constitute the majority of those who are sent (Stack 2007). If the number of Mormon men who left Utah on missions increased sharply between 1990 and 2008, this could affect the overall sex ratio among Mormons in the state. However, this

explanation is not plausible. While the number of missionaries has been increasing as the LDS Church grows, the number of missionaries per church member has declined. Between 1990 and 2008, the number of full-time missionaries fell from one for every 183 Mormons, to one for every 205 Mormons (Deseret News 1990, 2009). Data on rates of missionary service by region are not available, but there is no reason to suspect that the number of missionaries per capita increased dramatically in Utah while falling church wide during this time frame.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, birthrates within both Utah and the LDS Church have declined since 1990 (Heaton, Bahr, and Jacobsen 2004; Smith and Carmalt 2006; Sturgill and Heaton 2006). Consequently, mission-age men make up a decreasing share of Utah's Mormon population. Data from the ARIS show a statistically significant rise in the mean age of adult Mormons in Utah, from 42.5 years in 1990 to 44.9 years in 2008 ( $t = 3.25, p < 0.05$ ) (Phillips and Cragun 2011). This is consistent with a maturing population and a declining birthrate, indicating a dwindling pool of young men who are eligible for missionary service. Furthermore, in 2002, the church made the requirements for serving a mission stricter, screening out some young men who might otherwise have served (Stack 2005; Stewart 2007). Given these findings, it is unlikely the sex ratio imbalance among Utah Mormons is due to more male missionaries leaving the state.

#### *Conversion of Non-LDS Women in Utah*

The sex ratio imbalance could be caused by more women in Utah converting to the church. However, conversion cannot fully explain Utah's widening sex ratio. First, analysis of LDS Church membership data reveals that most church growth in Utah derives from children born in the faith. Utah has the lowest rate of growth by conversion of any of the church's regions (Heaton 1998). We are not aware of events that would have precipitated a surge in conversion limited to females after 1990.

LDS Church data show that lifelong Mormons outnumber converts in Utah by 5 to 1 (Heaton 1998). A Pew survey found that only 13 percent of Utah Mormons were converts (Pew Research Center 2009). According to the General Social Survey (GSS), the proportion of converts who are female in the Rocky Mountain states (which include Utah) has been stable for over two decades.<sup>3</sup> These results

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<sup>2</sup> In October 2012, the LDS Church lowered the minimum age for missionaries. As a result, the number of missionaries increased significantly in 2013. However, this increase was largely due to women going on missions. The number of female missionaries increased 142 percent in 2013, while the number of male missionaries rose 22 percent. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, it is unlikely that changes in the missionary program will balance the sex ratio in Utah (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Newsroom 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Information about the GSS is online at [www3.norc.org/GSS+Website](http://www3.norc.org/GSS+Website). The GSS does not situate respondents within individual states. Instead, they are located within nine regions. The mountain

are incompatible with the supposition that female conversions account for most of the rising sex ratio imbalance in the state.

### *Mormon Migration Patterns*

The sex ratio imbalance could also be explained by Mormon migration into and out of Utah. Large numbers of LDS women moving into the state would create a surplus. However, this explanation is at odds with the demography of Mormonism in the United States. Recall that most church members in Utah were born in the faith. Other states have a larger percentage of converts. East of the Mississippi, converts outnumber lifelong members 3 to 1. Mormons in other countries (except Canada) are even more likely to be converts (Heaton 1998). If large numbers of Mormon women moved to Utah between 1990 and 2008, the percentage of Mormon women in Utah who are converts would have risen. In the previous section, we demonstrated that this is not the case.

Mormon men leaving Utah is also a poor explanation of the sex ratio imbalance. If the imbalance were caused by LDS men moving out, we would expect to see a rising percentage of lifelong male church members outside the state. This is not the case. According to the GSS, from 1990 to 2000, 59 percent of Mormon men living outside the Rocky Mountain states were lifelong members; from 2001 to 2008, this figure fell to 47 percent. A general examination of the ratio of converts to lifelong Latter-day Saints across time and across the various regions of the country suggests that the growing excess of LDS women in Utah cannot be fully explained by migration (see also Bennion 1994, 1995; Bennion and Young 1996).

### *A UTAH ANOMALY*

Comparing changes in the sex ratio for the entire U.S. population with changes in Mormonism highlights the peculiarity of the church's surplus of women in Utah. Over the past twenty years, the sex ratio in the United States has inched toward parity. In the 1990 U.S. Census, 52.4 percent of Americans were female. In the

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region consists of Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. According to *Deseret News* (2012), these states rank first through fifth, seventh, eleventh, and twelfth in per capita Mormons. Only 7 percent of the U.S. population resides in the mountain region, but 52 percent of the nation's Mormons live there. Utah contains a majority of the Mormons in the mountain region, with almost five times as many as Arizona, the mountain state with the second largest number of Mormons. Thus this regional variable—the only available proxy in the GSS for estimating trends within Utah—is an imperfect but acceptable substitute for locating LDS respondents within the state.



2010 census, 51.6 percent were female.<sup>4</sup> This overall trend mirrors the one that is seen among Mormons living outside Utah, shown in Figure 1. Demographic trends within Mormonism often move in concert with larger, national trends, so this is not surprising (Heaton, Bahr, and Jacobsen 2004; Langolis 1983).

The sex ratio for all Utahns moved toward parity too. According to the 1990 census, 52.5 percent of all Utahns were female. In the 2010 census, men and women were almost equally distributed in the state, with a ratio of 1.01 women for every man. Thus the entire state's sex ratio evened up while the surplus of Utah Mormon women grew. If neither missionary activity, conversion, nor migration can fully explain this trend, what can?

### *MORMON APOSTASY*

We argue that the most plausible explanation for the surplus of Mormon women in Utah is an increase in Mormon men in Utah leaving the church. This explanation is consistent with what sociologists know about religious apostasy generally and comports with the demography of Utah and the LDS Church.

Social scientists call people who abandon or eschew religion "Nones." Nones are becoming more prevalent in the United States. In the 1990 ARIS, 7 percent of U.S. adults responded "none" when asked to specify their religion. In the 2008 ARIS, this figure rose to 15 percent (Kosmin et al. 2009). In 2012, Nones made up 20 percent of the adult population (Hout, Fischer, and Chaves 2013; Pew Research Center 2012b).

Nones are becoming more prevalent in Utah as well. According to the ARIS, Nones made up 8.8 percent of Utah's population in 1990; by 2008, they were 12.5 percent. This change is statistically significant ( $t = 203.48, p < 0.001$ ). Exit polls in Utah conducted by Brigham Young University corroborate ARIS data. Between the 1996 and 2008 elections, the percentage of Utah voters with no religious affiliation rose from 9.7 percent to 18.5 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Some of these people are former Mormons (Phillips and Cragun 2013; see also Agajanian and Blake 2011). When Mormons leave their religion, they are unlikely to switch to a new one. This is because Mormonism is so distinctive that little of a person's accumulated religious capital can be exported to another faith (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2010). Rather than constructing an entirely new religious identity, most ex-Mormons forsake religion (Albrecht and Bahr 1983; Bean 2006). One survey based on a nonrepresentative sample found that only 15 percent of respondents who identified as ex-Mormon had adopted a new religion.

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<sup>4</sup> All demographic information about Utah and the United States in this section are derived from the U.S. Census and can be obtained at the U.S. Census Bureau's website, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

<sup>5</sup> These exit polls are available online at [exitpolldata.byu.edu](http://exitpolldata.byu.edu). Exit polls are not representative of a state's population, and they should be interpreted with caution.

Most described themselves as “atheist,” “agnostic,” “humanist” or didn’t have a label for their beliefs (Why Mormons Question 2012). Over two thirds of ex-Mormons in the GSS claim no religion. In the 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, former Mormons were more likely to have switched into the “unaffiliated” category than into all other faiths combined (Pew Research Center 2015).

Data show that defections from Mormonism are more common in the Rocky Mountain states now than they were in previous decades. Using the GSS, Phillips and Cragun (2013) found that between 1972 and 2000, only 7 percent of respondents in the Rocky Mountain states who were Mormon at age 16 had subsequently left the church—a retention rate of 93 percent. But between 2001 and 2010, this retention rate dropped to 74 percent. Hence in recent waves of the GSS, one in four respondents who were raised in the LDS Church and were living in the Rocky Mountain states had apostatized. Retention rates were stable outside the Rocky Mountain states between 1972 and 2010 (Phillips and Cragun 2013). In the 2008 Religious Landscape Survey, 30 percent of respondents who had been brought up Mormon had left the church (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008:30; see also Sherkat 2014). Six years later, this figure had risen to 36 percent (Pew Research Center 2015). Recall that a disproportionate share of people who were brought up Mormon live in Utah. Forty-three percent of the nation’s lifelong Latter-day Saints reside in the state (Pew Research Center 2009).

Members of the church’s governing hierarchy acknowledge that defections from Mormonism are increasing. Marlin Jensen, former Church Historian and member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, told Reuters, “attrition has accelerated in the last five or ten years.” In a presentation to students at Utah State University in late 2011, Jensen stated, “[Since the Joseph Smith era,] we’ve never had a period of—I’ll call it apostasy—like we’re having right now” (Henderson and Cook 2012).

According to the ARIS, the nationwide ratio of men to women among Nones is 3 to 2 (Kosmin et al. 2009). Studies confirm that men are more likely to abandon religion than are women (Baker and Smith 2009; Hayes 2000; Sherkat 2008). This is evident within Mormonism as well. A 2007 Pew survey found that just 42 percent of the nation’s lifelong Mormons are male and 58 percent are female. Among converts, 49 percent are male and 51 percent are female (Pew Research Center 2009). Because the sex ratio of babies born to Mormon parents cannot be this skewed, men who were raised in the church must be leaving the faith in greater numbers than their female counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Journalists’ accounts support this

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<sup>6</sup> This pattern cannot be explained by lifelong Mormon men dying younger than lifelong Mormon women. We can think of no reason why lifelong Mormon men might die younger than their female counterparts while convert men live just as long as their female counterparts. Moreover, the Pew survey shows that lifelong Mormons are less likely to be widowed than are converts (Pew Research Center 2009).

conclusion. The *Salt Lake Tribune* reports that women outnumber men in special wards—the Mormon equivalent of parishes—that are designed for single Mormons. These wards “provide a haven for LDS singles in a marriage-dominated faith” (Stack 2013). One large Salt Lake City singles ward, which had 693 members, had just 264 men on its roster (Stack 2013). Apostle Dallin H. Oaks assessed the daunting marriage prospects for single LDS women by acknowledging that the church is losing men “at a far higher rate than young women, and there aren’t enough men to go around.”<sup>7</sup>

In sum, the presumption that Mormon men in Utah are leaving the church with greater frequency explains the surplus of Mormon women in Utah. This explanation is consistent with what we know about the religious demography of the nation, the state, and the LDS Church. Nevertheless, one question remains: Why would men be defecting from Mormonism at higher rates than women in Utah but not in the rest of the country? In the remainder of this article we propose an answer.

#### *THE TRANSFORMATION OF UTAH’S MORMON SUBCULTURE*

The increasing sex ratio imbalance among Utah Mormons has taken place alongside a simultaneous trend affecting Latter-day Saints in the state. The percentage of Utah’s citizenry belonging to the LDS Church is declining. This decline started around 1990—about the same time the sex ratio imbalance began widening (Otterstrom 2008). In 1990, Mormons made up 77 percent of Utah’s population (Deseret News 1990), but by late 2008, they accounted for only 60.4 percent (Loomis and Canham 2008; see also Canham 2007). In other words, Mormonism is losing market share in Utah.

A shrinking Mormon majority is diluting the religious subculture that permeates Utah society (Embry 2001; Phillips and Cragun 2013; Rogers 2003; see also Poll 1987). This subculture emanates from the LDS Church but has autonomous characteristics (Cornwall and Thomas 1990; May 1987; Sillitoe 1996; Stark 1998b). It is sustained by the conflation of religious and family networks and by the consolidation of ward and neighborhood boundaries. It is also preserved by the sheer density of Latter-day Saints in the state (Embry 2001; May 1980; see also Marlowe 2005, 2006). In this subculture, church and community norms are fused, and violating church edicts can draw sanctions in nonchurch settings (Barber 1995; Chalverus and Thomas 2011; Phillips 1998; Shipps 2005a).

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<sup>7</sup> This statement was made during a meeting with local church leaders in Seattle, Washington. It was uploaded on February 7, 2012 to the YouTube media channel of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and is available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=93XqR6IOcAw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93XqR6IOcAw).

Studies show that in homogeneous religious communities, religious expectations can assume the characteristics of public norms (Sosis 2005; Wollschleger and Beach 2013). This motivates some people to comply with ecclesiastical mandates not solely out of piety, but also to avoid the disapproval of kin, neighbors, and coworkers (Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Hall 1997; Merino 2012; Sherkat 1997; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). This phenomenon has been observed among Utah Mormons (see Bahr and Fortse 1998; Goodsell 1998; Horne 2009; Top and Chadwick 1998; Wright 1993). Using a sampling frame provided by the LDS Church, Cornwall (1987, 1988, 1998) found that dense Mormon social networks in Utah are associated with church attendance and other measures of institutional involvement but are less related to personal religiosity. Photadis (1965) concludes that in places where Mormons predominate, the connection between belonging and believing is weaker than it is in places where Mormons are a small minority.

In another study using LDS Church data, Albrecht (1988: 269) identifies some Utah Mormons as “ritualists,” who “participate in the various social activities of the church but who are weak in terms of their doctrinal conversion and faith” (see also Albrecht and Bahr 1983; Bahr and Albrecht 1989; Vernon 1975). Phillips found a linear relationship between the capacity of Mormons to monitor one another’s behavior and conformity with church standards. “A Utah Mormon tempted to do yard work on Sunday or put coffee in a shopping cart must assess the odds and consequences of being observed not only by other ward members, but by neighbors, coworkers, friends, and acquaintances” (Phillips 1998: 127; see also McBride 2007; Robertson and Bowles 2010). Cope (2009: 164–165) interviewed Utah Mormons who remained affiliated with the church “purely for the social elements that arise from being perceived as . . . ‘a member in good standing.’” He spoke to others who feared that apostatizing might cause them trouble at work (see also Vernon 1975). Horne reports that converts to Mormonism visiting Utah from other locales recognize the disjunction between belonging and believing in some Utah Mormons. “Visitors may perceive a greater gap between personal belief and behavior than they do in their own congregations in the hinterland” (Horne 2009: 43). According to Knowlton (1976: 91), Utah Mormons have a “reputation for taking their Mormonism for granted” (see also Goldsmith 2005; Moloney 1989).

Of course, most Utah Mormons are not motivated to practice their religion by social pressure to conform. The majority of Utah’s Latter-day Saints believe in the tenets of their faith and will remain stalwart regardless of the religious composition of the state. However, for those with weak intrinsic religious commitments, the burgeoning presence of non-Mormons in Utah’s schools, offices, civic organizations, and neighborhoods lowers the cost of defection. The erosion of the demographic base undergirding the Mormon subculture lessens the stigma of apostasy, and marginal Mormons have more contact with associates who will

countenance withdrawal from the church (Phillips and Cragun 2013). As Wollschleger and Beach (2013: 192) assert,

the gradual weakening of social disincentives against non-religiously affiliated individuals may be leading to a historical situation which provides those who belong but do not believe with the opportunity to finally express their true preferences without penalty. The growth of the religious “nones” could potentially be understood as a result of the waning influence of religion on social institutions . . . which, in turn, has revealed the actual underlying preference structure of wider society.

Outside Utah and a few places in adjacent states, there is no Mormon subculture suffusing neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, and this “underlying preference structure” is already laid bare (Goldsmith 2005; Shipps 2005b). Here, regular interaction among Mormons is generally limited to other members of the ward (Olson and Perl 2011; Stark 1998b; see also Shipps, May, and May 1994; Evans, Cnaan, and Curtis 2013; Orton 1989; Taber 1993). Mormons outside Utah are far less likely than their Utah counterparts to say that most or all of their friends are LDS (Pew Research Center 2012a). In these settings, disobeying the church’s behavioral mandates does not leave the person at risk of censure from associates outside the family or congregation because the majority of people in these areas do not condemn drinking coffee, shopping on Sunday, or going to R-rated movies. Leaving the church may involve conflict with family or with friends in the ward but rarely results in disapproval from neighbors, classmates, or coworkers. Hence where they are sparse, Mormons are not motivated to conform by subcultural pressure, because church norms do not permeate secular social networks (Decoo 2013; Phillips 2001; Shipps 2000). On the basis of his analysis of Utah’s religious demography, Young (1996: 156) asserts that Utah’s Mormon subculture “is not possible elsewhere.” Bahr and Forste (1998: 141) conclude that “contexts where Mormons are a statistically insignificant part of the population differ vastly from higher density contexts.” These contextual factors can explain why rates of apostasy are rising among Mormons in Utah but are stable elsewhere in the nation. As Utah’s religious subculture recedes, Utah is starting to resemble other places where belonging and believing are more tightly linked (Phillips and Cragun 2013).

#### *UTAH MORMON MEN*

Changes in Utah’s religious subculture affect all Latter-day Saints. To account for the widening sex ratio, we must explain why Mormon men with weak religious commitments are more likely to apostatize than are their female counterparts. The fact that men are more likely to forsake religion in general is part of the answer.

But we also suspect that one particular element of Utah's Mormon subculture forces the hand of young men with weak religious commitments, exposing their ambivalence to the Mormon way of life.

Aside from being disproportionately male, people who forsake religion are typically younger than the general population (Baker and Smith 2009; Hayes 2000; Kosmin et al. 2009; Sherkat 2008). This is true within Mormonism as well (Sherkat 2014). Latter-day Saints in Utah are most likely to disengage from their religion in their late teens or early twenties (Albrecht 1998; Duke and Johnson 1997). A veteran journalist who has specialized in covering Mormonism for over twenty years writes that apostle Russell M. Ballard "acknowledged that the [church] was worried about massive losses in the [18 to 30] age group" (Stack 2011). This is relevant because for decades, Mormon leaders have decreed that every eligible young man should serve a full-time proselytizing mission (Faust 1996; Richards 1998). In a study of returned missionaries, Chou (2013: 205) reports that "those who do not feel like serving a mission face enormous social pressure, especially in communities with higher concentrations of Mormons" (see also Bushman 2008). This pressure comes at an age when men are susceptible to declining religiosity (Jensen and Jensen 2002; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007; see also Albrecht 1998). In previous years, when Utah's Mormon population was even more concentrated, subcultural pressure was sufficient to push some young men with apprehensions to go on a mission because the stigma of refusing was significant (Chou 2013; Phillips 2001; Stack 2001).

Not serving a mission can attenuate or delay a young man's advancement in Mormonism's lay hierarchy. The LDS Church has a lay ministry, and all positions in the ward are staffed by the membership. The most important leadership positions are reserved for men. Hammarberg (2013) likens careers in the lay ministry to climbing a ladder, and men who perform their duties well receive greater authority and responsibility as they rise. In Utah, positions of distinction in the lay clergy confer prestige to the men who hold them, not only in church circles but also in the larger community (Mauss 1994; Shipps 2000; Sorenson 1997). According to Shepherd and Shepherd (1994: 162), "Within Mormon society the successful lay career is taken as an indicator of the individual's enduring moral character." Shepherd and Shepherd (1994: 163) call the Mormon missionary system "an institutional mechanism for structuring and channeling lay religious careers in the LDS Church" (see also Shepherd and Shepherd 1998). Bushman (2008: 46–47) writes: "For the young men, going on a mission is both a rite of passage and a test of faithfulness. . . . The missions are the training ground for the next generation of Mormon leaders." Going on a mission is correlated with remaining active in the church later in life (Bushman 2008; Chadwick, Top, and McClendon 2010; Roghaar 1991). Conversely, rejecting a mission call evinces low religiosity, "foreshadowing a loss of faith" (Shepherd and Shepherd 1998: 27).

It is possible that as Utah's Mormon majority wanes, the norms promoting missionary service are becoming too diluted to consistently exact compliance from young men who do not want to go on a mission. Stigma is diminished and can be managed by stocking one's social networks with non-LDS associates, who are now abundant in all sectors of Utah society. Studies show that among Mormons, the proportion of one's associates who are LDS and measures of religious activity tend to decline together (Cornwall 1988, 1998).

By contrast, Mormon women have never been enjoined to serve missions. Young women with tepid religious sentiments need not choose between meeting an arduous church obligation and "outing" themselves as marginally committed. They can mask their reservations about the church or disclose them as they please. In her study of missionaries, Chou (2013: 214) found that "a significantly higher percentage of male respondents mentioned that they had experienced social pressure to serve a mission." This is why we hypothesize that when subjective religiosity is held constant, young Mormon men in Utah are at greater risk of apostasy than are young Mormon women.

Outside Utah, there is no societal pressure on young men who do not want to serve a mission. Pressure may be applied by the ward or the family, but rejecting a mission call results in few consequences in the neighborhood, school, or workplace, let alone the wider community (Phillips 2001). Moreover, Latter-day Saints who live in regions where Mormons are sparse have always been free to apostatize without incurring costs outside their ward or family. Perhaps this is why sex ratios in the church have remained stable outside Utah. We hypothesize that as Mormon majorities in Utah wane, the behavior of church members in the state will come to resemble that of Mormons elsewhere in the nation.<sup>8</sup> Latter-day Saints with strong religious commitments will continue to participate and adhere to church standards, while those with weak commitments will be more free to disengage. This will likely raise the mean religiosity of self-identified Latter-day Saints in Utah, but this rise may be accomplished by shedding church members who are affiliated largely for subcultural reasons.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION*

Our findings are relevant for a research literature establishing an inverse correlation between religious market share and religious activity. Mormonism in Utah is an anomalous case in this literature (Olson 2002). We have explained the Mormon anomaly by describing a religious subculture that makes church participation a component of one's public reputation. Standing in the community and the extended family has traditionally been tied to compliance with church mandates in

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<sup>8</sup> Currently, there are substantial differences between the behavior of Mormons in Utah and Mormons living elsewhere (Phillips and Cragun 2011; Poll 1987).

Utah. This has elevated religious activity among Utah Mormons beyond what the market share thesis predicts. Religious markets with similar dynamics have been observed in other places and with other groups (Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Sherkat 1997; Sherkat and Wilson 1995).

The salience of Utah's subculture is eroding as the Mormon majority dwindles. Demographers project that the LDS Church will continue to lose market share in the state (Otterstrom 2008). If this occurs, it will give social scientists an opportunity to observe how an erstwhile predominant church reacts when social networks and structures that were once permeated with religious import become differentiated and secularized. The increasing apostasy of young men is one manifestation of this erosion. An apparent decline in church attendance among Mormons in the Rocky Mountain states (which include Utah) is another. Before 2001, Mormons in the Rocky Mountain states attended church significantly more often than did Mormons in other regions. But this difference is no longer significant, and attendance is now more uniform across the nation (Phillips and Cragun 2013).

The mechanisms that have been advanced to explain the vitality of churches that have small market share have heretofore failed to account for Mormon vitality in Utah. For instance, a mechanism proposed by Olson (2008b: 354) centers on how religious switching bolsters religiosity in groups with small religious market share:

All else being equal, groups with smaller population share have much higher rates of members leaving and new members joining. Both of these processes (joining and leaving) tend to select for more committed current members. The least committed are, all else being equal, the most likely to leave the group. Among the pool of persons who might join a religious group, it is the most committed of the potential joiners who are most likely to join. Though it might seem counterintuitive, denominations and congregations with higher membership turnover rates have current members that are more committed.

Preliminary research shows that this mechanism is consistent with activity in Mormon wards outside Utah (Phillips 2014). A nationwide census of religious affiliation in 2001 found that Mormonism "attract[s] a large number of converts ('in-switchers'), but also nearly as large a number of apostates ('out-switchers')" (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 2001: 25). However, Olson's mechanism cannot account for the robust religious activity that has traditionally been observed among Utah Mormons. Recall that the LDS Church retained over 90 percent of its members in the intermountain west before 2001, and the rate of Mormon growth by conversion in Utah is lower than that in any other state. Hence most of the switching within Mormonism before 2001 occurred in places where the church had a smaller market share. Nevertheless, continuing Mormon apostasy in Utah could eventually foster the kind of dynamic that Olson describes, and the activity of



other denominations in Utah seems consistent with his supposition (Phillips 2014; Stark and Finke 2004).

Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000) propose a different mechanism. According to them, free religious markets naturally gravitate toward broad religious pluralism and the absence of a predominant church. People vary in their religious predilections, and no single denomination can meet the needs of disparate market niches. Pluralism promotes competition among churches and motivates pastors to serve their flock, because people are free to join or leave congregations as they see fit. By contrast, predominant churches must maintain their status by merging with government to regulate religious competition (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Predominant churches are moribund because regulations remove pastors' incentives to serve and inhibit switching, leaving many adherents with unmet religious needs (Stark and Finke 2002).

Although this theory been contested, there is evidence that members of state-sponsored churches in regulated religious markets exhibit low religiosity (for a review of this literature, see Fox and Tabory 2008). However, the LDS Church is not a moribund predominant faith. Moreover, the constraints on religious behavior imposed by Utah's Mormon subculture are not derived from government (Phillips 1999). Rather, they emerge *sui generis* through the consolidation of church and community networks, the fusion of religious and public norms, and a common history and heritage (Shipps 2005b). This subculture has held off competing churches by raising the costs of inactivity and apostasy (Flynn 2005). The ethnic aspects of Utah Mormons also circumscribe and consolidate religious needs, effectively shrinking the number of niches in the state's religious market. This allows the church to appeal to a larger percentage of its members than Stark and Finke's theory might otherwise predict (Phillips 1999; see also Hamberg and Pettersson 2002).

Nevertheless, recent administrative changes in the LDS Church could be interpreted as a response to threats from religious and secular competition. In 2012, the church lowered the required age for missionaries from 19 to 18. This change allows Mormon youths to move seamlessly from high school to mission without interrupting their college education. Missions are thus less disruptive and preempt any secularizing effect of the university. Since Utahns are vastly overrepresented in the LDS missionary corps (Ostling and Ostling 2007), this policy disproportionately benefits them.

The church has also reorganized its programs for single members in an effort to "reach young members who have drifted from the faith" and promote religious homogamy (Stack 2011). Special wards for single people age 18 to 30 were created along the Wasatch Front, including 121 in metropolitan Salt Lake City alone (Stack 2011). Other wards for older singles were created with special membership

requirements, including holding a calling and regular meeting attendance (Stack 2013).

There could be many reasons for these and other, similar administrative changes. But they are consistent with the sorts of things churches do to shield themselves from religious and secular competitors. These actions contrast with a Mormon church in Utah that Armand Mauss (1994: xii) once called “smug” and “complacent.” They may also indicate the emergence of the kind of market dynamic that Stark and Finke describe.

On the basis of these observations, we suspect that there may be a threshold where the mechanisms that ensure conformity in a religious subculture that conflates church, family, and civic life are supplanted by the mechanisms that govern more typical religious markets. Comparing Mormonism to other denominations with a regional stronghold may give some indication of where this threshold lies. For example, Utah is about 60 percent LDS, depending on the data source and the method for counting members (Newport 2014; Phillips and Cragun 2011). By contrast, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) has a 24 percent market share in North Dakota and a 14 percent market share in both South Dakota and Minnesota (Grammich et al. 2012). Lutherans have a traditional presence and an identifiable subculture in this area, and other Lutheran denominations are prominent in the region (Lieske 1993). Nevertheless, this level of market penetration does not produce the kind of coercive religious subculture that has characterized Utah because members of the ELCA are most active in places where they are a small minority and least active in these traditional strongholds, just as the market share thesis predicts (Brewer, Jezefowicz, and Stonebraker 2006). Only time can reveal the degree to which market share accounts for this contrast.

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