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# Religious Market Share and Mormon Church Activity

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*A theory of religious activity based on principles of supply-side economics has generated considerable controversy in the sociology of religion. This theory posits that religious pluralism increases rates of religious activity by promoting competition between churches. This paper tests "supply-side theory" with data describing US Mormons. Results uncover patterns in Mormon church activity that refute the theory. The paper outlines several characteristics of Mormonism that explain its deviance from the theorized outcome, and suggests a scope condition for supply-side theory.*

Secularization theses assert that churches are most robust in places where they enjoy a religious monopoly. In such places, church authority is uncontested, and hence levels of religious activity are presumed high. Secularization theses further assert that religious pluralism weakens religious activity, since competing claims to exclusive truth undermine church authority (see Berger 1967). However, a growing literature in the sociology of religion questions the validity of these assertions. Specifically, critics point to persistent, vigorous religious activity in the United States as evidence against secularization (Warner 1993).

Based on this discrepancy, some scholars promote a model of religious activity using principles of supply-side economics. This "supply-side theory" reverses the logic of secularization, holding that it is religious pluralism — not monopoly — that generates religious activity (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). This is a departure from bedrock assumptions in the sociology of religion, and considerable debate surrounds the theory (Yamane 1997; Iannaccone 1995a, 1995b; Chaves 1995; Demarath 1995).

This paper outlines supply-side theory and tests its claims with data describing US Mormons. The ramification of Mormon church activity for supply-side theory is widely acknowledged (see Finke 1997: 57; Warner 1993:

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1056; Finke and Stark 1989: 1054; Breault 1989b), and this study meets specific calls for research on the subject (Ellison and Sherkat 1995: 1431; Sherkat and Wilson 1995: 1017).

## A SUPPLY-SIDE THEORY OF RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

Supply-side theory is a rational choice model, and employs the language and logic of economics. The theory assumes that “demand” for religion remains constant across time and place, and attributes shifts in rates of religious activity to changes in the “supply” of religion (Finke 1997). The theory holds that when “religious markets” are pluralistic, churches must compete with one another for members. Such competition promotes religious activity, because each church must earn its “market share” by meeting members’ demands (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). As markets get more pluralistic, competition among churches stiffens, and rates of religious activity rise. Conversely, in places where one denomination dominates the religious market, the theory predicts low levels of religious activity, since a monopoly church faces little competition, and thus has few incentives to satisfy members’ demands (Stark and Iannaccone 1994).

Supply-side theory asserts that religious pluralism best promotes religious activity when church competition is unrestrained (Stark 1997: 185-186; Stark, Finke, and Iannaccone 1995: 442). Since the presence (or legacy) of state churches and laws restricting proselytizing impedes church competition in many nations (Stark 1997), the United States is an ideal site for testing the theory. Indeed, supply-side theory is a key element in a proposed “new paradigm” for the sociological study of United States religion (Warner 1993), and some scholars suspect that the theory’s “free market” metaphors may not be applicable outside the US<sup>1</sup> (see Warner 1997; 1993: 1080). In the following section, I review studies testing supply-side theory in the United States.

## TESTS OF SUPPLY-SIDE THEORY

Four studies test supply-side theory using church membership rates as a measure of religious activity. One of these finds support for the theory (Finke and Stark 1988), while the other three do not (Blau, Land, and Redding 1992; Land, Deane, and Blau 1991; Breault 1989a). However, findings from these studies are suspect, because the rate of church membership is a crude measure of religious activity, implying little about more significant forms of religious behavior (see Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996: 206). For example, church membership figures include the nominally affiliated who never attend church

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<sup>1</sup> Even scholars who do assert supply-side theory’s universal applicability still regard the U S as the “ideal typical” free religious economy (see Stark 1997; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Finke 1997).

activities, and exclude frequent attendees without formal church affiliation. Moreover, some denominations count children as members, while others do not.

Finke, Guest, and Stark (1996) examine church attendance rates in 942 New York towns in 1855 and 1865. They find that towns with greater religious pluralism had higher church attendance rates, as supply-side theory predicts. However, this study does not account for differences in the denominational composition of the towns used as units of analysis. Since, *ceteris paribus*, some denominations promote church attendance more successfully than others (Iannaccone 1994), the church attendance rate within a town may have been more a product of its denominational composition rather than its degree of religious pluralism. Thus, if members of denominations with uniformly high church attendance rates are disproportionately found in pluralistic towns, the correlation between pluralism and church attendance could be spurious.

Stark and McCann (1993) sidestep the need to consider the denominational composition of religious markets by analyzing religious activity within a single denomination. In this study, Stark and McCann examine Catholic activity using 102 US dioceses as units of analysis. They find that, overall, Catholic activity rises as the concentration of Catholics within diocesan boundaries falls. This suggests — consistent with supply-side theory — that rates of religious activity within a denomination are maximized where its market share is least, and competition for members is keen. Nevertheless, some of Stark and McCann's specific results temper the strength of this overall conclusion. For instance, Stark and McCann find that US Catholics are highly active in the sparsely Catholic southern and western states, as supply-side theory predicts. But the densely Catholic East also has high rates of Catholic activity — surpassing national rates and trailing only the South among US regions (1993: 118-119). Thus, Stark and McCann's data actually imply that Catholics are highly active at both ends of the market share continuum — a fact obscured by the significant negative correlation between Catholic activity and market share for the nation at large.

In sum, tests of supply-side theory in the US are inconclusive. Existing studies use poor measures of religious activity or yield equivocal results. In the following section, I address these deficiencies and test supply-side theory with data describing US Mormons.

## ASSESSING MORMON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

The distribution of Mormons (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or “LDS” church) in the United States provides an excellent opportunity to test supply-side theory. Mormonism is a putative monopoly church in Utah and has substantial market share in the intermountain west, but Mormonism competes as a small minority church elsewhere in the nation (1997-98 *Deseret News Church Almanac* 1997 [hereafter, *Church Almanac*]). Since supply-side theory asserts that large market share churches have little incentive

to satisfy members, Mormon church activity should be highest in places outside Utah and the intermountain west, where the church faces greater competition. Available data, however, suggest that this is not the case.

TABLE 1

Frequency of Church Attendance Among US Mormons\*

Q. How often do you attend religious services?	Intermountain West		United States (not including Intermountain West)	
	Percent	n	Percent	n
A. Never	4.0	5	13.7	14
Less than once a year	6.5	8	9.8	10
1-2 times a year	7.3	9	10.8	11
Several times a year	2.4	3	3.9	4
About once a month	5.6	7	3.9	4
2-3 times a month	2.4	3	8.8	9
Nearly every week	3.2	4	8.8	9
Every week	59.8	73	32.4	33
Several times a week	9.7	12	7.8	8
		n = 124		n = 102

\* Data from General Social Surveys 1987-1996 ( $X^2 = 24.6, p < .01$ ).

Table 1 presents church attendance figures for a sample of United States Mormons. The sample is split to compare the church attendance of Mormons residing in the intermountain west, where Mormons are greatly over-represented relative to their national presence,<sup>2</sup> and other parts of the country, where they are typically (and often considerably) under-represented. In 1996 the eight intermountain states contained less than 6 percent of the nation's total population, but encompassed 52 percent of American Mormons (1997-98 *Church Almanac* 1997). This distribution has remained fairly constant since 1970 (Bennion and Young 1996). The table reveals that weekly (or more) church attendance for Mormons in the intermountain west is much higher (69.5 percent) than for Mormons elsewhere in the nation (40.2 percent). Indeed, outside their mountain stronghold, Mormon church attendance is unremarkable for a sect.

<sup>2</sup> The intermountain states are: Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Arizona, Montana, New Mexico, and Colorado. These eight states rank 1-5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 11-12<sup>th</sup> in per capita Mormons, respectively (1997-98 *Church Almanac* 1997).

Other data indicate that adult Mormon men in Utah are more likely to hold the “Melchizedek” priesthood (the highest of two levels in Mormonism’s lay priesthood) than Mormon men elsewhere (Young 1994). This privilege is reserved for men whose commitment and activity within the faith is screened and approved by both ward (parish) and stake (diocesan) leaders. Data from 1982 (the last year these figures were published in the church’s biennial almanac) show that 70 percent of adult LDS men in Utah were Melchizedek priesthood holders; the rate for the United States *sans* Utah was 53 percent (1983 *Church Almanac* 1983: 217-219).

Available sources, then, support the conclusion — contrary to supply-side theory — that Mormons are more active where they *predominate*. But the data used to establish this claim are not entirely conclusive. First, church attendance figures from the General Social Survey cannot be isolated by state, since general region of the country is the survey’s only indicator of respondents’ geographic location. This forces my comparison of church attendance rates to rely on an analytically imprecise amalgam of states, grouping Utah (75.2 percent LDS) and Idaho (27.8 percent LDS) with states having much smaller Mormon populations, like Colorado (2.7 percent LDS) (1997-98 *Church Almanac* 1997). Second, adult men who join the LDS church are required to demonstrate commitment within the church before they are eligible for the Melchizedek priesthood. Waits of up to a year are common. Given that many new members of the LDS church outside Utah are adult converts, it is possible that length of tenure in the church explains some of the disparity in rates of Melchizedek priesthood ordination noted above.

### *Mormon Church Activity within Utah*

Problems with the data presented above can be minimized by examining Mormon religious activity in Utah, where analyses can employ smaller, more precise units of analysis, and where available measures of religious activity better reflect actual religious commitment. For the following investigation, I use Utah counties as units of analysis. Finke, Guest, and Stark (1996) object to counties as units of analysis in tests of supply-side theory because counties often encompass several towns, each of which may be a discrete religious market in its own right. Since towns within a county can have different levels of religious pluralism, the potential for measurement error is greater for counties than for towns as units of analysis. However, Land, Deane, and Blau (1991: 238) defend counties as units of analysis for testing supply-side theory, arguing that “church membership is more likely to extend beyond city limits to urban fringes than to extend beyond county boundaries.” Thus, while the objection of Finke, Guest, and Stark is noted, I concur with Land, Deane, and Blau’s (1991: 238) conclusion that “sociological findings should be robust with respect to variations in units of analysis based on arbitrary political-geographic configurations.”

As a measure of religious activity, I use the percentage of eligible Mormon men in each Utah county ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood in 1980. This rate varies from a high of 82.8 percent in Cache County to a low of 48.6 percent in Grand County ( $\mu=67.8$  percent,  $\sigma=8.5$  percent). These data are from the *1981 Church Almanac* (1981: 228-229). The rate of Melchizedek priesthood ordination is not significantly affected by length of tenure in the church among Utah Mormon men for two reasons. First, the ratio of Utah Mormons born in the church exceeds members by conversion, 5:1, and the annual growth rate for Mormonism in Utah due to conversion is just .5 percent (Ludlow 1992: 1525). Thus, a large majority of Utah Mormon men are raised in the church, becoming eligible for Melchizedek priesthood ordination on their 18th birthday. Second, a full 95 percent of Utah Mormons in 1990 had at least 5 years experience in the church — more than enough time to demonstrate the commitment necessary to receive the Melchizedek priesthood (Ludlow 1992: 1531). There is no reason to suspect that this was not the case in 1980 as well. The rate of Melchizedek priesthood ordination is a cogent indicator of Mormon religious activity, since meeting the requirements for Melchizedek priesthood ordination involves — in addition to church attendance — abstinence from tea, coffee, alcohol, and tobacco, and the sustained payment of 10 percent of one's income to the church (see Burton 1994).<sup>3</sup>

Correlating Melchizedek priesthood ordination rates for Utah's 29 counties with the percentage of persons in each county that are Mormon in 1980 (constructed from raw numbers of Mormons per Utah county listed in the *1981 Church Almanac* and 1980 census data) reveals the relationship between the rate of Melchizedek priesthood ordination and Mormon church market share in Utah. The scatterplot in Figure 1 presents this relationship: a positive correlation suggesting that high concentrations of Mormons accompany high levels of religious activity among LDS men<sup>4</sup> ( $r=.61, p<.01$ ).

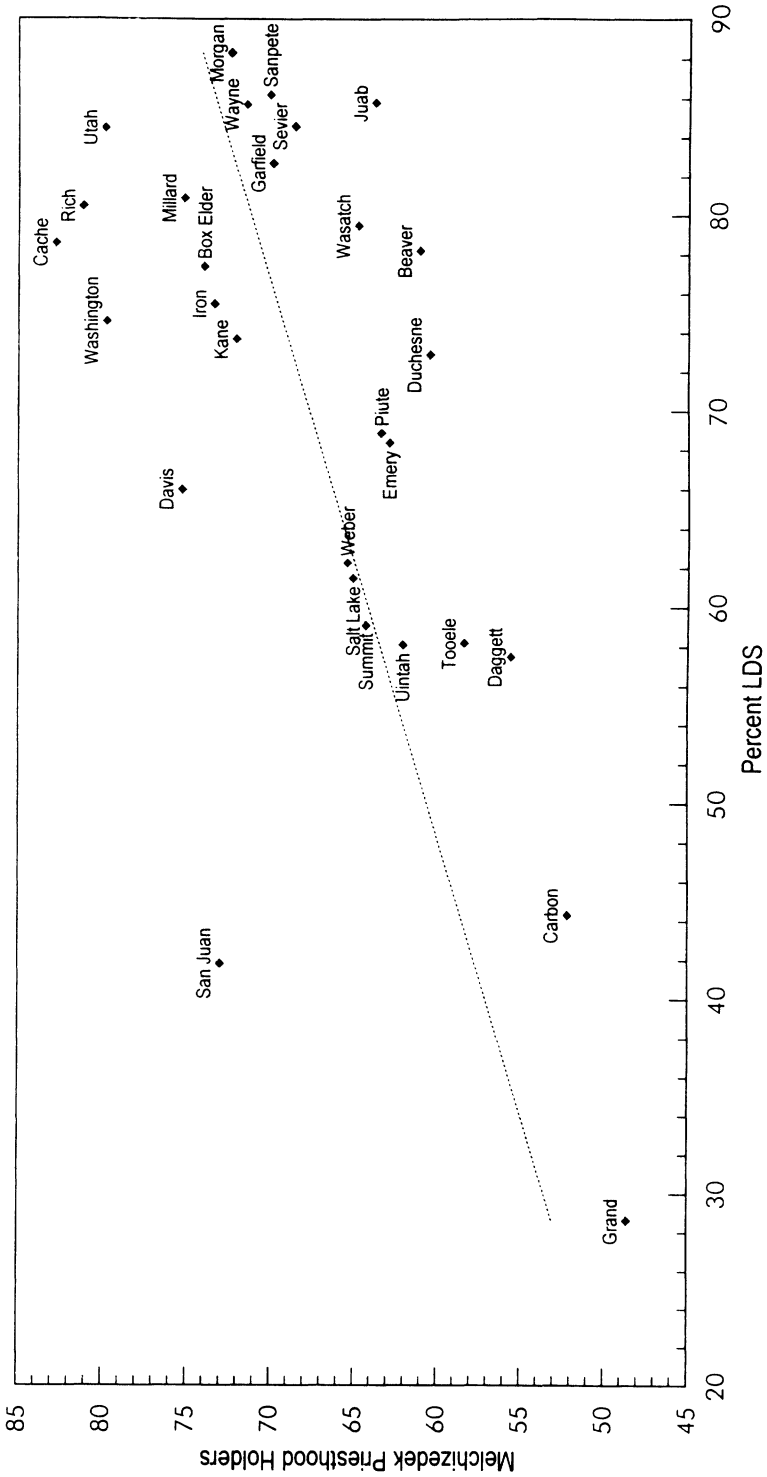
While the percentage of a county's residents that are LDS determines Mormon market share, it does not measure religious pluralism. Some counties with a low percentage of Mormons may also lack adequate religious competition

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, this rate does not measure the religious activity of Mormon women. Suitable generic measures of Mormon religious activity are not available. However, supply-side theory does not predict divergent rates of religious activity by sex. Here I assume that levels of religious activity for Mormon men and women are covariant.

<sup>4</sup> San Juan County is a substantive outlier. Thirty-eight percent of the county's 1980 residents are Native Americans living on a reservation. The vast majority of these residents are not LDS (Young 1996; McPherson 1995). Thus, the percentage of San Juan County that is Mormon (41.8 percent) does not reflect the actual concentration of Mormon residents in the county. Excluding San Juan County's reservation population (taken from 1980 census figures) from the analysis brings the county much closer to the regression line ( $r=.70, p < .01$ ).

**FIGURE 1**  
Percent of Mormon Men Holding the Melchizedek Priesthood by Percent LDS for Utah Counties, 1980\*



$r = .61, p < .01$ . \* Data from 1981 *Deseret News Church Almanac* and 1980 *Census of Population*.



from other churches, and counties with large LDS populations may nevertheless have many other religious alternatives.

To determine the effect of religious pluralism on the rate of Melchizedek priesthood ordination in Utah, I use data collected by the Glenmary Research Center. These data provide the number of adherents belonging to 111 religious denominations for each US county in 1980<sup>5</sup> (Quinn, *et al.* 1982). To transform this data into a variable measuring the extent of religious pluralism in each Utah county, I calculated a Herfindahl diversity index for each. The Herfindahl diversity index is the most common operationalization of religious pluralism in tests of supply-side theory (see Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996; Blau, Land, and Redding 1992; Land, Deane, and Blau 1991). The formula for the index is  $1 - \sum(x_i/X)^2$ , where  $x_i$  is the number of adherents in religious denomination  $i$  and  $X$  is the total population of the county. The index yields a number from 0 to 1, with 1 representing a maximally diverse market structure. Utah counties range from an index of .63 for Salt Lake County to a low of virtually zero for several counties with veritable Mormon monopolies ( $\mu=.15$ ,  $\sigma=.16$ ).

The measure of religious pluralism is used as an independent variable in an OLS regression equation with the rate of Melchizedek priesthood ordination as the dependent variable. To improve the validity of results from this equation, I also employ two control variables. The first is a measure of ethnic diversity, constructed with the Herfindahl diversity index and 1980 census data reporting the ethnic composition of Utah counties ( $\mu=.09$ ,  $\sigma=.14$ ). Religious and ethnic identities are often overlapping or coextensive (Bruce 1996), and this conflation can make religious markets appear more pluralistic than they actually are. For example, an ecological unit populated by two separatist ethnic groups, each with its own distinct religion and place of worship would generate a diversity index greater than 0. Nevertheless, since members of either church are highly unlikely to switch to the other — dissatisfaction with their own church notwithstanding — the index *should* be 0 (see Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996: 207). Holding ethnic diversity constant minimizes potential error introduced by parallel religious markets in the same ecological unit (see Stark, Finke, and Iannaccone 1995: 442-443).

I also control for the percentage of a county's population residing outside cities and towns of 2500 people or more ( $\mu=62$  percent  $\sigma=34$  percent). Finke and Stark (1988) argue that sufficient access to religious options affects religious competition and therefore rates of religious activity. The comparatively high concentration of churches in cities and towns provides easier access to these options and facilitates higher levels of religious activity than in rural areas,

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<sup>5</sup> Finke and Stark (1989) question the utility of the Glenmary Research Center data for testing supply-side theory, mainly on the grounds that several significant Black Protestant groups are excluded from the survey. Given Utah's small African-American population, this does not affect my analysis. Elsewhere Breault (1989b) argues for the adequacy of the Glenmary Research Center data for tests of supply-side theory.

where few nearby religious options and burdens of transportation combine to inhibit religious activity (Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996: 205). This control is more relevant for the several tests of supply-side theory using data from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (e.g., Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996; Blau, Land, and Redding 1992; Land, Deane, and Blau 1991; Finke and Stark 1988) than for my contemporary analysis. In spite of the sparse population and large size of some Utah counties, driving a car from a rural Utah home to the nearest town for church is probably no more burdensome than walking across town for church in 1855 or 1865 — the years examined by Finke, Guest, and Stark (1996). Nevertheless, to minimize potential error introduced by the effect of population dispersion on the accessibility of religious options, I hold the number of people outside towns of 2500 or more constant. Towns of 2500 are large enough to support a plurality of religious options. Indeed, almost half the towns used as religious markets by Finke, Guest, and Stark (1996: 208) had fewer than 2000 residents.

TABLE 2

Regression Coefficients for Religious Diversity, Ethnic Diversity, and Rural Location with Rate of Melchizedek Priesthood Ordinations as Dependent Variable for Utah Counties, 1980

	$\beta$	<i>b</i>
Religious diversity	-.66	-35.64*
Ethnic diversity	.13	8.22
Rural location	-.23	-5.79

$R^2 = .36$ , \*  $p < .01$ ,  $n = 29$

Results from the OLS regression equation appear in Table 2. The model accounts for 36 percent of the variance in Melchizedek priesthood ordination rates, with the lion's share of this variance explained by the measure of religious pluralism. This measure has a significant and *negative* impact on the rate of Melchizedek priesthood ordination. Neither control variable is statistically significant. The overall model's high level of statistical significance ( $p < .01$ ) is especially noteworthy given the small number of cases ( $n = 29$ ). These results show that low levels of religious pluralism in Utah counties accompany high rates of Mormon religious activity. This finding is wholly inconsistent with supply-side theory's claims.

### *Acknowledging the Mormon Exception*

Supply-side theory's advocates acknowledge that monopoly churches occasionally maintain high rates of religious activity. Proponents offer no

systematic explanation for these anomalies, but three cursory explanations appear in the literature. None of these explain Utah Mormon church activity.

First, Finke, Guest, and Stark (1996: 205) contend that “when one religion captures a large segment of the [religious] market, minority religions keep the dominant [religion] on its toes.” Given that Mormon church activity and LDS market share are negatively correlated, this would imply that the church is most “on its toes” where its monopoly is strongest. This contradicts a base axiom of supply-side theory: that monopoly churches are languid and inefficient (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Moreover, a noted sociologist of Mormonism describes the LDS church in Utah as “smug” and “complacent” (Mauss 1994: xii), and less “on its toes” than elsewhere in the nation.

Second, Finke (1997: 58 emphasis mine) holds that “when denominations dominate local markets, they find effective ways to allow for competition and pluralism *within* the organization.” This suggests that intra-organizational variability undergirds successful monopoly churches. But this does not describe the Utah Mormon case.

The LDS church exhibits a high degree of uniformity in doctrine, practice, and organization worldwide. This uniformity is imposed by programs assisting the transformation of the expanding church from a regional subculture to an international denomination (Mauss 1994). Within Mormonism, Sunday school curricula, the format of worship services, the content of church publications, standards of member worthiness, even the floor plans of meeting houses are painstakingly standardized across political and cultural boundaries (Shipps 1994a, 1994b). One observer notes: “Today’s centralized [Mormon] church, situated in the American intermountain west, works fastidiously to assure that the gospel message *plus* the church organization is the same everywhere” (Cleverley 1996: 70, emphasis in original). Such standardization disallows intra-organizational competition and pluralism. For example, the LDS church permits no variation in the format and content of church meetings to accommodate the demands of rich versus poor Mormons, even though the preferred styles of worship for rich and poor people are known to diverge (see Bainbridge 1997).

A third explanation suggests that monopoly churches may foster high levels of religious activity when the church serves as a vessel of cultural and political resistance against external pressures (Finke and Stark 1989: 1054). However, Utah Mormonism is a less salient tool of cultural resistance today (and its host society far less hostile) than during the first decades of this century (see Alexander 1986), yet data suggest that levels of church activity in Utah are higher now. For instance, Alexander (1986: 108) notes that church attendance among Utah Mormons in 1915 “was very low by today’s standards, generally under 15 percent.” However, as Mormons began to assimilate into the American mainstream, this rate began to climb. Arrington and Bitton (1979: 285) report that about 35 percent of Mormons attended church weekly in the 1930s and 40s, and by the 1970s — when Mormonism emerged as a *bona fide* international

denomination — the number of weekly attendees increased to 48 percent (see also Cowan 1985: 69). Finally, a recent sample of Mormons from Utah and other intermountain states reveals that 69.5 percent attend church at least once a week (See Table 1).

The inverse relationship between religious pluralism and LDS church activity in Utah implies that — net of any variance explained by intra-organizational dynamics or cultural resistance — Mormon religious behavior intensifies as the density of church members rises. This point receives detailed treatment below.

## EXPLAINING UTAH MORMON CHURCH ACTIVITY

In this section, I argue that dense concentrations of Mormons in Utah elevate rates of religious activity by consolidating church and community social ties. I also offer Utah Mormonism as an important caveat for supply-side theory, and suggest a necessary scope condition for the theory.

In many Utah towns and counties, denominational ties pervade work, family, neighborhood, and friendship networks. These consolidated social ties conflate significant aspects of religious and public life in Utah, and increase Mormons' stake in conformity to church standards, since high status in the church is tantamount to good standing in the community (Shepherd and Shepherd 1994). For instance, some lay responsibilities, or "callings," within the LDS church carry considerable social prestige in Utah. Such callings (e.g., bishop, high councilman) are often invoked as evidence for a person's good character in community settings (Mauss 1994). Consolidated social ties also fuse church and community norms, making deviance from the former a breach of decorum in the latter. This makes disobeying *church* rules subject to *community* sanctions. 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. Fused norms thus increase compliance with church strictures in Utah, since these acts (and others like them) are not deviant in the nation at large. The greater the density of Mormons, the more coextensive church and community networks and norms, and hence the higher the rate of Mormon church activity.

Consolidated church and community social ties promote church activity among other groups as well. Ellison and Sherkat (1995) find that African Americans in the rural South attend church more than non-southern counterparts, even after measures of religiosity are held constant. Since segregation in the rural South compels the Black church to assume many community functions, religious activity serves as a "barometer of [community] solidarity" in these settings (Ellison and Sherkat 1995: 1431). Moreover, activity in the southern Black church provides means to achieve social status where

secular opportunities are lacking. Thus, much like Utah Mormons, “the decisions of rural southern Blacks about participation in congregational activities have been shaped to a considerable degree by social norms and expectations” (Ellison and Sherkat 1995: 1416).

This notion is also consistent with Stark and McCann’s (1993) finding (detailed above) that Catholic activity is high in the densely Catholic eastern US. Perhaps concentrated parishes in states like Rhode Island (almost as Catholic as Utah is Mormon [Kosmin and Lachman 1993]) promote church participation in the same way as Utah’s LDS wards, and account for high rates of Catholic activity in the region.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPLY-SIDE THEORY

Supply-side theory asserts that religious pluralism stimulates church activity by making more religious options available to potential adherents. This presumes, of course, that religious consumers may freely choose from among these options. However, when like-minded religionists are densely concentrated, consolidated social networks can fuse church and community norms, constraining adherents’ exercise of religious options and adding significant costs to otherwise “free” choices about church activity (see Sherkat 1997; Ellison 1995). This is noted — but not explored — by Stark, Finke, and Iannacone (1995: 442-443).

This suggests that the real relationship between church activity and religious pluralism in free religious markets might be curvilinear. It is apparent that competition for members in pluralistic milieux forces churches to meet the demands of potential adherents. But this fact is not inconsistent with the notion that at sufficient densities (perhaps when a numerical majority obtains [see Bruce 1996: 134-135]) the consolidation of church and community social ties promotes church activity among members of the monopoly church (see Bainbridge 1997: 350-354; Demarath 1995: 106).

In sum, this study shows that to the degree that church and community social ties are consolidated and religious and community norms fused, large market share churches will exhibit high levels of religious activity. Future tests of supply-side theory must consider, operationalize, and hold constant these constraints on religious choices.

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