

# Religious Tolerance: Mormons in the American Mainstream

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MORMON CHURCH from a radical nineteenth-century socio-religious movement into a respectable denomination in the twentieth century raises sociological questions on whether or how distinctive Mormon elements can survive in our mass culture. This study, which measures the social acceptability of Mormons among representative groups of college students, allows us to make at least some cautious judgments on the social space Mormons now occupy in Canada and the United States.

Mormonism has a long history of antagonism to the American way of life even though, in other ways, it is quintessentially American. From its very inception, Mormonism established itself as a separatist group, viewed itself as exclusively true, and conducted an aggressive proselyting program. Ministers who were trying to build their own churches saw Mormon missionaries as "sheep stealers," a condition that still persists.

In addition to its organizational conflicts, other points of difference with most American churches are some distinctive Mormon doctrines, some central in contemporary belief and some not. The principle of eternal progression (human beings can also become gods) seems to diminish the transcendence of godhood. The Mormon view of events surrounding the Millennium includes the destruction of the United States and the establishment of a theocracy in which oppressed American Indians will play a large role. At least one sectarian critic has called Mormonism "a spiritual maze . . . a polytheistic nightmare of garbled doctrine draped with the garment of Christian terminology" (Martin 1965, 198).

Mormons themselves are less likely to talk about distinctive doctrines than about healthy lifestyles. They present themselves as moral and industrious citizens who emphasize the virtues of family life and whose primary peculiarities

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are larger-than-average families and a very commendable health law. Mormon athletic teams, individual athletes, beauty contestants, entertainers, business people, and academics are featured attractively in the public media, testifying either directly or indirectly to the virtues of Mormonism and its contribution to their lives.

It has been respectable, even commendable, to be Mormon for several decades now. Despite the new wave of "anti-cult" activities from evangelical Christians, evangelical Christian denominations have been among those who have made coalitions with Mormon conservatives to battle the Equal Rights Amendment, resist pro-abortion legislation, and provide "education" about the Constitution (Shupe and Heinerman 1985; Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie 1987). Evidently, the theological divisions are less important, at least in these cases, than the harmony of interests on certain moral/political issues.

From a sociological perspective, then, Mormonism is simultaneously exclusive and accepting, particularistic and accommodating. How does this dual pattern translate into actual tolerance of Mormons by non-Mormons?

To answer this question, we three devised a questionnaire adapted from the classic (1925) sociological tolerance index known as the Bogardus Social Distance Scale. We administered this questionnaire to 938 college students in introductory social science courses at the University of Calgary (355 students), an Alberta Bible College (which will remain anonymous in keeping with an agreement made before the study was conducted) (71), the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (276), and Brigham Young University (236). All of the BYU students were LDS (about 25 percent of the total), but only three of the others indicated Mormonism as a religious preference.

These students may not be representative of either their own denominations or of larger society. They may be more liberal, and hence more tolerant, than older generations. Mormon students at BYU could be more conservative and less tolerant than older and more experienced Mormons. Still, we feel that sampling students certainly provides clues about both the current state of religious tolerance and future trends.

The Bogardus Social Distance Scale has been used for over six decades to "estimate the amount of potential and real conflict existing between any cultural groups, . . . industrial, political, racial, religious, and other" (Miller 1977, 262).

Our version of Bogardus, the Religious Distance Scale, identified nineteen different denominations (see Table 1) and asked respondents to choose one of seven degrees "corresponding to the closeness of the relationship you would want with that specific group. These seven choices were: (1) close kinship by marriage, (2) membership in my club as personal friends, (3) neighbors living on my street, (4) employment in my own occupation [office], (5) citizenship in my country, (6) visitors only to my country, and (7) exclusion from my country.

The cumulative answers became Religious Distance Quotients (RDQs), and the mean responses located "closeness of relationship" for each of the nineteen denominations. The lower the score, the greater the tolerance. For

TABLE 1  
A SUMMARY OF RELIGIOUS DISTANCE QUOTIENTS

Target Group	RELIGIOUS DISTANCE QUOTIENTS BY DENOMINATION					
	Total Sample	No Preference	Catholics	Conservative Christians	Mainline Protestants	Mormons
Moonies	5.69	6.09	5.62	5.48	5.87	5.29
Hare Krishna	5.22	5.27	5.15	5.13	5.41	5.20
Scientologist	4.04	4.02	3.93	4.64	3.99	3.88
Jehovah Witness	4.00	4.03	4.19	4.42	3.86	3.69
Buddhist	3.99	3.67	4.19	4.51	4.24	3.77
Hutterite	3.87	3.94	4.03	3.55	4.09	3.66
Quaker	3.73	4.03	3.93	3.65	3.48	3.47
Nazarene	3.37	3.62	3.63	2.43	3.31	3.46
Mormon	3.16	2.88	3.21	4.01	2.92	
Unitarian	3.10	2.78	3.28	3.85	2.81	3.11
Pentecostal	3.10	3.25	3.18	2.43	2.74	3.44
Church of Christ	2.85	2.83	2.81	3.12	2.46	3.03
Jew	2.48	2.31	2.62	2.64	2.50	2.46
Baptist	2.40	2.49	2.52	1.87	2.11	2.59
Congregational	2.39	2.07	2.49	2.55	1.80	2.86
Anglican/Episcopalian	2.37	2.08	2.34	2.44	2.07	2.81
Lutheran	2.21	2.25	2.07	2.15	1.63	2.55
Presbyterian	2.15	2.10	2.22	2.14	1.56	2.48
Catholic	2.14	1.88		2.82	1.66	2.39
Religious Reactions <sup>1</sup>	3.28	3.22	3.37	3.39	3.07	3.33
N's <sup>2</sup>	674-796	177-212	132-153	90-104	97-131	157-209

Religious Distance Quotients (RDQ) are the mean scores on a given "target" within categories.

Religious ratings of one's own denomination are excluded from the analysis.

<sup>1</sup> Religious Reactions refers to the Religious Distance Quotient for all 19 Target Groups within a given denomination.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers vary due to non-response and from excluding rating of one's own group; figures reflect the range of numbers responding.

The target groups are ordered by how intolerantly they are viewed. Moonies are the least tolerated of the nineteen groups on which we asked for responses. Religious Distance Quotients give the mean scores within categories for a "target" denomination. Religious ratings of one's own denomination are excluded from the analysis. The total number of respondents therefore vary, due also to non-response. The inclusive figures under N reflect the range of responses.

\* Summaries of the Religious Distance Quotient for all nineteen target groups from a given denomination.

obvious reasons of bias, a student's rating of his or her own denomination was excluded.

In Table 1, the denominations are listed from least-tolerated to most-tolerated in the Target Group column. In the rest of the table, the responses are given by the students' denomination. We asked students to express their religious preference. The choices were (1) No denomination preference,

(2) Catholic, (3) Protestant, and (4) Mormon. We included four questions in the questionnaire to make a further distinction between conservative Christians and mainline Protestants, columns three and four in Table 1. These questions asked students to choose along a four-point scale<sup>1</sup> from strong agreement to strong disagreement how they felt about biblical literalness, personal salvation through Jesus Christ, the divinity of Christ, and the importance of being separate from the world. Baptist, Church of Christ, Evangelical, and Pentecostal denominations were classified as conservatives; their means ranged from 14.75 to 15.5 out of a possible score of 16.

The pattern of responses as summarized in Table 1 is intriguing. Mormons rated 3.16 in acceptability, eleventh out of the nineteen denominations and about halfway between the first-place Catholics (2.14) and second-place Presbyterians (2.15) on one end and the sixteenth-place Jehovah Witnesses (4.00) on the other. In terms of the seven-point scale, the score of 3.16 means that the rest of the respondents would accept Mormons as neighbors on their street while the Jehovah Witnesses would be tolerated only as being employed in the same profession. Catholics and Presbyterians, on the other hand, would be acceptable as personal friends "in my club."

The only major deviation of Mormon acceptability is that of Conservative Christians, for whom Mormons rate 4.01 (acceptable in the same occupation). Even though the two groups have similar moral positions, Conservative Christians want to distance themselves from Mormons, presumably because of competing missionary activities and because of theological differences. This finding may also indicate that the widespread attacks on Mormons in the past few years from disaffected Mormons making common cause with Christian evangelicals are actually coming from a narrow slice of the population and that publicity, rather than broad public feeling, may account for the feeling that Mormons are no longer welcome in some communities. It is interesting to note that Mormon attitudes toward conservative Christians are more moderate: 3.44 for the Pentecostals, 3.03 for the Church of Christ, and 2.59 for Baptists.

In fact, despite strong feelings among Mormons that they have the "only true church," Mormons are generally about as tolerant as the other four groups. Only .32 separates the most tolerant group (the mainline Protestants at 3.07) from the least tolerant (3.39 for the conservative Christians). Our BYU students tended to be most intolerant of the Moonies and Hare Krishna, just as did the two Protestant groups, the Catholics, and those with no religious preference. Apparently the hypothesis that members of a historically persecuted minority will be more sensitive toward other minorities does not hold true for our LDS respondents.

Probably many BYU students have had no personal contact with Moonies and Hare Krishna devotees and gain most of their impressions from the media. However, they should know people in mainline denominations, so it is somewhat alarming to find Mormons rating least tolerant of the four denomina-

<sup>1</sup> We developed this scale from that created by Nancy T. Ammerman (1982). For technical details on scale construction, statistical significance, and more detailed analysis of the data see Brinkerhoff and Mackie (1986).

tional groups for such large and conventional churches as Baptists, Congregationalists, Anglican Episcopalian, Lutherans, and Presbyterians. Perhaps one reason is that the Mormon Church, unlike some churches, strictly discourages marrying nonmembers. Thus, Mormons may feel a limit on one end of the continuum that some other groups do not.

A more accurate way of looking at feelings along the continuum may be represented in Table 2, which deals with only eleven denominations and examines the break-down by percentage of those who would allow marriage at the top of the tolerance scale to those who wouldn't even allow representatives of a particular religion in their country.

The right side of Table 2 gives the percentage of each of the five denominational groups who would exclude a target group from their country. Mormons are clearly the most tolerant denomination by this scale. Approximately half as many Mormons (26 percent) would keep Moonies out of the country as Catholics (41.2 percent) and those with no religious preference (56.6 percent). Being the most tolerant may not, however, be quite as commendable as it seems since one in four Mormon BYU students would still keep Moonies out. The history of LDS exile from New York, Missouri, Ohio, and Illinois does not seem to have created more tolerance for other minorities. (About one in five of the Conservative Christians — 17.7 percent — would also exclude Mormons from their country but only 1.6 percent of the Mormons would keep Pentecostals out.)

TABLE 2  
EXTREMES OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Target Group	PERCENT ALLOWING MARRIAGE					PERCENT EXCLUDING FROM COUNTRY				
	No Pref- erence	Cath- olics	Conser- vative Chris- tians	Main- line Prot- estants	Mor- mons	No Pref- erence	Cath- olics	Conser- vative Chris- tians	Main- line Prot- estants	Mor- mons
Moonies	9%	2.1%	1.0%	0.0%	.5%	56.6%	41.2%	48.5%	50.4%	26.0%
Hare Krishna	1.0	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	28.2	23.2	29.0	31.9	21.1
Scientologists	7.2	7.2	1.1	6.0	1.1	14.9	11.6	22.1	16.4	4.7
Jehovah Witness	9.0	4.8	2.0	2.4	1.0	14.7	14.3	25.5	13.6	5.4
Buddhists	11.1	5.8	1.0	4.8	1.0	9.2	14.4	24.7	12.0	3.5
Hutterites	7.1	4.5	2.2	2.1	1.3	6.6	7.6	3.3	11.3	1.3
Mormons	15.2	7.9	2.1	6.3		3.3	2.6	17.7	3.1	
Pentecostal	15.3	9.1	34.7	20.7	1.0	4.9	3.0	1.0	1.7	1.6
Jew	24.2	11.6	12.2	13.4	5.0	.5	2.1	2.0	0.0	.5
Presbyterian	36.0	28.3	32.7	60.6	5.1	1.0	.7	1.0	0.0	0.0
Catholic	41.0		11.1	48.1	4.5	.5		4.0	0.0	0.0
N's	177- 212	132- 153	90- 104	97- 131	157- 209	177- 212	132- 153	90- 104	97- 131	157- 209

Target groups are ordered according to the overall RDQ presented in Table 1.

The target groups appear in the same least- to most-tolerated order as in Table 1. Ratings of one's own denomination are again excluded. Total numbers represent the range of respondents for each group but vary, due to non-response and the exclusion of ratings for one's own group.

Apart from conservative Christians, Mormons do not suffer from intolerance. Less than 5 percent (from 2.6 to 3.3 percent) of the other three groups would exclude Mormons from their countries; and Mormons seem equally tolerant of them.

Mormons become "intolerant," however, on the subject of marriage. Only 5.1 percent would consider marriage to a Presbyterian; and marriage to a member of any other denomination is lower than 5 percent. On six out of the remaining ten, the score is near or under 1 percent. In general, members of other faiths would be more willing to marry Mormons than Mormons are to marry those of other faiths. Again, conservative Christians are most wary of Mormons: 2.1 percent would consider marriage to a Mormon although 11.1 percent would marry Catholics, while only 1 percent of the Mormons would marry a Pentecostal.

Catholics also lay great stress on marrying other Catholics. How do they compare on this issue? Almost 8 percent (7.9) of the Catholics would consider marrying a Mormon, while 4.5 percent of the Mormons would marry Catholics. Even among such presumably tolerant groups like mainline Protestant and those with no religious preference, fewer than half would marry Catholics.

Clearly, religion is an important factor in maintaining group boundaries and a sense of exclusiveness. Substantial numbers of students from all religious denominations were prepared to exclude members of other groups from their countries or deny residents citizenship. The dilemma for Mormons is that they want to be accepted and respected, yet they also wish to retain their unique beliefs and avoid assimilation.

Thus, it is interesting that this study places Mormons in the middle — neither as well accepted as Presbyterians and Catholics nor on the radical fringe (except from the perspective of conservative Christians). This position is a remarkable achievement considering the Mormon history of distinctive religious practices, the contemporary missionary message of being God's only true church, and the insistence on marrying only other Mormons.

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