

Effects of College Education on the Religious Involvement of Latter-day Saints

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Gerald Stott

LDS Educational Perspective

Mormonism fosters education. LDS theology views life essentially as an educational process. Mortality is seen as a probationary state, a period of learning and testing. Knowledge and mastery of both self and environment through obedience to divine law is the basis of eternal progression. Thus in Mormon dogma education not only helps man in this life, it also assists him in his quest to achieve perfection and become godlike in the next. This theological emphasis is manifest in many latter-day scriptures:

The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth. (D&C 93:36)

Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. (D&C 130:18–19)

It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance. (D&C 131:6)

Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expected for you to understand; Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms. (D&C 88:78–79)

Mormonism's theological emphasis upon the importance of knowledge has very tangible results. Within the first few years of the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, its leaders established in Ohio and Missouri an adult school for men called the School of the Prophets. Three years after entering the Salt Lake Valley, despite the hardship of settling an uninhabited, nearly desolate area, Mormon pioneers founded the University of Deseret (1850), later named the University of Utah. Brigham Young University, also established in Utah's pioneer period (1876), has become a showpiece of Mormondom. Utah, a predominately Mormon state, has an enviable education record, leading the nation in the percentage of higher school graduates among persons eighteen and over—80.2 percent

compared to the national percentage of 66.6—and tying with Colorado for the highest median school years completed by persons eighteen and over—12.8 years.¹ Furthermore, it reports one of the highest percentages of adults who have attended college—31.4 percent.²

Utah's emphasis on education is not superficial. More than forty years ago, Thorndike, controlling for population size, found Utah to rank first as the birthplace of people listed in *American Men of Science*, to tie for second place in producing people listed in *Leaders in Education*, and to be fourth in contributing to those listed in *Who's Who in America*.³ Astin, in his 1962 study, found productivity of colleges was largely determined by the characteristics of incoming students (input). Utah universities, however, were found to be much more productive than their inputs predicted.⁴ Hardy in his 1974 analysis of the origins of American scientists and scholars provided additional evidence indicating the superior productivity of Utah schools of higher education. Using a weighted index based on the number of college graduates per thousand who go on to earn a Ph.D. within a specified time, and controlling for gender variations, he found:

The most productive state is Utah, which is first in productivity for all fields combined in all time periods. It is first in biological and social sciences, second in education, third in physical sciences, and sixth in arts and professions. Compared to other states in its region, it is defiantly productive. This result seems clearly to be due to the influence of Mormon values, because Mormon youth predominate in the colleges of the state, and because other variables, such as climate, geography, natural resources, and social class, do not appear to explain the exceptional record of this state.⁵

Secularizing Influence of Education

Both education and religion are directly concerned with knowing, that is, understanding the cosmos and man's place in it, yet they rely upon different and possibly conflicting methods of acquiring knowledge. Religion, with its emphasis on the superempirical, subordinates worldly reasoning to faith in revealed knowledge. In the words of Paul Williams, religion involves

a belief-attitude that the Ultimate for man exists (however is may be conceived) and that certain aspects of life derive from the Ultimate; . . . that the derivation (from the Ultimate) of these aspects of life is beyond empirical demonstration; . . . and that these aspects of life are of supreme importance.⁶

Scholarship, on the other hand, follows essentially the scientific perspective, grounding truth in logic and empirical findings. Many scholars consider these two approaches—faith and science—to be incompatible. Thomas F. O'Dea, a sociologist who made an in depth study of Mormonism, contends that the incompatibility between higher education and religion is major source of strain and conflict in contemporary Mormonism. O'Dea argues that this strain between education and religion rises out of the secularizing influence of science and rationalism which undermines traditional religious beliefs:

The Mormon appreciation of education emphasized higher education and thereby encouraged contact between Mormon youth and those very elements in modern thought that are bound to act as a solvent on certain aspects of Mormon beliefs. . . . He has been taught by the Mormon faith to seek knowledge and to value it; yet it is precisely this course, so acceptable to and so honored by his religion, that is bound to bring religious crisis to him and profound danger to his religious belief. The college undergraduate curriculum becomes the first line of danger to Mormonism in its encounter with modern learning.⁷

The Study

Is college education, as O'Dea suggests, detrimental to Mormon faith? Is Mormonism, by encouraging educational achievement, latently promoting its own secularism? Is the highly educated Mormon less religious than his less educated brothers? Findings from a study recently completed by the author suggest not.

The study is based on a probability sample of 500 adult Latter-day Saints systematically selected from all LDS wards in the Greater St. Louis area.⁸ The 500 adults were mailed a questionnaire dealing with educational attainment, religious involvement, and background information. Of the 500 sampled, 261 (52 percent) returned usable questionnaires. Of this number, 101 (39 percent) held college degrees.⁹

The problems in measuring religiosity are numerous and resist easy solution. Even defining religiosity is a formidable task. My solution was to use multiple measures of religiosity that tap different facets.¹⁰ Specifically, scales were created to measure religious practice, belief, knowledge, and experience. In addition, an overall measures of religiosity—religious self-identification—was used.

Religious Self-Identification. The respondents' self-evaluation of how religious they are given a subjective generic measure of religiosity. Table 1 cross-tabulates religious self-identification by educational level.

Table 1
Religious Self-Identification by Educational Level (in rounded percentages)

How Religious	Non-HS Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College	Bachelor Degree	Graduate Degree	Total
Not Very	6	8	5	4	6	5
Mildly	12	10	3	5	8	7
Fairly	49	39	31	26	36	35
Very	33	43	61	65	50	53
Total Percent	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number	33	51	62	55	36	237

$r = .11$ ($P < .05$)

Notice that the percentage of respondents classifying themselves as very religious increases with educational level from a low of 33 percent of those who were not high school graduates to a high of 65 percent of those with bachelor's degrees, but then declines to 50 percent of those with post-bachelor's degrees. All in all, 39 percent of the noncollege-educated respondents, compared to 60 percent of those who did attend college, judged themselves to be very religious.¹¹

Practices. Acts of worship which devotees of a religion are encouraged to perform constitute religious practices. At one end of the spectrum these practices tend to be formal and typically public. At the other end of the spectrum they tend to be informal and typically private. Church attendance (a public act of worship) and personal prayer (a private act of worship) were selected to measure religious practices. The relationship between these two variables and education is shown in tables 2 and 3:

Table 2
Church Attendance by Educational Level (in rounded percentages)

Church Attendance	Non-HS Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College	Bachelor Degree	Graduate Degree	Total
zero	16	15	12	8	13	13
1 to 3 times yearly	6	7	3	1	0	3
4 to 12 times yearly	9	5	3	2	3	4
2 or 3 times monthly	6	2	5	5	5	4
weekly	63	71	77	84	79	76
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number	32	58	65	61	38	254

$r = .13$ ($P < .05$)

Note that weekly church attendance increases with educational level from 63 percent among those who did not graduate from high school to 84 percent among those with bachelor's degrees. Again those with graduate degree upset the monotonic relationship by attending less than those with bachelor's degrees. Eighty percent of the college category, compared to 63 percent of the noncollege category, attend church weekly.

The relationship between personal prayer and education is less clear. As with the two preceding measures of religiosity, the college-educated are more likely than the noncollege-educated to place high on the measure, but the difference is small (67 percent to 60 percent), and those who

attended college but did not graduate were more likely to engage in daily personal prayer than those who did graduate.

Table 3
Personal Prayer by Educational Level (no rounded percentages)

Frequency of Prayer	Non-HS Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College	Bachelor Degree	Graduate Degree	Total
do not pray only on special occasions	0	2	3	2	7	3
occasionally	3	5	0	3	0	2
once a week	23	19	8	10	12	14
daily	21	10	15	21	13	16
	53	64	74	64	67	65
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number	34	58	65	61	40	258

$r = .04$ ($P > .05$)

Belief. The belief dimension of religion focuses on ideology—the religious tenets individuals avow. It comprises religion's theological component. Acceptance of biblical miracles was used to measure belief. As Table 4 shows, belief declines with educational advancement.

Table 4
Belief in Biblical Miracles by Education Level (in rounded percentages)

Bible Miracles	Non-HS Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College	Bachelor Degree	Graduate Degree	Total
did not happen explained by natural events	0	0	0	0	3	0
uncertain	6	3	15	18	16	12
did happen	0	11	5	3	8	6
	94	86	80	79	74	82
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number	33	56	64	61	38	252

$r = .17$ ($P < .01$)

Note that the percentage of respondents believing that biblical miracles actually happened just as the Bible states declines from 94 percent of those who did not graduate from high school to 74 percent of those with college graduate degrees. The college-educated, as a group, are 11 percent less likely than the noncollege-educated to be unequivocal believers.

Experience. Religious experience constitutes the feeling component of religion. Such experience involves the sensation that contact, however fleeting, has been made with the divine. This contact may range the entire gamut from feelings of peace and safety to visions and revelations. Spiritual confirmation of the truthfulness of the gospel was used as an indicator of religious experience. As Table 5 shows, education is negligibly related to spiritual confirmation.

Table 5
Spiritual Confirmation of the Truthfulness of the Gospel by
Educational Level (in rounded percentages)

Spiritual Confirmation	Non-HS Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College	Bachelor Degree	Graduate Degree	Total
no	0	7	10	2	13	6
uncertain	20	15	8	12	8	12
yes	80	78	82	86	79	82
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number	30	55	63	58	39	245

$r = .01$ ($P > .05$)

The college-educated are more likely to have experienced a spiritual confirmation than the noncollege-educated, but again the difference is small (83 to 79 percent).

Knowledge. The knowledge dimension of religion deals with religious literacy—the extent to which a person is informed about the basic doctrines, practices, and history of his faith. Knowledge differs from belief since knowledge is concerned only with knowing, while belief involves commitment. Four questions dealing with the Bible were used to measure religious knowledge: (1) Who wrote the most books in the New Testament? (2) Is the Book of Acts an eyewitness account of Christ's ministry? (3) Name the last book of the Old Testament, and (4) Which Gospel narrates most fully the events surrounding the birth of Christ? The number of responses per person is represented on the next page by Table 6.

Table 6
Bible-Knowledge by Educational Level (in rounded percentages)

Number of Correct Answers	Non-HS Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College	Bachelor Degree	Graduate Degree	Total
0	31	22	18	7	20	18
1	28	22	18	16	5	18
2	17	22	16	7	13	15
3	17	21	26	25	13	21
4	7	13	22	45	49	28
Total Percent	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number	29	54	62	60	39	244

$r = .31$ ($P < .01$)

The association between religious knowledge and education is positive and substantial. Notice that the percentage of individuals answering all four questions correctly nearly doubles with each increment in education up to the graduate degree level. A comparison of those who attended college to those who did not shows that while 39 percent of the college-educated answered all four questions correctly, only 11 percent of the non-college-educated did.

Summary and Conclusion

Of the six measures of religiosity, only belief was negatively associated with education, that is, tended to decline with educational advancement. In contrast, church attendance and biblical knowledge increased substantially and self-evaluated religiosity increased mildly with educational advancement. Personal prayer and spiritual confirmation of the truthfulness of the gospel showed little relationship to educational level.

In order to rule out the possibility that the association between negative belief and education was a product of the specific belief indicator used, the relationship between education and four other measures of belief were tested: (1) belief in God, (2) belief in the existence of Satan, (3) belief in the infallibility of the President of the Church in matters of doctrine, and (4) acceptance of religious over scientific beliefs when the two appear to clash. The associations with education for the measures were, respectively, $-.19$, $-.18$, $-.01$ and $-.27$. The fact that these measures of belief were also associated negatively with education strongly suggests that surety of belief in basic religious tenets to diminish with educational advancement. Nevertheless, corrosive effects of education of religious belief—if it is education

that is causing the decline—are limited.¹² Note that 77 percent of the college graduates fully accept biblical miracles as actually having happened.

The fact that the percentage of those with graduate degrees scoring high on the various measures of religiosity is typically lower than the corresponding percentage for those with bachelor's degrees suggests that graduate education may adversely affect certain aspects of religiosity. Even so, those with post-bachelor's degrees are, on the average, more religious than those who never attended college. In short, college-educated Latter-day Saints in my sample, both as a group and by specific level of education, were, on the average, more religiously involved than noncollege-educated Latter Saints. Thus, contrary to O'Dea's contentions, no evidence was found to indicate that college education is detrimental to the religiosity of Mormons.

My findings are at odds with the findings of several studies dealing with other denominations. A study of Episcopalians which focused on church attendance, religious belief, personal prayer, and Bible reading found all but church attendance to be negatively related to education.¹³ A study of urban north Texas Presbyterians, Missouri Lutherans, Methodists, and Disciples of Christ reported that of nine dimensions of religiosity tested, only the knowledge dimension did not associate negatively with education.¹⁴ A 1972 study of church members of various denominations in the San Francisco Bay area found religious belief, personal prayer, and religious experiences negatively related to years of education, while church attendance and religious knowledge were positively related.¹⁵

The typical negative association found to exist between educational level and various measures of religiosity has been attributed by some writers to the rationalizing and secularizing influences of higher education which are thought to undermine religious commitment. If this be the case, it appears that the religiosity of Mormons is largely impervious to this secularizing influence. The reason for this, I suggest, is to be found in the LDS view of education. LDS theology, while it places a strong emphasis upon education, places education into a larger religious perspective. This tends to galvanize Mormons against whatever religiously corrosive influences higher education might generate. In short, Latter-day Saint theology appears to negate the secularizing impact of education by sacralizing it and incorporating it into the total religious milieu.

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1. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 151.

2. *Standard Education Almanac* (Chicago: Marquis Academic Media, 1975–76), 91–92. The 1975–76 edition of the *Standard Educational Almanac* is referenced because relevant information is not given in later editions.

3. E. L. Thorndike, "The Origin of Superior Men," *Scientific Monthly* 56 (1943): 426.

4. Alexander W. Astin, "'Productivity' of Undergraduate Institutions," *Science* 136 (1962): 123–35.

5. Kenneth R. Hardy, "Social Origins of American Scientists and Scholars," *Science* 185 (1974): 500.

6. J. Paul Williams, "The Nature of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2 (1962): 8.

7. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 226–27.

8. The study may be faulted for not drawing the sample from Utah, Mormonism's heartland. Justification exists, however, for drawing the sample outside Utah. Research findings demonstrate that a group's majority or minority status has significant influence on its members' behavior. Mormonism is a national and even international religion, the majority of LDS living outside of Utah. Because most LDS live in areas where they are a minority, a Utah sample where they constitute a majority would be unrepresentative and hence of no more utility in generalizing to all or even to LDS in the United States than my Midwest sample.

9. Due to response bias among those returning the questionnaire, the findings should be accepted primarily for their correlative and comparative values rather than as accurate measurements of the survey population. For example, while 39 percent of the respondents hold college degrees, only 23 percent of a follow-up sample of nonrespondents had college degrees. Hence, probably 31, not 39, percent of the survey population are college graduates. Even this percentage, however, is quite large, especially when compared to a corresponding study of Southern Baptists which found 18 percent of that survey population to be college graduates.

10. Multidimensional approaches to the study of religiosity have been used by such writers as Joseph Fichter, *Social Relations in the Urban Parish* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Gerhard E. Lenski, "Social Correlates of Religious Interest," *American Sociological Review* 18 (1953): 533–44; Morton King, "Measuring the Religious Variable: Nine Proposed Dimensions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6 (Fall 1967): 173–90; Rodney Stark and Charles Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); King Morton and Richard Hunt, "Measuring the Religious Variable: National Replication," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 15 (March 1975): 13–22; Gordon F. DeJong, Joseph S. Faulkner, and Rex H. Warland, "Dimensions of Religiosity Reconsidered: Evidence from a Cross-Cultural Study," *Social Force* 54 (June 1976): 866–89; Dean R. Hoge, Gregory H. Petrillo, and Ella I. Smith, "Transmission of Religious and Social Values from Parents to Teenage Children," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 44 (August 1982): 569–80. My approach is most closely related to Stark and Glock's.

11. A measure of association, Pearson's r is provided in the table. An interval rather than an ordinal measure of association is reported because interval statistics which are more powerful, more sensitive, and more readily interpreted can be applied to ordinal data with, except in rare circumstances, little distortion..

12. Correlation does not prove causation.

13. Wade Clarke Roof, "Traditional Religion in Contemporary Society: A Theory of Local-Cosmopolitan Plausibility," *American Sociological Review* 41 (1976), 195–208.

14. Morton B. King and Richard A. Hunt, *Measuring Religious Dimensions* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1972), 39.

15. Rodney Stark, "The Economics of Piety: Religious Commitment and Social Class," in *Issues in Social Inequality*, ed. Gerald W. Thielbar and Saul D. Feldman (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1972), 483–503.