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## ARE SOCIAL SCIENTISTS LESS RELIGIOUS?

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Tim B. Heaton, PhD

**I**n my observation, there is a commonly held notion that social scientists are less religiously inclined than other people. Presumably, their low religiosity occurs because they try to understand religious experience and the functioning of religious organizations in terms of the laws of human behavior. Since religious phenomena are subject to the same patterns as other types of experience, social scientists apparently do not need supernatural explanations.

However, this notion ignores aspects of the social scientists' perspective which might support greater religiosity. Social scientists may be more aware of the importance of institutions for shaping and expressing personal religious experience. They may also be more sensitive to the realm of experience which lies outside the materialistic domain of many of their theories. Moreover, the orientation of other occupational groups may run counter to religious perspectives. For example, physical scientists who accept evolutionary explanations have reason to question the theology of salvation, or the medical profession may doubt the efficacy of faith healing.

To my knowledge, the notion that social scientists are less religious is not based on sound empirical evidence. The purpose of this article is to evaluate the hypothesis of low religiosity among social scientists by comparing church attendance of social scientists with other professionals and with other occupational groups.

The comparisons are based on a large sample of Mormons who completed a demographic survey in 1981. Adults were randomly sampled from the computer files of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mailed surveys, followed by other attempts to interview or otherwise obtain information from nonrespondents, yielded a response rate of about 80 percent. For details of methodology and a summary of some of the major findings of this survey, see Goodman and Heaton (1986).

TABLE 1  
ESTIMATED AVERAGE CHURCH ATTENDANCE FOR PROFESSIONALS  
IN THE LDS CHURCH

	Sample Size	Estimated Average Attendance	Estimated Average Attendance*
<i>Occupation:</i>			
Social Scientists	44	62	60
Managers	630	59	64
Mathematicians, Accountants, Computer Scientists, Engineers	272	60	60
Lawyers	40	71	62
Physical-life Scientists	33	79	72
M.D.s, Dentists	73	71	64
Other Health Professionals	94	57	57
Teachers	330	75	68
Technicians	71	53	59
Artists, Writers, Entertainers	58	64	66
beta		.19	.09
<i>Education:</i>			
1-12 years	356	46	47
13-15 years	121	60	60
16 years	338	70	69
17 + years	458	73	73
beta		.29	.28
<i>Gender:</i>			
Male	851	63	63
Female	421	65	65
beta		.03	.03
R <sup>2</sup>			.096

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\*Adjusted for other variables

The 1970 U.S. census occupational codes were used to categorize respondents into groups which would provide as much detail as possible on occupation while still maintaining large enough numbers in each group for statistical reliability. Through use of a five-point scale, respondents were asked how often they attend church. This scale was converted to approximate average attendance to facilitate interpretation of results. This transformation yields an average attendance rate of 55 percent, compared to 49 percent computed from yearly ward reports of sacrament meeting attendance.

Further analysis of these data indicates education plays a greater role in predicting church attendance than does occupation (Albrecht and Heaton, 1984). Education is therefore included as a control variable. Also, this analysis is adjusted for gender differences in attendance.

The sample sizes and estimated average percent attendance for occupation, education, and gender groups are presented in Table 1. The last column of Table 1 also reports average attendance after adjusting for the effects of education and gender, utilizing multiple classification analysis. The results show that physical and life scientists have the highest attendance rate, followed by teachers, lawyers, medical doctors, and dentists. Each of these groups is nine or more percentage points above social scientists. Other groups, however, are comparable to social scientists. Once educational and gender differences are taken into account (last column), occupational differences are reduced so that teachers and physical and life scientists are the only groups noticeably higher than social scientists. In short, although social scientists do not attend church as often as some other professionals, they are no lower than many other groups of professionals.

Differences among educational groups are substantially larger than occupational differences. To illustrate, the beta value (a measure of explanatory power) is .29 for education compared to .19 for occupation. When all three variables are considered in a multivariate analysis (column 3), the occupation beta drops to .09; but the education beta remains virtually unchanged. In other words, education accounts for some of the differences among occupational groups, but the reverse is not the case.

Women attend church only slightly more than men, indicating that gender is not an important factor in predicting attendance.

In combination, education, occupation, and gender account for only 9 percent of the variation in attendance. This difference is not meaningless by social science standards, but it does indicate that these factors are not of overriding importance.

TABLE 2  
COMPARISON OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE OF PROFESSIONALS WITH OTHER  
OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS

	Sample Size	Estimated Average Attendance	Estimated Average Attendance*
<i>Occupation:</i>			
Professionals	1348	64	57
Sales, Clerks	856	54	55
Craftsmen	575	46	52
Operatives	313	43	49
Laborers	138	34	42
Farmers	105	48	53
Service Workers	428	54	58
beta		.21	.09
<i>Education:</i>			
1-12 years	2099	45	46
13-15 years	479	58	57
16 years	575	68	67
17+ years	611	72	71
beta		.28	.26
<i>Gender:</i>			
Male	2179	54	53
Female	1584	56	57
beta		.03	.06
R <sup>2</sup>			.092

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\*Adjusted for other variables

In Table 2, professionals are compared with other occupational groups. Average attendance for professionals is higher than for any other occupational group considered. Moreover, the attendance rate for social scientists (62 percent) is higher than for any other major occupational group considered. In part, professionals attend church more often because they have higher levels of education; but even after education is taken into account, no other group is noticeably higher than professionals. As noted previously, educational differences are more important than occupational differences, gender does not make much difference, and the other factors considered do not explain much variation in attendance.

### Conclusion

The data show that some professional groups do have higher attendance rates than social scientists; but social scientists have attendance rates on par with many other professionals, and higher rates than any major nonprofessional occupational group. Perhaps more importantly, education has a greater influence on attendance (and the influence is positive) than does occupation. However, neither of these factors, nor gender, explain very much of the variation in attendance. Of course, results must be qualified by the small samples in some occupational groups and by our examination of only one of many indicators of religiosity. With these qualifications in mind, however, we find no support for the notion that social scientists are an irreligious group.

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