Good Clubs and Community Support: Explaining the Growth of Strict Religions

Anna Grzymala-Busse

How do some religions grow over time without significantly diluting their strict doctrinal commitments? Religious denominations face the problem of expanding their ranks without moderating their doctrine, changing their identity, or losing the existing faithful. Yet some have resolved this dilemma with considerable success. This article suggests that they do so by serving as “good clubs”: offering networks of community support that not only increase growth from within but also increase the costs of exit over time, encouraging reproduction, retention, and resoluteness. Such community support allows these groups to grow while retaining their doctrinal commitments.

All denominations want to multiply their ranks and ensure continued vitality. Yet the sect-church dynamic suggests that as churches age, they slacken their doctrinal demands and slow down their growth.¹ Gaining new members and adherents often means moderating ideology and attenuating the core commitments that originally defined the organizations and made them attractive to core supporters. The watering down of theological and ideological

ANNA GRZYMALA-BUSSE (AB, Princeton University; M.Phil., Cambridge University; PhD, Harvard University) is the Ronald and Eileen Weiser Professor of European and Eurasian Studies at the University of Michigan. Her articles have appeared in World Politics, Comparative Political Studies, Politics and Society, East European Politics and Societies, Annual Review of Political Science, Party Politics, Studies in Comparative Political Development, and Communist and Post-Communist Studies. Special interests include post-communist politics, state development, political parties, and church-state relations. Many thanks to Allen Hicken, Carolyn Warner, the participants of workshops at Brigham Young University, Brown University, University of Michigan, and University of Rochester for helpful comments, and to David T. Smith for his research assistance.

commitments then alienates the existing support base, eroding their loyalty, and eventually undermining the organization’s coherence and numbers. The result is a “hollowing out,” as efforts to expand and recruit through moderation undermine existing loyalties. The shrinking numbers and emptying pews of the mainstream Christian denominations, including the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Roman Catholic churches in the United States, suggests that there may be high costs for liberalizing religious tenets: any expansion due to dilution may be short lived and self-undermining.

Yet several established religions have defied this dynamic, and largely escaped the dilemma of expansion at the cost of dilution. These anomalies have instead managed both to grow (sometimes exponentially) and to retain their crucial doctrinal commitments. These successful denominations include the Amish, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Jews, and to a lesser extent, pre-Vatican II Catholics. These are strict denominations, espousing principles and demanding behavior that put them at tension with the rest of society. As Table 1 shows, even accounting for the usual caveats about estimates of membership data, these religions have grown over time, without significant doctrinal transformations or attempts to loosen theological strictures on the beliefs and practices of their members. Moreover, these strict denominations have grown at higher rates than their mainstream counterparts and, in contrast to other conservative denominations such as New Evangelical Movement churches, have retained their members. Retention rates for the Amish and Mormons in the United States, for example, are in the 80–90 percent range and remain considerably higher than for mainline denominations.

2. Currently, Roman Catholicism is strict if measured by doctrine, but membership behavior is far less so (Catholics divorce, use contraceptives, and so on at similar rates to non-Catholics in the United States). Prior to the reforms of Vatican II, however, both behavior and doctrine converged on greater strictness.


Table 1  Growth rates, mean household size, and fertility rates, 1990–2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Average growth rate per five-year period, 1929–2005</th>
<th>Mean household size in 1991</th>
<th>Total fertility rate</th>
<th>Pronatalist doctrine?</th>
<th>Community support?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amish</td>
<td>14.3 (1929–65)</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultra-Orthodox Jews</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.60–7.90</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox Jews</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholics 1929–60</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostals</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witnesses</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Baptists</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh-day Adventists</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutherans (incl. MO Synod)</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.80–1.90</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodists</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.80–1.90</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopalians</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.80–1.90</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholics 1965–2005</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Orthodox Jews</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*continued*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Average growth rate per five-year period, 1929–2005</th>
<th>Mean household size in 1991</th>
<th>Total fertility rate</th>
<th>Pronatalist doctrine?</th>
<th>Community support?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No religious affiliation</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General population</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.04–2.10</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Notes.** Pronatalist doctrine includes formal and informal restrictions on birth control, traditional division of household labor with women staying at home, and encourages children as the purpose of marriage. Community support comprises auxiliary organizations that provide nonreligious services and facilitate frequent contact among members outside of religious services. Such organizations include charities, Knights of Columbus, Relief Society, gemachim, and so on.

*The four largest Pentecostal denominations are: Church of God in Christ, Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, Inc., and the Church of God (Cleveland, TN).*
Why are some denominations more successful at expanding without losing strictness? Existing “club goods” models focus on the maintenance of strict religious communities—this article refines this approach by examining their endogenous growth. The key factor is local community support among coreligionists, which sustains endogenous growth and raises the costs of exit by adherents over time. These denominational “good clubs” provide the material and spiritual capital necessary to sustain geometric growth by promoting high birth rates among coreligionists and by monitoring doctrinal commitment. Such norms and support serve a two-fold function: they help to sustain high fertility rates, and they significantly raise the costs of leaving the denomination for the large families that result. The consequence is not only expansion and retention of members but also their continued strict doctrinal commitment. This account further shows why pronatalist doctrine alone is not enough and why local monopolies, rather than competitive markets, can achieve durable growth.

The argument proceeds as follows: The first section reviews the existing explanations. The second section builds on club goods models by endogenizing growth and the increase in exit costs over time. The third section examines the empirical patterns, and the fourth section focuses on the LDS, which demonstrates these mechanisms and relationships. The final section concludes with implications for the political economy of religion.

Existing Explanations

In the contest for souls, several supply-side factors make some denominations more successful. Ever since Dean Kelley’s seminal 1972 study, the focus has been on religious strictness: high demands on behavior and belief that screen out low-level participants and ensure high rates of participation and commitment among the rest, which in turn make the faith more attractive to potential

---

members. Religious strictness ensures that religions provide club goods—benefits whose payoff for an individual is a function of the behavior of others. Examples range from the very specific—ten men are needed to make up a Jewish minyan—to the very broad—individuals who attend religious services achieve far greater spiritual and emotional benefit when surrounded by an active and committed community of the faithful. Thus, individuals obtain the greatest benefit when their coreligionists are fully engaged and committed. Free riding is the critical challenge, in two guises: heterogeneity of participation (some members are far more involved and committed) and low average participation (no one is particularly committed).

Higher participation and commitment are the result of the greater demands of stricter religions and their ability to offer close alternatives for secular goods they forbid their members. By providing substitutes for secular benefits, the denomination further enmeshes the coreligionists in communal networks. For example, Israeli Ultra-Orthodox Jews attend yeshiva for extremely long periods of time, foregoing market wages and signaling their commitment to the religious community, which in turn provides networks of charity and emotional support. Prohibitive entry and exit costs thus ensure high club good provision. The club goods model emphasizes the importance of the community and its ability to uphold its boundaries and norms, regulating entry and exit.

Strictness thus explains how denominations can retain strength. Its connection to growth, however, is less clear, as Kelley noted.

9. I shift away from existing emphases on the problem of free-riding in club good models. First, in tightly knit religious communities, free-riding can be readily identifiable: most participants know who attends, who is an avid practitioner and who is not, and so on. Reputations matter, contrary to the assertion that free-riding is difficult to observe. See Iannaccone, “Introduction to the Economics of Religion,” 1185–86. If observance cannot be observed, then it is unclear how the free-riding impinges on or dilutes the experience of high-intensity participants: how could they know?
Scholars working in this tradition have focused on conversion, theology, and regulation. First, for those strict religions that proselytize, *conversion* can be a key mechanism of growth (and a costly sign of commitment by the proselytizers). Conversion enables denominations to gain new adherents who (by definition) meet the high doctrinal standards of the religion. For example, Rodney Stark and Larry Iannaccone argue that conversion underlies the success of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Stark also explains LDS growth as the result of successful conversion efforts. Religions able to convert more effectively will undoubtedly grow faster—and the stricter a religion, the higher its entry costs, and the more likely it gains committed adherents. Conversion is enabled by two factors: first, most changes in religious practice and affiliation occur through family and friend relationships (marriage is thus an important reason for conversion). Second, reaffiliation (a change within a religious tradition) is much less costly and more frequent than full-fledged conversion (a change of religious traditions). This body of work leads to two predictions: First, the more demanding or strict the religion, the more we should see it effectively proselytize and convert new adherents, growing rapidly. Second, such conversions should occur within religious traditions, using extant networks of family and friends.

Yet conversion is neither necessary nor sufficient for growth: not all growing strict religions rely on conversion, and it does not produce committed new members. Conversion is not *necessary*: Ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Amish repudiate proselytizing, yet both have grown considerably and consistently. And, conversion may not be *sufficient* to maintain growth. There is enormous variation in conversion rates, both across and within growing (and proselytizing) denominations. For every growing denomination like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose 5 percent growth rates are attributed to conversion, there are those expanding religions like the Mormons, where the 3–5 percent annual growth rate masks local variation that ranges from 17 percent in Latin America to 0.5

percent in Austria or in Utah. Moreover, it is not clear how reliable a mechanism conversion is—that is, what are the rates of backsliding and subsequent departures? Fifty percent of Mormon converts in the United States and 75 percent of foreign converts fail to attend church after a year. In fact, the higher these growth rates, the lower the subsequent retention of converts. Even more of a concern for other proselytizing religions, these statistics are a positive outlier: Mormon converts have relatively high retention rates.

Finally, the costs of conversion vary greatly, and do not correspond to the doctrinal distance traveled. On the one hand, Protestants in the United States contend with low costs when they change churches. On the other hand, the persecution of apostates and heretics is predicated on the notion that changing one’s religious affiliation for a close substitute is more threatening and a worse transgression than a full-fledged change of religious traditions (the fate of Uniates in Ukraine and the Shi’a-Suni-Sufi hostilities are two examples). In the end, conversion can be both a costly and unreliable mechanism of religious growth, even if conversion work may still matter as a high-cost signal that cements the missionaries’ commitment to faith. Nonetheless, this body of work invites us to consider religions not just as doctrines, but as communities, by pointing to family and friends as the channels through which converts enter a religion.

A second explanatory factor is doctrine itself, and theological differences are key to the variation in denominational growth. Here, pronatalist tenets and principles can play a powerful role in leading adherents to have more children and thus lead to denominational growth. Specifically, the more denominational doctrine forbids abortion or the use of contraceptives, emphasizes the procreative nature

---

of marriage, fosters a division of labor among the genders (with one partner staying at home and taking care of children), and celebrates the family as a critical unit of both social and religious life, the greater its fertility rates. All other things equal, religions with a more pronatalist doctrinal stance should grow at higher rates.

Yet all things are not equal. Doctrinal admonitions rarely suffice to consistently and reliably foster natural growth. Not even a comprehensively pronatalist doctrine is enough. The Roman Catholic Church espouses all of the pronatalist tenets listed above, yet the lowest fertility rates in Europe are found in predominantly Catholic countries, such as Italy, Spain, or Poland. Even as Catholic family doctrine did not change (and instead clearly specified prohibitions on most forms of birth control), birth rates among Catholics dropped significantly over the course of the twentieth century, all the more so after Vatican II.23 Moreover, even religions with very uniform doctrinal commitments vary geographically in their reproductive rates. For example, Mormons in 1968 San Francisco had an average of 1.6 children; their fellow Saints in Salt Lake City had 3.3 children.24 Doctrine alone is insufficient to account consistently for denominational growth: it may provide an incentive and a justification, but not the wherewithal.

Third, turning to another aspect of religious vitality, state regulation of religious competition can influence growth. Where religion is neither favored by the state nor regulated, religions are free to expand and to meet consumer demand.25 State regulation and privileging of religious monopoly thus stifle expansionary efforts and promote complacency and under-provision of religious goods. The prediction is that older religions that dominate the market experience lower rates of practice, declining growth rates, and organizational decay. Smaller, stricter sects that are at odds with the society around them should grow far more quickly than noncompetitive monopolies or simply established churches. For these smaller, more agile competitors, growth may be a matter of denominational survival.26

26. And, of course, adding a new member to a tiny sect results in a higher growth rate than adding the same member to a large established denomination.
Yet the supposedly pernicious effects of state regulation do not explain rapid and vigorous growth in monopolistic settings supposedly hostile to religious fervor. The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland and Quebec (until the mid-twentieth century) are acknowledged to be fully fledged and state-supported monopolies, yet the church grew at high rates with continued strict practice and no attenuation of belief. Several established and extensive local monopolies also call this explanation into question. Mormons in Utah, despite the church’s reputation in Utah as sometimes staid and complacent, have the highest rates of participation and of deep religious commitment (as measured by rates of the Melchize-dek priesthood).\textsuperscript{27} Similarly extremely active monopolies can be found among the Haredim (Ultra-Orthodox) communities in Israel and in the United States. Such local monopolies remain vibrant.

In short, even though strict religions have the greatest growth rates, aspects of strictness such as proselytizing and conversion, theology, and regulation do not explain this growth. Conversion is not necessary, as the Amish and Haredim illustrate; a pronatalist theology is insufficient, as internal differences within the same religion show; and the regulatory suppression of competition has not precluded some monopolies from flourishing. Supply-side explanations contain important insights about the \textit{demands} made on members by tightly knit religious communities and how these maintain the vitality of strict denominations. However, they have tended to downplay the \textit{support} that strict religions offer their members, and it is this community support that explains the variation.

\textbf{An Alternative Explanation: “Good Clubs” and Community Support}

How, then, do strict religious communities grow? As we have seen, supply-side mechanisms are either insufficient or unnecessary, and the club goods model itself does not focus on \textit{growth}, even as the logic of exogenously high entry and exit costs makes growth by means other than high fertility difficult. More generally, in the focus on strictures and competition, analyses in this tradition have overlooked endogenous fertility as a key source of stable and consistent religious growth. They view high fertility as either the consequence of depressed real wages\textsuperscript{28} or simply a necessary

\textsuperscript{27} Phillips, “Religious Market Share and Mormon Church Activity,” 122.
condition (an exogenous parameter) for replacement of the faithful that supplements conversions.29 Yet high fertility within a religious community can be a critical factor for both religious growth and retention. It is not only a powerful demand on an adherent, in keeping with other strictures on behavior and belief, but it is also a mechanism of growth. To summarize, couples deliberately make investments in families based on the spiritual and emotional benefits of children but also on the very real material and opportunity costs of having large families. Where a religion offers both incentives and norms (in the form of a doctrine that views children as gifts from God, as positive attributes) and lowers the costs of having children (by providing material and emotional support), it can grow from within while retaining strict religious values. Thus, if club goods explain maintenance, these denominations’ function as good clubs can explain growth and retention.

Given the logistical, financial, and emotional difficulties of raising large families, spiritual, material, and emotional support is critical to fostering endogenous denominational growth through high birth rates. Local religious communities are best positioned to offer material, spiritual, and in-kind support for raising children—and given the enormous financial and emotional expense of having a large family, such support makes the decision to have more children easier by offsetting these high costs. Networks of families and fellow adherents help with child care, auxiliary church organizations provide subsidized goods and spiritual assistance and check on the emotional well-being of families, and so on. Such support makes pronatalist doctrinal imperatives easier to enact and allows religious denominations to expand through natural growth. If the local religious community only monitors and punishes religious free-riding, it does little to promote expansion. Pronatalist doctrine without community support and child-rearing assistance becomes little more than wishful thinking, an empty set of nonsustainable desiderata. Instead, coreligionists need to provide family assistance and support in addition to the transmission of religious norms. Tightly knit religious communities thus cannot simply punish deviance; they need to serve a positive function by sharing in the rearing and education of children, thus lowering the costs of having children.

Community services that act to support and sanction the behavior of coreligionists thus promote the investment in large families. This also means that religious families who want to have more children may choose to live in areas with more dense networks and community support. This is not to suggest that members of strict religions either have identical and high desire to have many children or that they will simply have as many kids as the religion will offset; preferences over the number of children will vary, as will the material and other resources individuals can contribute. On average, however, community support makes it possible to realize pronatalist doctrinal directives more easily by lowering the costs of having large families.

In turn, having more children increases the reliance on the community of the fellow faithful: with each additional child, the family becomes more reliant on the religious community and the support it provides. Exit costs increase over time and with each additional child. Moreover, the reliance on community support decreases free-riding and inculcates norms that are passed on from generation to generation: the same networks that serve to provide sustenance can be also used to monitor compliance with religious strictures and norms. The result is both the retention of core supporters, sustained by doctrinal orthodoxy, and the expansion of membership, sustained by high fertility (and indoctrinated in the same orthodoxy). High fertility increases the ranks of the faithful more reliably than conversion and perpetuates existing doctrinal norms as both justification of large families and a norm to be passed onto a new generation. Community support can thus expand the ranks of the faithful without diluting their commitment.

In contrast to the club goods model, this model endogenizes entry and exit costs: the former are lowered (family investments are encouraged by community support, so new members by birth can enter the church “for free”), whereas the exit costs increase over time as families grow (a family with several children dependent on community support is less likely to leave the religious community). Thus, exit costs are also dynamic, rather than static, and vary over the course of the family life cycle. Community dependence also helps to resolve another tension in the existing club goods model, which argues that minority strict religious groups maintain tension to the rest of society through costly stigmatizing practices such as peculiar dress or behavioral demands. Yet strict groups hold onto these beliefs and practices even when they are in the majority, as in localized monopolies. This is because demanding religious practices exist not only to stigmatize the members but also to provide services and benefits.
If high fertility serves as both a mechanism of expansion and a commitment device, it further explains some gaps in the club goods accounts. First, it explains fertility rates well above replacement rates: Stark and Iannaccone argue that fertility has to be high enough only to offset mortality, yet, as they note themselves, the mean Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for Jehovah’s Witnesses in Canada is 3.4 and for Mormons is 3.8. Second, socialization no longer need produce the weakest loyalists: instead, it increases the dependency on the community and thus increases exit costs over time. Third, high fertility is no longer the ad hoc result of women turning to “household activity, particularly childbearing.” Instead, investments in high fertility are conditional on their expected utility: both on the payoff (a high value placed on children by the doctrine) and on the probability of that outcome (the degree to which costs are offset by the community). Finally, the relationship between fertility and community helps to explain why “[religious] practice matters in shaping family preferences for conservative women but not as markedly for men.” Women are more dependent on community support, given the gendered division of labor in strictly religious households and the demands of family and child care.

As a result, a focus on fertility as an expansionary strategy explains critical anomalies left behind by the club goods model: the success of both Ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Amish, who reject any missionary work, yet who continue both to maintain high boundaries, with the concomitantly high retention rates, and to expand their membership with TFRs as high as 8. Attendance in yeshivas (religious schools) varies across Ultra-Orthodox communities, but fertility rates do not: children are a powerful (and irreversible) signal of accepting community norms and the dependence on community that comes with them. Moreover, couples with many children are more likely to remain within the fold, given their dependence on community benefits. Conversion is no longer necessary for strict sects to survive and to prosper. High fertility, however, remains critical to their propagation.

This explanation complements the club goods model and other supply-side accounts by endogenizing entry and exit costs and showing how and when they are asymmetrical. Moreover, it explains growth, rather than maintenance alone, and the empirical patterns we observe are of expansion and contraction of denominations.

30. Stark and Iannaccone, “Why the Jehovah’s Witnesses Grow So Rapidly.”
rather than stasis. Unlike conversion-based explanations, the model presented here accounts for the success of nonproselytizing denominations.

Empirical Patterns

If this model is accurate, religious growth should be correlated with (1) strict and pronatalist doctrine, (2) dense local networks of coreligionists, and (3) material and emotional support offered by these networks. More specifically, this model predicts that fertility differentials explain more of denominational growth than conversions, that dense local religious networks favor fertility, that informal religious institutions provide material and spiritual support (and monitoring), and where these ties are looser, fertility rates drop. Finally, if the story of endogenous entry and exit costs holds, retention rates should be higher in these conditions, but, insofar as there are departures from the religion, the young and childless should be more likely to leave, whereas commitment to the religion should increase with marriage and children. As children leave the household, dependence on the community lessens. In contrast, where neither doctrine demands nor communal standards support high fertility, entry and exit costs are lower, conversion may play a greater role, and we would expect greater rates of defection and turnover.

To examine whether the community dependence hypothesis is supported, this study relies on cross-denominational correlates of religious growth, and an in-depth study of community support mechanisms in the LDS. First, data on denominational growth rates allows us to compare several religions: Roman Catholics before and after Vatican II, Orthodox and Reform Jews, and conservative Protestant denominations, including the LDS (the Mormons), Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Seventh-day Adventists, as compared with mainline Protestant denominations, including Methodists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians. These comparisons pair the stricter version of a given denomination with its laxer, less doctrinally demanding counterpart. To control for potentially confounding contextual variables, the data is limited to the twentieth-century United States, a vibrant religious marketplace characterized by the availability of modern birth control options. Variation in birth rates is thus possible and attributable to personal choices rather than societal constraints. Similarly, state regulation of religion is a constant so that variation across denominations cannot be attributed to differences in legal constraints or privileges.

Doctrine and norms matter. As Table 1 shows, strict denominations have grown more rapidly than lax ones. Strict denominations grew at nearly 3.5 percent annually on average between 1929 and
2005. These denominations included the Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Southern Baptists, LDS, Amish, and Roman Catholics until 1960. Less demanding denominations grew at roughly 1 percent annually. These denominations were the Roman Catholics after the shock of the Vatican II liberalization, Lutherans, American Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians. Moreover, strict or conservative denominations have far higher fertility rates than their more lax or liberal counterparts. Strictness is correlated to pronatalism: the stricter religions frown (or prohibit) divorce, contraception, and abortion and emphasize women’s role as mothers.

Within denominations, the stricter variants also have higher rates of reproduction: the Amish average is 7.1 TFR, but the rates for the Swartzentruber Amish, a particularly orthodox order, are considerably higher, with families regularly reaching between thirteen and sixteen children. Similarly, the estimated fertility rate is 1.86 children average for Jewish women, but it ranges from 3.3 for modern Orthodox, to 6.6 for Ultra-Orthodox, to 7.9 for Hasidim. As in the other strict denominations, these differentials are buttressed by theology and by practice. For example, Ultra-Orthodox Jews have numerous informal prohibitions on the use of contraceptives and abortion, and in one account, “the issue is not a principle opposition to interfering with the production of life, as in [the 1968 Roman Catholic papal encyclical] Humanae Vitae, but a strategic policy of maximizing births.” Infertility is grounds for divorce.

Fertility is a reliable driver of growth. Conversions cannot explain the higher growth rates of either Orthodox Jews or Amish groups because these groups do not readily accept converts and do not proselytize. Conversion may be a plausible mechanism of growth in some conservative Christian denominations; one study of three

34. These numbers include both the Evangelical Lutheran Church, with 4.6 million members, and the considerably stricter Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), with 2.3 million members. See Eileen Lindner, ed., The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010). However, the stricter LCMS does not have either the strong pronatalist theology or the community support that would lead us to expect higher growth rates from within. For example, the LCMS is antiabortion but allows the use of a variety of birth control methods it considers nonabortifacient.
New Evangelical Movement churches found that the majority of new evangelical members have come from other churches, with 60 percent coming from mostly mainline Protestants and Catholic denominations and roughly one-third coming from other conservative denominations.38 Yet even here, there are reasons to doubt that conversions are a more consistent and reliable source of conservative Protestant expansion than growth from within. First, because these are relatively new churches, we cannot test the community dependence hypothesis directly. At the time of the Perrin, Kennedy, and Miller study, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship was ten years old, the Calvary Chapel was twenty-seven years old, and Hope Chapel was forty-four years old.39 Sufficient time had not elapsed for birth rates, rather than conversion, to make a difference. Second, the more established conservative denominations (Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and most Baptists) tend to show a different pattern, a pattern of a “circulation of the saints,” with conservative Christians reaffiliating and staying within conservative denominations rather than reaffiliating from more mainstream Protestant denominations.40 Many evangelical churches offer numerous community services, ranging from coffee shops to youth groups to mothers’ gatherings to men’s retreats, that may eventually offer community support for growth from within, if they are not offset by the frequency of churn among members. Third, birth rate differentials appear to be the dominant factor in the decline of the more lax mainstream Protestant denominations.41 Trends in fertility account for 76 percent of the observed increase in

conservative denominations, whereas reaffiliation from mainstream religions accounts for only 4 percent of the increase.Episcopal officials have also attributed the decrease in their membership to dropping birth rates.

Second, the religious community and its support matter. Strict denominations with the highest birth rates also have the most vibrant and diverse networks of community aid for families, including financial redistribution, child care, education, visitors, women’s organizations, and, by the same token, monitoring of the behavior of the faithful. For example, in an explicitly pronatalist policy, rotating credit societies among Ultra-Orthodox Jews, known as *gemachim*, operate in vast domains, lending money interest free, operating consumer cooperatives, providing household essentials such as toys, tools, clothing, and so on. In keeping with the argument presented here, “Orthodox communal culture encourages child-bearing” through both doctrine and the provision of mutual child-rearing assistance. As a result, exit costs increase over time: “[T]he boundaries thicken so the investment in them on the part of those who remain within them becomes more and more precious—that is to say, the costs of violating them or stepping outside them rises, and so the possibility of a viable social life on the edge of boundaries declines, and the expenditures of effort in policing boundaries becomes more worthwhile. Boundaries are extended and framed to cover more and more sphere of social life.”

Accounts of Amish life similarly emphasize that these tightly knit communities not only celebrate but actively support and share in the responsibilities surrounding birth, child care, and education (as well as other events, such as marriage, funerals, and even disaster relief). As John Hostetler argues, “[I]ntense interaction in the little homogenous community makes members feel responsible for each other’s welfare. Although community aid is often a form of economic sharing, the feelings are the result of intense social concern.” These networks can have an additional purpose of maintaining group identity and dependence: in an explicit act of

42. Hout, Greeley, and Wilde, “The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States.”
44. Wertheimer, “Jews and Jewish Birthrate.”
46. Mackall, Plain Secrets; John Hostetler, Amish Society (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Kraybill, The Riddle of Amish Culture.
47. Hostetler, Amish Society, 249.
substitution and boundary maintenance, the Amish shun commercial insurance, Social Security, health care, and pension plans as a hedge against God's will and instead rely on a system of mutual aid and obligation.

Community support can make a significant difference in promoting fertility among adherents of the same religion with a uniformly pronatalist doctrine. Differences in communal density and support mean that fertility and growth will vary within denominations, and over time. The Catholic example is illustrative here. For example, in Catholic countries where child-care provisions are negligible and women are expected to bear the burden of child rearing by themselves, fertility rates have dropped precipitously. Among developed democracies, those countries with the least flexible labor markets and lowest child-care provisions are also the ones with the lowest birth rates, including Italy, Spain, and Poland. This variation occurs despite a conservative Catholic culture and constant church pronouncements in favor of families and against contraception and abortion.

We see similar variation over time. Catholic fertility patterns show a sharp drop-off once Vatican II inadvertently attenuated both pronatalist doctrine and community support institutions. There was a sharp decrease in Catholic fertility in the 1970s. And the rate at which Catholic fertility declined was considerably higher than that of the non-Catholic population; the inflection point seems to be located around 1965. Fertility rates decreased 33 percent for Catholics from 1961–65 to 1966–70 and 16 percent for non-Catholics. Thus, in 1961–65, the Catholic TFR in the United States was 4.25, and the non-Catholic TFR was 3.14, for a difference of 1.11. In 1966–70, the Catholic TFR decreased to 3.21, whereas the non-Catholic TFR dropped to 2.62, for a difference of 0.59. Both continued to decline, so that in 1971–75 the Catholic TFR was 2.27 and the non-Catholic TFR was 2.17.

Why would Catholic birth rates drop off so precipitously? The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) had two potentially deleterious effects on fertility: First, it was characterized by a highly controversial wobble on the acceptability of contraception. A panel of scientific and theological advisors formally supported the use of birth control, but church authorities publicly (and with great publicity) renounced these findings. This internal conflict suggested that

the church’s stance on birth control was heterogenous and based on elite politics rather than theological consistency, making it easier for the faithful to ignore it. A strictly pronatalist theology was now undermined by theological splits. Second, Vatican II greatly lowered the prestige of nuns and monks by lowering the boundaries between lay members and the sacred orders. This meant a drop in the number of nuns and monks, the very people who were the mainstay of Catholic education and charity provision, increasing the costs of investing in large families. Unfortunately, in the United States, this drop-off coincided with the changing character of many parishes, which went from tightly knit communities of poor immigrants, often concentrating a particular immigrant group or ethnicity, to much more diverse and heterogenous local entities. Community ties, therefore, could not compensate for the decreasing numbers of Catholic nuns and monks. Thus, Vatican II coincided with the loosening of local community ties.50

Third, exit costs increase with marriage and children. Very strict religions retain a very high percentage of the faithful: for example, 90 percent of Amish children join the church as adults.51 Insofar as members of these denominations leave, however, it is when they are young and without children. As the website of Hillel, an organization in Israel that helps people who wish to leave the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi), soberly admits, “[M]ost of our newcomers are young, between the ages of 18 and 23. At later ages, most [H]aredi men and women are married and have children, and for many reasons leaving becomes virtually impossible.”52 In a final observable implication of the importance of community support for fertility and the expansion of religion from within, religious out-marriage reduces birth rates.53

Taken together, these data suggest that community support fosters larger families and eventually leads to greater dependence on the community. Investing in large families increases the costs of leaving the denomination over time and promotes greater adherence and commitment to religious norms (including pronatalism and mutual aid). The result is steady expansion from within, and the resolution of the dilemma of growth and dilution.

50. Fertility rates remained high where Vatican II was not as keenly felt, as in Ireland.
51. Kraybill, The Riddle of Amish Culture, 16.
The Canonical Example: The LDS

To see how these factors and mechanisms unfold, the LDS provides one of the clearest illustrations of the argument that community support underlies the stable and consistent natural growth rates of strict religions. That said, other denominations, such as the Amish and Ultra-Orthodox Jews also share the mechanisms of growth and similar supporting institutions (pronatalist doctrine with family as the central unit, mutual material and spiritual support and redistribution, and informal institutions of monitoring and addressing families’ needs and adherence to religious norms).

The LDS Church’s growth illustrates two important points. First, it is striking that it relies on natural growth for the core of its expansion in the United States, given its extensive missionary and proselytizing efforts. These efforts have led some scholars to conclude that while “sects have become gradually more dependent on biological reproduction for growth… the only obvious exception are the Mormons, who devote an unprecedented amount of effort to proselytism.”54 Yet as we will see, high rates of conversion do not explain the growth of the LDS Church in the United States, precisely the vibrant religious marketplace where we would expect conversion to be a primary driver of growth. Second, community support is critical to maintaining the expansion of the LDS with minimal dilution of its doctrinal commitments, with the highest rates of religious commitment and highest fertility rates occurring where the religious communities are most dense, in the intermountain American West. One result is that “from cradle to the grave, Mormons are more likely to be surrounded by children and married couples.”55

Since its founding in 1830, the LDS has grown from six members to 14.4 million as of 2012.56 From 1880 to 1960, natural increase dominated conversions as the engine of denominational growth.57 Subsequently, Rodney Stark argues that the very high rates of LDS growth (anywhere from 30 to 50 percent per decade) can be attributed to conversions: for every child baptized, he claims, nearly four

new converts join the religion.\textsuperscript{58} His data, however, call these estimates into question: he cites as an example figures from 1991, when 175,000 children were baptized against 297,7000 converts. Such figures, however, mean that less than two converts join for every child baptized. By 2007, the number of conversions and baptisms were the same globally.

Conversion drives LDS expansion outside of the United States. Growth due to conversion is highest in Africa (13 percent) and lowest in Utah (0.5 percent). Latin America and Asian LDS membership grew at a little less than 10 percent, whereas United States LDS membership grew at around 2 percent thanks to conversions. The greatest absolute growth has occurred in Latin America, whereas the highest growth rates are in Africa and in the former communist bloc.\textsuperscript{59} Similarly, the ratio of converts to those baptized in the faith varies from fifteen converts per child baptism in Asia and in Africa to 0.2 converts per baptism in Utah.\textsuperscript{60}

Converts, however, are a highly unreliable source of new members. Precisely where the church has experienced greatest growth through conversion internationally, it has experienced the greatest attrition. As noted earlier, 50–75 percent of new converts become inactive within a year. In numerous countries, rapid expansion of Mormon ranks through conversion frequently came at the expense of retaining new converts. As a result, when national census tallies and church statistics are compared, self-professed Mormons are as few as 23 percent of the number claimed by the church (as in Mexico).\textsuperscript{61} Other figures range from 27 percent in Chile to 48 percent in Australia to 57 percent in Austria and Canada. As one study concluded, “[R]apid growth attends low convert retention.”\textsuperscript{62} The carefully woven and robust webs of Mormon doctrinal teaching, public testimony, community support, and shared values that sustain commitment to the faith have not kept pace with conversions outside of the United States. The LDS Church has accordingly lengthened the time before baptism and confirmation of new converts and has weeded out more nominal members than in the past. Accordingly, the 2003 statistics show that there were roughly 243,000 new converts, the lowest number since 1987, when 227,000 new converts were

\textsuperscript{58} Stark, “Moderization and Mormon Growth.”
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 1525.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 57.
added, despite an increase in the number of missionaries to more than 56,000 in 2003, up from 35,800 in 1987.63

In the United States, however, Mormons are born into the faith. Fertility, rather than conversion, is critical to the expansion of the church in the United States. This natural growth is formidable. LDS families are consistently bigger and have higher fertility rates than other denominations.64 Birthrates have, in fact, fallen since the 1970s across the US nonimmigrant population, including among the Saints. However, LDS families continue to be larger than the national average (2.63 persons as opposed to 1.99), and their ideal number of children is higher (3.89 children as opposed to 2.89 children). These differences remain significant when controlled for education, race, age, and church attendance.65 In contrast with Catholic women, the fertility of LDS women has decreased at a lower than average rate. Moreover, more than 50 percent of LDS families have three or more children, compared with roughly one-third of Catholic and Protestant families. Twenty percent of LDS families have more than five children, compared with 10 percent of Catholics and Protestants. Surveys of the Saints suggest that this continued higher birthrate “apparently derives from personal values or social pressures favoring large families rather than from beliefs that birth control per se is wrong.”66

The church emphasizes the family and supports it in two ways. First, the theology is family centered, with families sealed together for eternity in the afterlife and with marriage as an enormously important institution. Programmatic focus on the family was renewed in the 1960s, with initiatives such as church authorities encouraging the family home evening, promoting greater religious education for the young, and so on.67 Second, there is also a great deal of material and community support for families. The church runs an extensive network of agricultural operations, second-hand clothing stores, volunteer-run food processing plants, and distribution centers to ensure that needier members are materially

63. Ibid., 63.
supported. Deseret Industries thrift stores are a familiar sight across the intermountain West, and these efforts are exemplified in Welfare Square, a facility in Salt Lake City that includes a bakery, cannery, thrift store, storehouse, and employment center.

Several local church institutions also actively support high fertility and high community involvement. These organizations are affiliated with the church and are organized on the ward and stake levels, close to individual members. Thus, the Relief Society, a women’s organization, has a network of visiting teachers who call on women and families in their area, organize activities for young mothers and children, and offer material support for needy families. Young women’s and young men’s organizations offer age-appropriate activities, religious instruction, and fellowship. A missionary organization for local missionaries working in the area, an activities committee, an employment and welfare specialist, a financial counselor, and a librarian are among some of the other callings in each ward. All males over the age of twelve can hold offices in the church priesthood, and the priesthood holders (who are organized into various quorums, such as the deacons, teachers, elders, high priests) also visit each house monthly, reaching out to members who have not been attending the weekly religious services.

These institutions, and the community support they offer in particular, are important in fostering fertility. Timothy Heaton found that pronatalist theology (measured by whether couples married in the temple) and reference groups (measured by frequency of church attendance and residence in a predominantly Mormon area) were powerful predictors of Mormon birthrates. Heaton posited that reference groups have two effects: they generate norms and expectations regarding birthrates, and they can generate “structural support in terms of shared interests, activities, and life situations.” However, his analysis does not disentangle the normative effects of theology and reference groups (an individual’s ambition to live up to theological and group expectations) and the structural effects: the community support that lowers the physical, material, and emotional costs of having children. Therefore, I turn to a study by Armand Mauss, “Salt Lake City and San Francisco Surveys of Mormons, 1967–69,” that explicitly asked Mormon respondents about whether they have found specific denominational organizations and institutions, such as Relief Society, Welfare, Primary, and so on helpful. The limitations of this study

are that it is dated and that it is geographically limited; the advantage is that it is a rare opportunity to test explicitly the hypothesis that community support is critical to fostering higher birthrates.

The analysis of the survey supports two conclusions: that community support institutions matter and that local monopolies foster greater growth. I used a negative binomial regression because the dependent variable is a count variable (the number of children of the respondent) and the events within a count may not be independent of each other (having a child may correlate positively or negatively with having more children.) The results are reported in tables 2–4. For Mormons living in Salt Lake City, Utah, community support, such as finding Welfare or Relief Society assistance helpful or spending more time in auxiliary organization meetings, is strongly correlated with the number of children. In fact, finding Welfare Society assistance helpful is, along with years of marriage and income, the strongest predictor of the number of children of the respondent. Commitment to doctrine and frequency of attendance at sacrament meetings are important correlates as well, in keeping with the predictions of the good clubs model.

In contrast with the local Mormon monopoly in Salt Lake City, for Mormons living in San Francisco, the only reliable predictor of the respondents’ birthrates was their educational attainment, which was negatively correlated. Whether there is something particular about respondents who self-select into a predominantly non-Mormon area, or whether community support structures are more attenuated where there are fewer Mormons, community support did not increase the number of children among San Francisco Saints. In general, San Francisco Mormons tended to have few children: 1.64 on average (1.63 standard deviation), against the Salt Lake City mean of 3.27 (1.79 standard deviation). More than 34 percent of the San Francisco Mormons reported not having children, compared with 3 percent in the Salt Lake City sample.

In addition to support, these institutions also serve as sanction mechanisms that cement the commitment to fulfilling obligations to church, family, and community. Home and visiting teacher visits, for example, also allow the bishop to monitor both the religious observance of the faithful and the need for community support within families. The Amish have a similar system of mutual pastoral visits, and “close ties in family networks place informal checks on social behavior.” Bishops meet with families yearly to discuss tithing commitments and religious observance and interview members privately before issuing the “temple

70. Full results of the San Francisco regressions are available from the author.
Table 2  Regression results with the dependent variable as respondent’s number of children. **Model 1: Welfare**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Incidence rate ratio</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>P &gt;</th>
<th>95% confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding welfare assistance helpful</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−3.23</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.89, 0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple marriage</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>−1.73</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.86, 1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacrament Meeting Attendance</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−2.86</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.92, 0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity of respondent’s parents in the church</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>−1.17</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.95, 1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−2.09</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.91, 1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income level</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.09, 1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>12.18</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.23, 5.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note. Number of observations = 519. Likelihood ratio (LR) $\chi^2(6) = 91.34$. Dispersion = mean. Probability $> \chi^2 = 0.00$. Log likelihood $= -972.02$. Pseudo $R^2 = 0.04$. $/ln\alpha = -54.54$. Alpha $= 2.06e - 24$. Likelihood ratio test of alpha $= 0.00$. Chibar2(01) $= 0.00$. Probability chibar2 $= 1.000$. Temple Marriage, Activity of respondent’s parents in the church, Finding welfare assistance helpful, and Finding relief society assistance helpful are inversely coded. A high score indicates no temple marriage, low parental activity in church, and low perceptions of helpfulness. Results are reported as incidence rate ratios (exponentiated coefficients). For example, for a unit increase in finding welfare assistance helpful, the rate ratio for the number of children would increase by a factor of 0.93, holding constant all other variables in the model.
Table 3  Regression results with the dependent variable as respondent's number of children. Model 2: Time spent in LDS church activities (Primary, Relief Society, MIA, etc.)

| Number of children                                      | Incidence rate ratio | Standard error | Z      | P > |Z| | 95% confidence interval |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------|--------|-----|-----|-------------------------|
| Hours per week spent serving in LDS auxiliary organizations | 1.04                 | 0.02           | 2.68   | 0.007 | | 1.01, 1.07              |
| Temple marriage\(^a\)                                    | 0.87                 | 0.03           | -4.81  | 0.00 | | 0.82, 0.92              |
| Activity of respondent’s parents in the church\(^a\)     | 0.98                 | 0.01           | -1.46  | 0.14 | | 0.95, 1.01              |
| Educational attainment                                   | 0.93                 | 0.02           | -3.57  | 0.00 | | 0.89, 0.97              |
| Income level                                             | 1.12                 | 0.02           | 5.02   | 0.00 | | 1.07, 1.17              |
| Constant                                                 | 3.52                 | 0.41           | 10.83  | 0.00 | | 2.80, 4.42              |


Note. Number of observations = 659. Likelihood ratio (LR) $\chi^2(5) = 78.01$. Dispersion = mean. Probability > $\chi^2 = 0.00$. Log likelihood = $-1,253.16$. Pseudo $R^2 = 0.03$. $/lnalpha = -27.69$. Alpha = 9.45e $-13$. Likelihood ratio test of alpha = 0.00. Chibar2(01) = 0.00. Probability > chibar2 = 1.00. Temple Marriage, Activity of respondent’s parents in the church, Finding welfare assistance helpful, and Finding relief society assistance helpful are inversely coded. A high score indicates no temple marriage, low parental activity in church, and low perceptions of helpfulness. Results are reported as incidence rate ratios (exponentiated coefficients). For example, for a unit increase in hours per week spent serving in LDS auxiliary organizations, the rate ratio for the number of children would increase by a factor of 1.04, holding constant all other variables in the model.
Table 4  Regression results with the dependent variable as respondent’s number of children. **Model 3: Relief society**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Incidence rate ratio</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>P &gt;</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>95% confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding relief society assistance helpful</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−3.17</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.90, 0.98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple marriage&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>−4.69</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.81, 0.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity of respondent’s parents in the church&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>−1.13</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.96, 1.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−2.97</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.90, 0.98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income level</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.07, 1.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>15.50</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.58, 5.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Note.* Number of observations = 634. Likelihood ratio (LR) $\chi^2(5) = 81.40$. Dispersion = mean. Probability > $\chi^2 = 0.00$. Log likelihood = −1,212.92. Pseudo $R^2 = 0.03$. /$\lnalpha = −27.90$. Alpha = 7.65e − 13. Likelihood ratio test of alpha = 0.00. Chibar2(01) = 0.00. Probability > chibar2 = 1.00. Temple Marriage, Activity of respondent’s parents in the church, Finding welfare assistance helpful, and Finding relief society assistance helpful are inversely coded. A high score indicates no temple marriage, low parental activity in church, and low perceptions of helpfulness. Results are reported as incidence rate ratios (exponentiated coefficients). For example, for a unit increase in finding relief society helpful, the rate ratio for the number of children would increase by a factor of 0.94, holding constant all other variables in the model.
recommend” that certifies a Saint’s commitment to the religion and its principles for a member to enter a Mormon Temple. Similarly, an Amish groom has to bring a letter of good standing from his deacon to the bride’s deacon to marry. Saints receive callings (or community work assignments) based partly on their reputations. Adultery and premarital sex are serious transgressions that merit punishments ranging from chastisement to disfellowshipment to excommunication. Sanctions can come from church authorities, the local community, or both, but all serve to buttress the commitment to community and to family. Fitting into the LDS “religio-ethnic community” is a critical, if informal, aspect of church belonging.72

These local activities and organizations also offer direct material and spiritual support. Ward members aid each other: bringing food to those in difficult circumstances (births, deaths, sickness), helping ward members to move house, carpooling, and watching each other’s children, both within and outside of immediate family networks. Thus, “theology is reinforced by interaction in local religious communities. Moreover, being raised as a child in a Mormon subculture helps perpetuate pronatalism.”73 Because the wards are organized into a loose hierarchy, with the various quorums and women’s auxiliaries apprising the bishop of their activities and being directed to channel aid, coordination costs are relatively low. Finally, the church can offer financial support to struggling families, guaranteeing rent payments to landlords or providing small sums to tide families over. The Ultra-Orthodox and the Amish have similar systems of mutual aid and redistribution.74

Just as important, these structures, especially missions and the extensive educational offerings, help to retain young Saints in the faith and its practice. Many young men aged 19–21 years go on a two-year proselytizing mission that not only serves to gain converts but also cements commitment to faith precisely at a vulnerable period of young adult life. (The Amish rumspringa serves a similar purpose of cementing commitment.) The extensive educational offerings (including Sunday school, young men and women’s activities, and Seminary, a four-year program of scriptural study for high school students that meets daily) and the leadership roles offered to youth early on in their lives mean that young men and women assume responsibility and commit to the church at a young age. Boys enter priesthood roles in adolescence, and young

men and women are called to teach the congregation and to offer public testimony beginning at twelve years of age. The young women’s organization runs in parallel to the young men’s priesthood quorums, and young women sit in presidencies from the age of twelve as well. Children younger than twelve regularly bear their testimony to the congregation on fast and testimony Sundays and are assigned talks in the children’s primary. As a result, those born into the LDS church tend to stay within it, with very low rates of converting out of the religion or abandoning its tenets.

In keeping with the community model, religiosity tracks family investments. Surveys of Mormons suggest that it is marriage that cements their religious commitment: more than 40 percent of married male respondents in one survey were highly religious, compared with 20 percent of their unmarried counterparts. For women, the increase was more modest, from 39 to 43 percent. Church attendance increased after the birth of the first child, and religiosity further increased with the birth of a second child. The most notable increases in testimony, however, came as children grew older, especially as they became teenagers: both men and women increase their religious commitments precisely at a time when children are most vulnerable to outside influence. In keeping with expectations of the model, religious belief and observation decrease once children leave home and the need for community support drops.75

As a result, the church experiences the highest natural growth rates and the highest rates of retention in the intermountain American West, the area where it is a predominant (if not monopolistic) religion and its community networks are the most dense. This area is also where it experiences the least tension between church and society: most residents share the same set of religious values. This is also the site of greatest religious activity: for example 70 percent of eligible men were ordained Melchizedek priesthood holders in Utah, compared with 59 percent in the United States overall, or with rates as low as 19 percent in Mexico or 17 percent in Japan—areas where religion is at the greatest tension with society and where the members should self-select for the most fervent commitment among its members.76 In short, the denser the networks of Mormon support, the higher the birth rates, the


greater the commitment and participation, and the greater the growth of the religion.

Existing approaches lead us to expect the opposite: sects at high tension with society, small and embattled, should show the greatest intensity of practice and growth potential, whereas dominant denominations should become self-contented and decline. Yet the patterns of Mormon growth and retention suggest otherwise. Rather than resulting in a complacent monopoly, the Mormon dominance in the intermountain West has been fostered by historically vibrant community networks of mutual support and growth.

Conclusions

A renowned scholar of American religion once noted that “birthrates and church attendance have fluctuated together in America for as long as we have data.”77 In accounting for this correlation, the model presented here has two implications. First, good clubs resolve the dilemma of expansion without dilution by lowering the investment cost of having large families while increasing the costs of exit over time. If natural propagation is the main mechanism of increase, entry (by birth) is virtually free, so the costs of exit rise afterward by definition—but a key aspect of this dynamic is the continued increase in the exit costs. In contrast with the club goods model, good clubs endogenize entry and exit costs, with the latter growing higher as fertility increases over time. High growth rates are no longer incidental, secondary to conversion efforts, nor are they simply the result of theological priorities. Instead, high fertility becomes central to religious expansion and relies on community support. This account thus provides further foundations for the link between robust religion and the importance of family and community, rather than conversion or state regulation.

Second, this study refines some of the findings of the political economy of religion, which argues that monopolies in the religious marketplace are what they are in the economic market: underproviders. Yet as we have seen, local monopolies support religious growth and retention by providing the networks of material and emotional support that make investments in large families cost effective and increase the costs of exit from the religious community. This also answers the puzzle of growth without conversion or

proselytizing; endogenous fertility can account for growth in the absence of outreach. In many cases, fertility is a more durable source of growth than conversion. In the end, it not only takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes many children to sustain a religion.