

“Statistical Analysis of Jehovah’s Witness, Seventh-day Adventist, and Mormon Growth and Retention in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe 1985-2018”

Presenter: David G. Stewart, Jr., University of Nevada Las Vegas

Contact email: dgstewart@yahoo.com

Presented at the European Association for the Study of Religion
University of Tartu, Estonia, June 26, 2019

Keywords: Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Religion, Eastern Europe

Abstract [Slide 1]

Christian new religious movements founded in United States in the nineteenth century, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Watchtower Society), Seventh-day Adventism, and Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) have experienced different dynamics in regard to growth and expansion in Central and Eastern Europe.

Each of these faiths experienced substantial initial growth following the liberalization of religious freedom and fall of communism. Initially high growth decelerated with the resurgence of dominant national faiths. Especially in Russia, the passage of legislation favoring the Russian Orthodox religion with close ties to the government restricted proselytism by foreign missionaries and sharply curtailed the growth of these movements. Long delays or refusal to grant permits for church buildings limited new construction. Atheism and secularism also experienced resurgence after an initial period of increased religious enthusiasm.

These faiths have responded variously. The Mormon faith, which is most dependent on foreign missionaries, has experienced the greatest decline in growth rates. Mormons have tried to scrupulously comply with local laws and regulations. Weekly Mormon church attendance across most large countries in the region has remained stable or declined from rates of twenty years ago.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists have experienced uneven growth, with modest gains in some nations offset by slight losses in others. Jehovah’s Witnesses have largely ignored government restrictions on proselytism but have been embroiled in legal controversies in several nations, culminating in an outright ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia following a Supreme Court ruling in 2016.

Data on the growth and member retention of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and Mormons will be presented for each nation from 1985 to 2018. Factors which may influence growth and retention, including reliance on foreign missionaries, methods of spread, local adaptations, social and governmental responses to these movements, will be evaluated. Results will be analyzed and discussed.

Disclosures [2]

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose. No external funding was received for this research.

Level of Evidence [3]

Level of Evidence for this research is level IV (case series, surveys of limited quality, nonconsecutive) and Level V (observational/anecdotal studies, mechanism-based reasoning), on a I-V scale with level I representing the highest level of methodological rigor.¹

Data and Sources [4]

Sources of statistical data include:

- LDS national membership and congregation statistics (*LDS Church Almanacs, lds.org*)
- Human Development Index (*UN Development Program*)
- GDP per capita (International Monetary Fund)
- Fertility rates (*UN Population Division*)
- Population growth rates (*World Bank, UN Population Division*)
- Urbanization (*UN Population Division*)
- Net migrants per 100K population (*UN Population Division*)
- JW growth and 1000s of preaching hours per baptism (*Jehovah's Witness annual yearbooks 1982-2017*)
- LDS activity rates, national outreach percent (*Reaching the Nations*)

Statistical analysis was performed with MiniTab and Microsoft Excel software packages.

Author Background [5]

My professional work is as an orthopedic surgeon. Missiology or the study of church growth is a hobby I have engaged in since my own experience as a Mormon missionary in Russia from 1992 to 1994. I am the author or co-author of several works on LDS missionary work, including the two-volume *Reaching the Nations: International Church Growth Almanac* with Matt Martinich, *Law of the Harvest: Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work*, several book chapters (including in the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* and *Revisiting Thomas F. Odea's The Mormons*), and a section editor and author in the *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions* in press with Springer (2019).

Areas Visited [6]

Over the past twenty years, I have conducted on-site ethnographic and missiological research in 62 nations. The relevant locations for this presentation are shown on the slide. Today, I will be discussing the growth of the Jehovah's Witness, Seventh-day Adventist, and Latter-day Saint or Mormon faiths in Communist and Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe.

¹ Introduction to Levels of Evidence in Research Methodology: Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery. <https://journals.lww.com/jbjsjournal/Pages/Journals-Level-of-Evidence.aspx>. Accessed 29 May 2019.

The Enlightenment and Higher Textual Criticism [7]

Skepticism toward religion had been growing since the Enlightenment, with seeds even more ancient. The Marquis of Laplace, when asked by Napoleon why his work on the solar system did not mention God, stated: "I had no need of that hypothesis." The Tubingen school of Ferdinand Christian Baur disputed the rationality of Biblical miracles and ushered in the study of higher criticism of the scriptural text, challenging dogmas and stories held by Christians since antiquity. As geologists ranged throughout the world, they published findings which were difficult to reconcile with the Genesis flood narrative. The study of nature led to explanations for natural phenomena which disputed traditional literal interpretations of scripture, such as Darwin's work *On the Origin of Species* which proposed mechanisms for evolution through natural selection on the basis of wide-ranging evidence and observations.

As the agricultural and the industrial revolutions took hold, man felt less dependent on the supernatural. This was accentuated by further advances in medicine and the understanding of disease. Man was no longer so dependent on the elements that a lack of rain or a bad storm would spoil the harvest and lead to starvation, nor were health and sickness entirely capricious conditions with little remedy beyond propitiation of the gods. Skepticism toward religion grew.

USSR Anti-Religious Campaigns [8]

An extreme form of anti-religious sentiment was embodied in the writings of Karl Marx, who wrote that "religion is the opiate of the masses." The Communist state in the former Russian Empire was envisioned as ushering in a utopia of the common man, based not on state atheism and ostensibly scientific and rationalist claims. Religion was to be actively suppressed as delusional and counterrevolutionary. In the USSR, antireligious campaigns were conducted from 1921 in 1928 and from 1928 to 1941. Priests were painted as enemies of the working class and were rounded up and exterminated. Some 85,000 Russian Orthodox priests were killed in 1937 alone. During this period, the Russian Orthodox Church lost most of its churches, declining from 29,584 to fewer than 500 in the Russian Republic. Its remaining institutions were heavily infiltrated by government informants.

As communism spread throughout Eastern Europe and areas of Central Europe, it was initially principally concerned with suppressing armed political resistance. Once control had been consolidated, campaigns were conducted to suppress religion. In Poland, a new Constitution imposed by the Communists in 1952 omitted previously guaranteed religious freedoms. Catholic schools were closed and social and charitable organizations affiliated with the church were made illegal. A terror campaign was conducted against monasteries and parishes, and clergy were arrested and put on trial. Communist collaborators were appointed to take over dioceses. The situation in other Eastern Bloc nations was similar, with suppression of existing religious institutions, imprisonment or execution of clergy, and forced secularization.

In Central Asia, communism sought to undermine Islamic clergy and religious traditions. A state-controlled Islam kept religious practice and teachings under close government

supervision. Between 1948 in 1991, only two madrassas, or Islamic religious schools, functioned in all of Central Asia, both in Uzbekistan.²

Post-World War II [9]

The Post-World War II period saw marked declines in religiosity across much of Europe. The great suffering inflicted by the war and oppressive governments led many to question belief in a God who cared and actively participated in the world as a force for goodness and justice.

Mainline churches, which in some cases had been complicit with authoritarian governments in the oppression of religious minorities, were viewed skeptically as self-interested, power-hungry, and corrupt organizations with their own agendas rather than as God's earthly kingdom. There are some exceptions, such as Poland, where the Catholic Church was associated with resistance to both fascists and communists, and retained strong credibility. Elsewhere, individuals increasingly identified as atheist, agnostic, or "spiritual but not religious." While sincere believers remained, Europeans who continued to identify as Christians increasingly did so on the basis of culture and heritage, rather than out of deep-seated conviction.

Christian Restorationist Movements [10]

Onto this scene had come Christian restorationist movements founded in the nineteenth-century United States. The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation had attempted to reform what its advocates saw as corrupt practices and institutions of the Catholic Church. Eastern Orthodox Christianity differed, having never experienced a similarly successful reform movement.

Christian Restorationism went further. Restorationists taught that the early Church had fallen into apostasy after the death of Jesus and the apostles. The apostate church, they argued, had long ago lost its divine authority and was beyond mere reform. Restorationists claimed that the pure form of early Christianity needed to be restored.

Christian Restorationist Movements [11]

The three major Christian restorationist movements today are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the LDS or Mormon Church, founded by Joseph Smith in 1830, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, founded by Ellen White in 1863, and the Watch Tower Tract and Bible Society, founded by Charles Taze Russell in 1881 and known since the 1930s as the Jehovah's Witness organization.

Time does not allow detailed discussion of the history and theology of each movement. Each was founded by a charismatic prophet-like figure³ in the northeastern

² Hélène Thibault (2015). The Soviet Secularization Project in Central Asia: Accommodation and Institutional Legacies. *Eurostudia* 10(1), 11–31. <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/euro/2015-v10-n1-euro02010/1032440ar.pdf>

³ The Jehovah's Witnesses deny considering Charles Taze Russell as a prophet, and Russell himself denied receiving any special authority or revelation. However, Russell's sister described his search for true theology as the result of a prophetic dream at the time he left the Presbyterian faith for Congregationalism the age of thirteen. Russell made future predictions, and subsequent Jehovah's Witness literature has implied that Russell was divinely inspired and that the society he founded is Jehovah's organization on earth.

United States in the 19th century, with roots in the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening. Although the Watch Tower Society was not incorporated until 1884, both it and Seventh-day Adventism were strongly influenced by the earlier Millerite branch of Adventism, contemporary with the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Notwithstanding salient differences, these movements have been distinguished by the dedication of their adherents and by global outreach and growth. These groups have also been marginalized by mainline Christian churches, due in large part to their claims of religious exclusivity, designation of other forms of Christianity as corrupt, and their role as religious disruptors who achieve much of their growth by proselytizing other Christians.

LDS Church in Eastern Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries [12]

All of these groups had a presence in Central and Eastern Europe since the late 19th century. Around the turn of the century, Mormon missionary Mischa Markow had preached in Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Russia, but no permanent congregations were organized.⁴ The LDS Church was most concentrated in England, Scandinavia, and Germany. Due to the doctrine of gathering to the Utah Zion, most converts left their European homelands and emigrated to the United States. In 1939, 13,402 Mormons lived in Germany and Austria, at least 997 were killed during World War II.⁵ Following World War II, there were some scattered members in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, but no LDS congregations operated in the states under Communist rule.

Seventh-day Adventists [13]

The Seventh-day Adventists had a presence in parts of eastern Europe since the late 19th century. As the chart demonstrates, Adventism experienced the greatest growth in Romania. Michal Belina Czechowski, a former Roman Catholic priest from Poland, preached the Seventh-day Adventist faith in Europe and settled in Romania. Ludwig Conradi organized German Adventists in Romania in the 1890s. Johann F. Ginter, a German from Russia, moved to Bucharest in 1904 and organized congregations and a training school.

The Seventh-day Adventist church had the largest presence in Eastern Europe in the inter-war period. In 1936, there were 26,303 Adventists in the region compared to 1,283 Jehovah's Witnesses and few or no Mormons.

Jehovah's Witnesses [14]

The Watch Tower Society experienced prophetic disappointments in 1918 and 1925, losing approximately three-quarters of their members in the 1920s, mainly in the United States and Western Europe. Under the leadership of Joseph Rutherford, authority was centrally consolidated, and the name of Jehovah's Witnesses was adopted in 1931.

Whereas the Seventh-day Adventists were most successful in Romania, the Jehovah's Witnesses experienced the greatest greatest growth in Poland, followed by Romania.

⁴ Cowan, Richard O. "Mischa Markow" in Garr, Arnold K., Donald Q. Cannon and Richard O. Cowan ed., *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2000) p. 708

⁵ Minert, Roger P (Fall 2010). "German and Austrian Latter-day Saints in World War II: An Analysis of the Casualties and Losses". *Mormon Historical Studies*. 11 (2): 1–21.

In 1936, the Witnesses reported 714 active proselytizers in Poland, 518 in Romania, and 51 in Yugoslavia. Interestingly, in France, they reported 508 Polish proselytizers and 204 German ones compared to only 133 French-speaking Witnesses, as divided into companies by language.

Witnesses engage in multimodal outreach, including individual witnessing, literature distribution, lectures broadcast by radio, and literature and representatives sent to interested parties by mail. Their outreach is well organized and carefully tracked.

Persecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses – 1939 [15]

As war fell across Europe, persecutions under the Nazi regimes were severe. The Witnesses reported in their 1939 Yearbook:

"There is no liberty in Romania...The clergy have their own detectives, who are paid by them and have to inform them of all the people are doing not in conformity with their religion...."

"The conditions in Poland during the past year have been distressing beyond expression...The enemy has violently assaulted God's people in its attempt to destroy all their liberty and privilege of serving Jehovah, and much of the Society's literature has been suppressed at the instance of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy-Fascist combine."

Notwithstanding the persecutions, Jehovah's Witnesses experienced rapid growth. The published figures report 518 Witnesses in Romania in 1936, 9,624 in 1944, and 12,289 in 1945.

Although the Jehovah's Witness faith is the youngest of these three new religious movements, it has grown to overtake both the Adventist and Mormon (LDS) Church in most of Central and Eastern Europe. The central emphasis of the Jehovah's Witness faith is on personal evangelism. Witnesses are proud of their resilience through persecution, and the note that it is not a social club church.

The conduct of proselytism through the personal witness of local members has given the Jehovah's Witness organization as strong advantage for ongoing growth in contrast to the LDS or Mormon Church, which is primarily dependent on foreign missionaries and poorly effective at motivating and organizing widescale outreach by local members. These are key findings which we will see in subsequent data.

Growth During the Communist Period [16]

The expansion of the Soviet Bloc across Eastern Europe saw nations liberated by one oppressor only to be overrun by another. This resulted in curtailing of religious freedoms and the restriction of foreign missionaries.

Limited data is available on restorationist churches during the Communist period. The most data is available for Seventh-day Adventists, as the faith was recognized in some

countries. The Jehovah's Witness faith operated underground. Membership in restricted nations was aggregated in a category for other lands on official reports.

Latter-day Saints (Mormons) during Communist Period [17]

The LDS or Mormon Church, in contrast to the Jehovah's Witnesses, does not proselyte or hold worship services where restricted by law. The LDS Church had no organized presence in Eastern Europe throughout the Communist period. A few scattered members worshipped individually or as families, particularly in Czechoslovakia, but no official congregations existed and no proselytizing was conducted.

One exception was in the former Yugoslavia, where the LDS Church was briefly permitted to send missionaries between approximately 1977 and 1980 due to the efforts of Kresimir Cosic, a basketball star at BYU (1970-73) who joined the LDS Church. Cosic translated the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, two books of LDS scripture, into Croatian. Cosic died from cancer in 1995 but his legacy has had an ongoing impact on the LDS Church in Croatia.

Seventh-day Adventists 1945-1981 [18]

The large membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Romania during the interwar period facilitated its recognition by the postwar Communist regime. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was one of fourteen recognized faiths in the 1948 Law on Cults. Notwithstanding some challenges, Seventh-day Adventists were able to operate a printing house and to travel to conferences abroad. The SDA Church experienced meaningful growth in Romania over the Communist period, from 19,000 in 1946 with the return of Hungarian Transylvania to Romania, to 53,721 in 1981.

Adventist membership remained largely stagnant in Hungary over this period and experienced slight gains in Poland. Membership in Czechoslovakia was first officially reported in 1971, and appears to represent long-established congregations which had not previously been reported. Czechoslovakian membership remained stable throughout this period.

In 1981, 78% of Seventh-day Adventists in Eastern Europe lived in Romania, according to the church's official statistics.

Seventh-day Adventists 1982-1989 [19]

During the 1980s, modest growth continued in Romania. Adventist membership was first reported for nation comprising the USSR, including Ukraine (13,050 members), Russia (6,101 members), and the Baltics in 1982. As was the case for Czechoslovakia, these members appear to have pertained to existing Adventist congregations which operated during the earlier Communist period but were not officially reported by the world church. Membership in most of these nations remained stable or experienced slight increases during the 1980s.

Jehovah's Witnesses during the Communist Period [20]

Jehovah's Witnesses in lands where proselytism is not legal or in which activities are not deemed safe to report publicly are listed in annual reports under the category of "Other Lands."

Although direct figures are not reported for each nation, considerable growth occurred during the postwar Communist era. From six initial nations including Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and presumably the USSR, membership grew from 44,127 in 1953 to 205,073 in 16 nations in 1978. By 1988, 282,280 Jehovah's Witnesses were reported in this category.

With increased religious freedom precipitated by the fall of communist regimes, Jehovah's Witness membership began to be reported for these individual countries. Hungary appears on statistical reports in 1989 with 9,713 witnesses, and Romania in 1990 with 18,003. In 1991, Czechoslovakia appears 23,035 Witnesses, the USSR with 45,887, and Poland with an astonishing 99,602. Croatia shows up in 1992 with 3,413 Witnesses and Yugoslavia with 1,887. All told, 201,540 Witnesses show up in countries with no prior reports.

The number of Witnesses reported in unspecified "Other Lands" fell to 92,136 by 1991 and just 64,097 by 1993, or only 22.7% of the 1988 figure. This suggests that over 70% of Witnesses worldwide reported in the "other lands" category during the communist era lived in Eastern Bloc nations. These data also demonstrate that the Jehovah's Witnesses experienced substantial growth throughout the communist era, including expansion to new lands previously without a Witness presence. The factors I have previously cited appear to be largely responsible for the Witnesses' remarkable growth under adverse circumstances.

Post-Communist Era [21]

The religious freedoms brought about by the end of communist regimes led to a surge in proselytism by existing churches and the influx of foreign missionaries. These are a few of my photos as a young Mormon missionary in St. Petersburg, Russia from 1992 to 1994.

Seventh-day Adventists, 1989-2017 [22]

In large post-Communist nations, the Seventh-day Adventist church experienced a rapid period of initial growth from 1989 until 1995 in Ukraine and Russia. Some congregations had operated during the Communist period, but open proselytizing led to a rise in SDA membership from just over 19,000 in these two countries in 1989 to nearly 94,000 by 1995. Congregations were organized in Belarus, with membership rising from 787 in 1990 to 4,724 by 1995.

However, the trajectory of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in other nations, including Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Bulgaria is remarkable for its lack of growth. The church largely retained its membership in these countries, but experienced little or no increase in adherents over nearly a thirty-year period since the end of the Communist regimes.

In Romania, home to most of Eastern Europe's Adventists throughout the Communist era, slight initial growth occurred until 1999, with membership slowly declining since that time.

The data are also remarkable for the lack of meaningful membership increases in any of these nations since approximately 2000, and the decline of membership to 1995 levels or below by 2015. I shall refer to this period, which appears likely to continue, as the two "lost decades" of church growth.

Counter-Proselytism Movements in Post-Communist Era [23]

These "lost years" leading to deceleration and stagnation in growth of new religious movements correspond to counter-proselytism initiatives and trends. These include a resurgence of national faiths with emphasis on traditional religious identities as tied to ethnicity, a backlash against pluralism, representation of foreign-based faiths as unpatriotic and counter to national identity, and in some cases, laws and regulations restricting religious outreach. Secularization, materialism, and European integration have also been factors, particularly in nations that have acceded to the European Union.

Jehovah's Witnesses, 1989-2016 [24]

In contrast to the Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced continuing growth in most post-Communist states which did not plateau or decline after 1995. Growth in Russia and Ukraine has been the most remarkable, with the organization reporting 170,415 proclaimers in Russia and 140,356 in Ukraine in 2016, from a base of 45,887 across the USSR in 1991. The lone exception is Poland. During the communist era, the Jehovah's Witnesses established themselves as the main protest movement to Polish Catholicism. In 1991, there were 99,602 average proclaimers in Poland. The Witnesses experienced initial growth to over 120,000 by 1995, but have experienced no sustained membership increases in Poland since then. This may reflect relative saturation and fatigue in the religious market. Virtually everyone has had multiple contacts with the Witnesses; few have not already formed an opinion.

Latter-day Saints (Mormons) 1989-2017 [25]

The LDS Church started essentially from zero in these countries, as no congregations operated during the communist era. A chart of membership demonstrates large increases in membership until the early 2000's, followed by decreasing slope of the growth curve. Mormon membership in these countries would appear to be strong and growing.

However, this chart does not entirely reflect the realities of the situation. In contrast to the Seventh-day Adventist and Jehovah's Witness organizations, the LDS Church continues to report statistics of baptized members even after they stop attending or affiliating with the Church unless they go through a formal name removal process. Official LDS membership numbers do not imply continued attendance or participation official membership numbers may continue to grow even when attendance is flat or declines.

LDS Congregational Growth, 1997-2017 [26]

LDS congregational numbers offer a more realistic look of member activity and participation. As congregations cannot be organized or maintained without adequate numbers of active members, the number of congregations serves as a useful proxy for growth in real membership. While acknowledging differences between large and small congregations (wards vs. branches), a failure to create new congregations implies a lack of growth in participating membership.

LDS Congregations in Eastern Europe [27]

Congregational data demonstrate that most LDS growth in Eastern Europe had been achieved by 1995 to 2000. Since 2005, congregational numbers have remained static or declined toward their 2000 levels. Nonetheless, congregations exist widely across the area.

LDS Congregational vs. Membership Growth [28]

Regression analysis of average compounded annualized membership growth rates compared to annualized growth in congregation for every nation in the world with available data from 1997 to 2017 demonstrates this disconnect between Mormon membership and congregational growth. The best fit plot finds that the average LDS Congregational growth rate is equal to 85% of the official membership growth rate, minus 2%. In other words, a 2% annual increase in reported Mormon membership corresponds on average to no growth in congregations and no growth in actual church attendance or member participation over the study period. This association is strong, with congregational growth predicting 70% of variance in membership growth.

In contrast, the ratio between membership and congregational growth for Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses is close to 1:1, as only active and participating members are reported. Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists have historically experienced higher convert retention rates than Mormons, and members who stopped participating are removed from membership reports.

Russia, Ukraine and Belarus [29]

A comparison of Jehovah's Witness, Adventist, and Mormon membership growth in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus demonstrates meaningful continued growth of Jehovah's Witnesses long past the initial period of high religious receptivity from 1989 to 1995. Seventh-day Adventist membership in these nations has plateaued and declined to at or near 1995 levels. Although Mormon membership shows slight nominal increases, congregational numbers remain at or near their 2000 levels. My visits to Mormon congregations in Ukraine and Russia have found that church attendance has not meaningfully increased over the past twenty years.

Russia Religious Restrictions [30]

Close ties of the Russian Orthodox Church the government and backlash against foreign organizations have led to increasing restrictions on the activity of minority faiths in Russia. There have been long delays or refusal to grant permits to construct church

buildings in Russia since the early 1990s. The Foreign Agent Law of 2012 made registration for outside groups difficult, incurring extensive audits and mandatory public disclosure of activities as by a “foreign agent.” Many nongovernment organizations have left. Foreign missionary visas are restricted and cumbersome. Increased costs and loss of productivity are incurred by requirements to leave and reenter the country every three months.

Surveillance laws of 2012 lumped the suppression of foreign-based religious movements in with ostensibly anti-terrorism provisions. Conventional proselytism by minority faiths was almost entirely outlawed. Members of minority faith cannot share their faith in public places, homes, or online. Even if requested, they are not permitted to speak about religion or answer questions to third parties. Faith can be shared only in registered church buildings.

Adaptations to Russian Religion Laws [31]

Faiths have adapted differently to religious restrictions. The Seventh-day Adventists have experienced uneven growth, with stable or modestly declining membership towards the 1995-2000 levels. However, this does not appear to have occurred principally as a result of Russia’s religion laws. Adventists have experienced a similar trajectory in other nations of the region, and these declines were underway long before Russia’s restrictive legislation.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses have largely ignored government restrictions on proselytism but have been embroiled in legal controversies, culminating in an outright ban following a Supreme Court ruling in 2016. Whereas some of my colleagues have suggested that the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia will wither away with their meeting houses confiscated, literature banned, and witnessing prohibited, the evidence to me suggests that the Witnesses are likely to maintain current membership and grow further.

Although Russia was removed from official Jehovah’s Witness reports in 2017, growth can be inferred from the “other lands” category on statistical reports just as during the communist era. From 2016 to 2018, the number of Witnesses in “other lands” increased by over 10,000 from the prior number in this category plus the 2016 figure for Russia. This compares with much smaller increases in this category in prior years, and suggests that the Jehovah’s Witnesses have continued to grow in Russia notwithstanding being banned entirely by the government.

Their organizational policies, past record, and current evidence suggest that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are not going to fold in Russia as a result of government restrictions. The Witnesses have weathered such storms before during World War II and throughout the Communist era. Official Jehovah’s Witness histories recorded in annual yearbooks have acknowledged organizational practices of literature smuggling, surreptitious witnessing, and clandestine meetings in areas where their activities have been restricted. Witnesses I have interviewed have cited their members’ perseverance in the face of oppression by communists, fascists, and persecution by dominant religious organizations as evidence of their faithfulness to Jehovah and the veracity of their theological claims.

Indeed, the organization not only survived but grew stronger their periods of persecution.

The LDS or Mormon Church has likely been the most impacted by these restrictions. The Church believes in following the law of the land, and has restricted proselytism to comply. Whereas the average LDS mission worldwide has between 150 and 200 missionaries, missions in Russia had between 60 and 100 missionaries in the early 1990s. The five missions today are down to as few as 30 missionaries who are designated as volunteers and engage mainly in service work and language teaching. As church growth has traditionally occurred principally through the efforts of full-time missionaries, the church lacks the organizational know-how and programming to successfully engage its members in outreach beyond sporadic efforts, which in any case are now restricted in Russia.

For one example, when I arrived as a Mormon missionary in Saint Petersburg, Russia in mid-1992, there were approximately 200 LDS (Mormon) members attending on an average week across the five congregations in the city (500 nominal members). When I left in mid-1994, there were approximately 500 attending on an average week across six congregations in the city. When I visited this past weekend (June 2019), there were approximately 300 local members attending in four congregations in the city, notwithstanding growth in nominal membership to more than 3,000.

Belarus and Ukraine [32]

In Belarus, there have been restrictions on proselytism from the beginning. Among the East Slavic nations, Ukraine has experienced the greatest religious freedom as well as being the most pluralistic and tolerant. All groups have experienced the greatest per capita growth in Ukraine.

Poland, Romania and Hungary [33]

Jehovah's Witnesses are growing in Romania and Hungary, although at a slow rate since 2000. Otherwise, the number of adherents of all of these groups has changed little in Poland, Romania, and Hungary since 1995 to 2000. With the exception of Poland, we again see continuing growth of Jehovah's Witnesses in difficult religious markets in which Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists have largely stagnated.

Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Serbia [34]

In the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Serbia, the Jehovah's Witnesses have been most successful in Bulgaria. Otherwise, all of these groups have been essentially flat since 1995 to 2000. Low success in the Czech Republic corresponds to the attrition of almost all Christian groups as Czechs have increasingly identified as atheist or agnostic. The Serbian Orthodox Church has been firmly embraced by most Serbs and suspicion remains toward foreign faiths and ideas, in part as a result of the Balkan wars of the 1990s in which Serbia was isolated by a coalition of nations. Although Bulgaria has been the most receptive, it has also experienced emigration of nearly 20% of its population since 1989.

Seventh-day Adventists in Small Nations [35]

In small nations, which I have arbitrarily defined as having a population of less than 5.5 million, Seventh-day Adventists experienced most of their growth by 1995. Growth in Moldova was the most impressive, due in large part with their ethnic and linguistic affinity to Romania with large Adventist populations. Membership in Moldova peaked in the early 2000s and has declined since that time. There is also been increase in membership in Albania, but overall, the membership trajectory in most small nations has been for stagnation or mild declines since 1995-2000. This correlates with low religious receptivity in the region, low birth rates, and net emigration from many countries. National populations in Latvia, Lithuania, Bosnia, and some other countries have shrunk by 20% or more over this period as young people have sought opportunities abroad. In this challenging environment of demographic decline, maintaining stable church membership is a considerable achievement.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Small Nations [36]

As we have seen in other nations, the Jehovah's Witnesses have continued to buck the trend of stagnation or decline. Jehovah's Witness membership in Moldova more than doubled after 1995 and increased from few or no members to over 5000 in Albania over this period. In other nations, Witness membership has been largely stable. However, the lack of any nations with significant decline in proclaimers over this period is a remarkable achievement in headwinds of broadening skepticism toward religion and demographic decline.

Latter-day Saints in Small Nations [37]

Latter-day Saints have also experienced real growth in most small post-Communist nations of Eastern Europe. Statistics demonstrate membership increases in all countries continuing over this period (1989-2017). Some countries, like Albania, have experienced more growth than others. But all have experienced expansion of national outreach.

LDS Congregations in Small Nations [38]

Congregational statistics show that for the most part these membership increases represent real growth. The LDS Church has also continued to expand to new towns and cities across the region.

Photo of Baltic Mission [39]

Time does not allow for a full discussion of the factors involved. In brief, the relatively greater concentration of missionary manpower per capita in small nations allows greater coverage, and the stability of dedicated local members allows for local adaptations, more consistent implementation, long-term strategic planning, and greater institutional learning. In larger nations covered by multiple missions, each rotating mission presidents brings distinct directives and areas of emphasis, making it difficult for working models to take hold long-term.

SDAs in Central Asia and the Caucasus [40]

In Armenia and Georgia in the Caucasus, Adventist membership has experienced little change since 2001. However, in Central Asia, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has experienced continuing attrition since membership statistics were first reported in the early 2000s. The emigration of many Christian Russians and Ukrainians and increasing Islamic education of traditionally secular, nominalist, and syncretic Muslims are influential factors, as well as a paucity of concerted outreach efforts. Across the region, Adventist membership dropped from 8,280 in 2002 to 5,936 in 2015.

JWs in Central Asia and the Caucasus [41]

Jehovah's Witnesses have fared better, showing meaningful and continuing growth in each nation. Registration has been denied to Jehovah's Witness congregations in Uzbekistan except for one in Chirchik.⁶ Witness congregations have also been raided in Azerbaijan. However, the Witnesses have built up substantial and growing memberships in Georgia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan.

LDS in Central Asia and the Caucasus [42]

The LDS Church in Central Asia and the Caucasus has experienced significant growth only in Armenia. Only one LDS congregation exists in Georgia and two in Kazakhstan, although the Jehovah's Witnesses have over 17,000 adherents in each of these nations. The LDS Church arrived in Armenia through the efforts of Mormon employees of Huntsman Chemical, and in the Kazakhstan through the efforts of expatriate Mormons living abroad.

When I visited Georgia in 2009, Mormon literature and Georgian was restricted to one or two pamphlets. I found myself wondering how church leaders thought that Mormon missionaries there would make converts with no substantive literature in the local language. Although missionaries complained about a perceived lack of receptivity of Georgians, the rapid growth of Jehovah's Witnesses suggest that this was a deficit of preparation rather than opportunity. The translation of the Book of Mormon in Georgian was completed only in 2018, nearly thirty years after the fall of Communist regimes.

The LDS Church never entered Kyrgyzstan, expecting that favorable conditions would last indefinitely. A new religious law was introduced in the early 2000s requiring a minimum number of adherents for a faith to become officially registered. Having failed to participate in the earlier influx of missionaries from many denominations, the LDS Church found itself locked out of Kyrgyzstan, as it had no means to gain the necessary number of adherents without first being permitted to send proselyting missionaries. Both of these situations speak to the need for global strategic vision, planning, and implementation.

LDS Congregations in Central Asia and the Caucasus [43]

Although membership statistics suggest continued growth in Armenia, the congregations which were organized after 2005 could not be sustained due to member attrition. By 2017, the number of congregations had fallen to their 2005 levels.

⁶ "Uzbekistan Overview," jw.org, <https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/uzbekistan/jehovah-witness-facts/>, accessed 9 June 2019.

Future Prospects [44]

As a Danish proverb states, “prediction is hazardous, especially about the future.” Nonetheless, existing trends can provide some guidance regarding more or less likely scenarios. Prominent facts include demographic decline due to low birth rates, a history of significant emigration from post-Communist nations especially to Western and Central Europe, and the declines in religiosity among young people that led one prominent English scholar to declare Christianity in Europe to be “moribund.” St. Mary’s University professor Stephen Bullivant stated that “Christianity as a default, as a norm, is gone, and probably gone for good – or at least for the next 100 years.”⁷ Both Seventh-day Adventists and Mormons have experienced difficulties in nations like the Czech Republic with low religiosity, in nations like Poland where national or ethnic identity is strongly tied to a dominant faith, and in nations like Russia where the outreach at the efforts of foreign-based faiths have been heavily restricted. Trends of lower religious belief and participation in young people than in their parents suggest that the practice of Christianity is likely to continue to decline over much of Europe.

“De-Christianization” has had a profound impact on culture and society across a range of indicators.⁸ For instance, the French statistical bureau INSEE reported that only 6.1% of children were born to unmarried parents in 1960 and 11.4% in 1980, but 59.9% in 2017. However, detailed discussion of the societal implications of declining religiosity is beyond the scope of this presentation.

HDI vs LDS and Jehovah’s Witness Growth Rates [45]

The Human Development Index is a composite of dimensional indices for per capita income, education, and life expectancy. A trend of decreasing religiosity and church affiliation as Human Development Index increases has long been established. This finding also applies to Christian Restorationist movements.⁹ A regression analysis of human development index versus LDS and Jehovah’s Witness average annual compounded growth rates over a recent 20-year period for all countries worldwide with available data demonstrates a strong negative correlation between human development index and membership growth. Multivariate regression analysis demonstrates that the 1997 human development index was negatively correlated with growth over the subsequent 20 years for both Latter-day saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, the human development index had a greater explanatory power for deceleration and Mormon growth than for Jehovah’s Witnesses. This may in part reflect the fact that Jehovah’s Witnesses eschew traditional higher education. In the United States, the Pew Research Center religious landscape survey found that Jehovah’s Witnesses are the least educated among major religious groups. As the Witnesses are appealing largely to individuals with low

⁷ Sherwood, Harriet. 'Christianity as default is gone': the rise of a non-Christian Europe. 21 March 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/christianity-non-christian-europe-young-people-survey-religion>. Accessed 9 June 2019.

⁸ Le grand bouleversement - La déchristianisation s'accélère", [lepoint.fr](https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/le-grand-bouleversement-la-dechristianisation-s-accelere-28-02-2019-2296990_20.php), 28 February 2019. https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/le-grand-bouleversement-la-dechristianisation-s-accelere-28-02-2019-2296990_20.php. Accessed 18 June 2019.

⁹ Cragun R and Lawson R, The Secular Transition: The Worldwide Growth of Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh-day Adventists, *Sociology of Religion* 71:3 (Fall 2010), 349-373.

participation in higher education and employment of their respective societies, they may be less affected by increases in these indicators.

Human Development Index [46]

This effect is highly statistically significant, with the LDS church experiencing an average decline in annual growth rates of 1.9% for every 0.1 increase in Human Development Index on a scale of 0 to 1. The most developed nations with a Human Development Index around 0.9 experienced average annual Mormon membership growth rates of approximately 1%, compared to annual membership growth near 10% in underdeveloped nations with a Human Development Index near 0.4.

HDI, GDP per Capita, Fertility, Urbanization [47]

Multivariate regression analysis further demonstrates that 1997 Human Development Index was more predictive of Mormon growth in nations worldwide than other individual factors, including GDP per capita, population growth rates, fertility rates, and urbanization. These other factors were not independent predictors of Mormon growth when adjusted for human development index. Migration did not correlate with growth rates.

HDI and Congregational Growth [48]

HDI was also the strongest independent predictor of LDS congregational growth rates worldwide. Mormon growth also correlated to Jehovah's Witness growth rates, which appears to reflect factors associated with religious receptivity not captured in the Human Development Index. Supply-side factors also played a role, with congregational growth being positively correlated with member activity and negatively correlated with the penetration of national outreach and the number of members per congregation.

Contemporary Critiques of Christianity [49]

Social trends have created a challenging environment for Christianity worldwide. At almost every scholarly conference I attend, the conference schedule is replete with presentations regarding real or perceived textual discrepancies of Christianity and "higher criticism" in the tradition of the Tübingen school, unflattering histories of prominent figures, critiques of policies and practices, and disproportionate attention to marginalized and offended groups. Christianity has been increasingly blamed for various ills of modern society. These criticisms are often greatly exaggerated, or arise from the beliefs and practices of fringe groups with no basis in Christianity's roots and scripture. Critiques have also increased from the groups in the media and the political left. Media Matters, a left-wing advocacy group in the US which provides material to numerous news outlets, even reported its agenda of combatting Christian ideals on its filing with the IRS for tax-exempt status.

Not all faiths are treated equally. At the present conference, yesterday I witnessed a young lady being accused of "Islamophobia" in insulting tirades by two attendees because her presentation was not perceived as being adequately deferential to Islam. In contrast, these attendees raised no objections to far harsher critiques of Christianity. This is merely one example of a growing trend.

Disruptive Innovation [50]

Adaptation is needed in a rapidly changing social landscape. Yesterday's answers may not work for today's problems. Even "timeless" answers may require different presentations and implementation. Agile, timely, and responsive organizations have the advantage. Throughout my adult life, business headlines have been dominated by organizations like Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Netflix, which engage in "Disruptive Innovation."

Similar challenges face religious faiths today. The religious landscape of Europe has changed more in the past fifty years than in the past thousand. Some faiths are still fighting yesterday's wars, and "closing the barn doors after the horse is out of the barn." As HG Wells stated, "Adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature's inexorable imperative."

Seventh-day Adventists – Future Prospects [51]

Beyond extrinsic factors of a competitive and shrinking religious space, several additional factors may contribute to a lack of Adventist growth in Eastern Europe.

From a world perspective, Seventh-day Adventist results in Eastern Europe are anomalously low. Starting with fewer members than the LDS Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church surpassed the LDS Church's membership by 1999, and has continued to increase its lead. In 2016, the SDA Church baptized 1.2 million and net membership increased by 882,000. A record 1.27 million Adventists were baptized in 2017, whereas LDS growth rates fell to their lowest levels since 1937, and convert baptisms dropped to a thirty-year low.

Adventists have attempted to mainstream into the global Christian community. Whereas Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses both claim religious exclusivity, that is, to be the one true church with God's authority on earth for all believers, the Adventists have officially stepped back from such claims. This has facilitated wider acceptance of Adventism by the larger Christian community, but also resulted in less impetus for preaching in areas that are already predominantly Christian. Although the Adventist church has continued to engage in new regional initiatives, Adventists see little reason to intensively compete with Jehovah's Witnesses in Eastern Europe, and have preferentially devoted more time and resources to receptive areas of the developing world with few Christians. Over half of Adventist members live in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia (especially India), whereas there are fewer than 6,000 in Poland. The low Adventist investment in the post-communist states appears to reflect a pragmatic decision to concentrate resources in areas with a higher return on investment, and a preference for proselytizing non-Christians and the unchurched rather than competing with other Christian groups in competitive and shrinking religious markets.

SDA Schools and Hospitals [52]

World Adventist growth is heavily weighted toward areas of the developing world with a more expansive institutional infrastructure which is nearly absent in its outreach to Eastern Europe. In 2015, there were 5,705 Adventist primary schools worldwide with

1,188,910 students, 2,336 secondary schools with 583,946 students, and 114 tertiary institutions with 142,530 students. Few of these institutions are in most countries of Eastern Europe. Due to decades of Soviet rule under the atheist state, there were no Adventist schools in the region until an elementary school was opened in Zaoksky, Russia, in 1990. However, the Adventists are actively opening additional schools in the region, increasing from 12 in 2012 to 48 in 2017, with plans to open an additional 50 over the next five years. Adventist note that schools have been an important part of their community outreach, increasing receptivity to their message and drawing new adherents. These initiatives may help to stabilize existing membership and achieve modest additional growth in challenging areas.

Mormon (LDS) Future Prospects [53]

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints faces mixed prospects in the region. It has experienced considerable expansion since the fall of the Iron Curtain, but the lack of meaningful increase in congregations or member participation in large nations since 1995-2000 is concerning. In recent years, the LDS Church has experienced greater growth in small nations of Eastern Europe, although the growth has been uneven. Future prospects in Russia are limited by recent laws restricting religious proselytism.

Jehovah's Witnesses – Tradeoffs of Growth [54]

I do not condone the Jehovah's Witnesses ignoring the law of the land in Russia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan. But I also recognize their sacrifice for their beliefs, and acknowledge their achievement in surpassing all of their competitors by wide margins in most countries of the region. I concede their claim that their religious freedoms are likely to be upheld by the high courts of Europe, although implementation of such rulings is unlikely to occur in Russia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan the medium-term future.

I worry that their heavy emphasis on personal evangelism, often at the expense of work, education, family, and personal development may be potentially exploitative of potential converts. As I studied numerous national histories and missionary testimonies of Jehovah's Witness for my contributions to the encyclopedia of Latin American religion, I was struck by how many missionaries who had dedicated virtually their entire adult lives to preaching shared their expectation that Jehovah's kingdom would come sooner and surprise at still being there to preach in their old age. I was concerned by how many individuals have foregone education and career opportunities because of the belief in an imminent earthly paradise which is deemed to trump the need to plan for the future. Witnesses are completely withdrawn from civic activities. They do not support national governments, salute the flag, or serve in armed forces. Most do not vote or participate in the democratic system, citing allegiance only to God's future kingdom.

The Witnesses' organization, their printing and distribution of vast quantities of literature, and their training and discipline of members are admirable. There are constructive lessons from the Witnesses that I believe would likely benefit Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, and other outreach-oriented faiths.

Yet perhaps the Jehovah's Witnesses in some areas may go too far, at least from the perspective of my personal ethics and values. My experience as a Mormon as well as my acquaintance with Seventh-day Adventists has demonstrated to me that beyond their theological teachings of the hereafter, both of these faiths emphasize constructive societal behaviors, education, and fellowship, offering a great deal which can enrich one's life in the present.

The remarkable success of Jehovah's Witnesses in achieving sustained growth in competitive and shrinking religious markets comes at high cost to its adherents, such that I cannot suggest for other faiths to seek additional growth by adopting the Witnesses' program wholesale. It is not my intent to criticize the Jehovah's Witnesses, for whom I have great respect. It is rather to observe in the language of the social science of economics that everything has trade-offs, and that their successes in proselytism come at a cost.

The cost to adherents of the Witnesses, ostensibly with few ancillary benefits, at least when looking beyond the faith's theological claims, is high. Adventists offer thousands of schools and numerous universities and hospitals which provide secular education and medical care; Mormons also emphasize education and were found by the Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Survey to be the most educated group of Christians in the United States constituting over 1% of the population.

Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the precursor organization to Jehovah's Witnesses, looked with disdain on faiths that for which religion seemed to be little more than a pretext for socialization and sport, and noted that the faith was not a "social club church." Russell's observation that many churches are too much social and cultural organizations and not sufficiently based in discipleship has considerable validity, and may offer a practical starting point for churches seeking to rejuvenate the spiritual lives of their adherents.

Yet there may also be some risk to interpretations which offer little place for personal development or socialization outside of religious instruction and proselytism. Jehovah's Witnesses, in contrast, were found by the Pew Research Center study to be the least educated and lowest earning religious adherents in the United States. National Public Radio profiled numerous individuals who left the Witnesses and found themselves lacking desirable career prospects due to forgoing opportunities for higher education at the encouragement of the Watchtower Society, ostensibly because time was better spent proselytizing and preparing for an imminent paradise for believers rather than preparing for careers that (allegedly) would soon be obsolete. Even some of the Watchtower Society's own published profiles of elderly missionaries who had dedicated their entire adult lives to spreading the faith acknowledge the missionaries' surprise to still be preaching in a sinful world as Jehovah's earthly paradise had not yet come in the time they had expected. Such profiles, viewed with the benefit of hindsight, left me with lucid concerns that some of the faith's most dedicated evangelizers may have been exploited, as well as lay members. To be fair, outsiders who do not accept the beliefs of a religious tradition may often view its adherents as exploited.

The Jehovah's Witness faith is what sociologists call a "greedy organization." It places high demands on its adherents and encourages believers to go well beyond this, accepting whatever time, energy, and resources its adherents will offer, up to dedication of all of their available time as full-time missionaries or pioneers for years, often at the expense of education and career.¹⁰

All three of these faiths (Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) are "greedy organizations" in the sociological sense. Mormon young men are encouraged to serve a two-year full-time mission, and it is not uncommon for active Mormons to spend time at church activities two or even three days a week. Yet many of these activities serve additional roles in areas of personal development, socialization, sports, and service. Even though many Mormons feel busy with church service and activities, the Church's demands are constrained by clear boundaries. Whereas Mormons encourage missionary service for two years for young men and eighteen months for young women, as well as volunteer opportunities for elderly couples, these are time-limited activities within a larger framework that encourages secular education, full-time employment (with the exception of mothers with young children and those unable to work), and protected family and personal time. If one wanted to quit one's job and preach or engage in church work full time, Mormons would not accept this, but would encourage the individual in seeking education and gainful employment. Church activities generally occur outside the confines of working hours.

In contrast, the Witnesses are happy to benefit from the energy of individuals who are able to contribute thirty, fifty, sixty hours a week to preaching, either on a temporary or ongoing basis, even if the individual forgoes external opportunities for work or education. The average hours worked by Jehovah's Witness proclaimers are considerable, with a sizable number of pioneers dedicating even more time. The faith benefits greatly from the preaching time and effort of its high contributors, but the personal cost to these individuals may be considerable.

Jehovah's Witnesses - Continued [55]

Nonetheless, these issues touch on the larger issues of sacrifice for any faith. To the outsider, adherents of high-demand faiths may appear to sacrifice too much and the benefits of devotion may be under-appreciated. The benefits received are best understood by the believers themselves. The Jehovah's Witnesses I have interviewed have expressed that they genuinely enjoy their outreach work, that it offers them meaning and fulfillment. Many, including the Witnesses I interviewed here in Tartu yesterday, are realistic that relatively few contacts will lead to a conversion but enjoy dialogue with others regarding topics of faith. Interviewees also cite personal blessings and happiness resulting from their participation.

¹⁰ Shortly after this conference, NBA player Darren Collison announced his retirement from basketball to focus on full-time preaching as a Jehovah's Witness, walking away from a potential \$40 million contract. See Hookstead, David. "Darren Collison Shocks The NBA World By Retiring, Leaves Tens Of Millions Of Dollars On The Table." The Daily Caller, 29 June 2019. <https://dailycaller.com/2019/06/29/darren-collison-nba-retirement-jehovahs-witnesses/>

Faith continues to serve important roles, even in the so-called “Post-Christian Age.”

Conclusion [56]

While many more observations could be made of each of the religious faiths, time is short. Our conclude by noting that although future prospects are uncertain, each of these faiths has found its own strategies and methods for achieving growth and reaching its spiritual goals. The resilience of these faiths and dedication in the face of challenging circumstances deserves our admiration.

Selected References [57]

End [58]