

Faith and Doubt in Contemporary American Mormonism: A Quantitative Empirical Perspective

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After many years in the Mormon underground, the topic of “doubt” is now firmly on the public agenda in Mormon culture. The internet has changed the game in terms of who controls access to information about LDS church history and doctrine. The Church has been struggling to figure out how to adapt to this new reality, sometimes embracing a new path forward (e.g. Joseph Smith Papers, Gospel Topics essays, new Deseret Book offerings, restructuring of the youth curriculum, etc.) and other times resisting and retrenching (e.g. high-profile excommunications, warnings to not trust information on the internet, etc.)

This topic is important because the introduction of doubt is often (although not always) associated with a change in one’s relationship with the Church and level of activity. It also can introduce difficult social dynamics with family and friends.

Who are the doubters? How many are there? Is this a large group or a small isolated set of a few hundred individuals who are active in the Mormon blogosphere? Just how different are doubters from TBMs (True Believing Mormons) in terms of their religious behavior and attitudes?

We have scores of anecdotes and some general impressions, but very little hard data to go on. My goal is to try to address that. More data is better than less data.

Why is it so hard to study Mormons?

- Public opinion research
 - Representative samples (Mormons < 2% of U.S. population)
- Some early surveys
- LDS Church does not publicize internal research

Public opinion researchers rely on either telephone or internet surveys. In order for them to be accurate, they must be able to obtain a randomized sample from the population so that the results are representative of the wider population of interest. Because Mormons make up less than 2% of the U.S. population, only about 1 out of every 50 random survey responses is a Mormon. Given that response rates are about 10% (at best!), a surveyor must make about 500,000 telephone calls to get a final sample of about 1,000 so that the margin of error will be small.

Calling half a million people is not impossible, but it's hard. And it costs a LOT.

Several Bloggernacle people have fielded Mormon surveys through online social networks. These are certainly useful, but not guaranteed to be representative because they are not solicited randomly. Others have started to use internet surveys to study Mormons and these have produced some interesting early results. Hopefully this will continue to be a useful resource going forward.

The Pew Research Center has been able to gather samples of a few hundred Mormons. In 2011 in the lead-up to the presidential election with Mitt Romney the likely Republican nominee, they invested the money to acquire a survey of 1,000 Mormons in the U.S. population with questions tailored specifically for Mormons. That is what I'm analyzing.

I will note that we have know that the LDS Church has an internal research department but 1) anecdotally, there is a culture of employees staying away from controversial questions

like this to avoid appearing disloyal or displeasing superiors, and 2) to my knowledge all research is kept in-house and not shared with the general public.

Thus we must rely on data collected from other organizations.

Pew 2011 National Survey of Mormons

- October 25-November 16, 2011
- 1,019 Mormon adults over age 18
- 68% landline; 32% cellphone
- *Self-identified* Mormons
 - Different than “member of record” definition
 - 1,012 LDS, 1 CoC, 4 “other” Mormon, 1 “just Mormon”, 1 don’t know
 - 34% Utah; 66% non-Utah
- 85.3% “active” or “somewhat active”
- <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/01/12/mormons-in-america-executive-summary/>

The full Pew survey report is available here:

<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/01/12/mormons-in-america-executive-summary/>

This is interesting. We know that about a third of members of record in the U.S. are actually active. And yet of those who claim Mormon identity, 85% say that they’re active to some degree. This implies that most members of record who are *not* active don’t self-identify as Mormon. Ouch!

It is also *essential* to keep in mind that these are *self-identified* Mormons that we examine. Many of those who doubt are on the records but no longer identify as Mormons – they are not included in this survey.

Also keep in mind that this data was collected *nearly five years ago*. A LOT has changed in the last five years (Gospel Topics essays, high-profile excommunications, etc.). So some of this may be different now. I hope for more updated data to become available.

How to measure “doubt”?

Which statement comes closer to your own views – even if neither is exactly right?

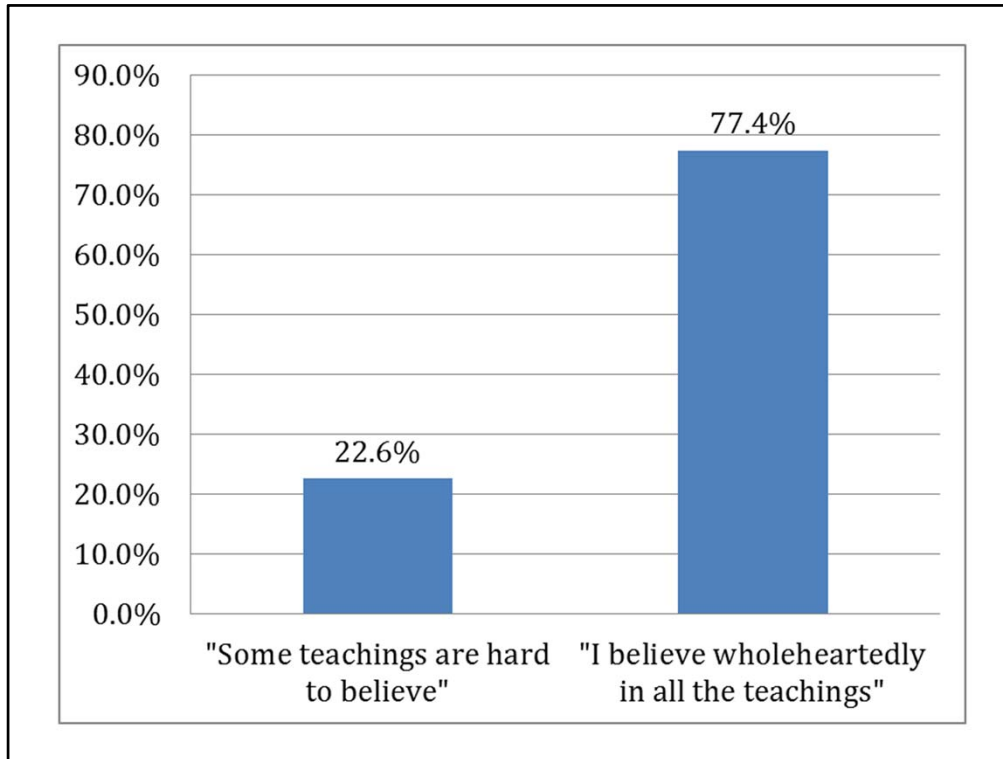
“Some teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to believe.”

“I believe wholeheartedly in all the teachings of the LDS Church.”

This is imprecise. And it’s blunt. It would be great to have more variation (e.g. “I believe none of the teachings.” “I believe a few of the teachings.” “I believe most of the teachings.” etc.).

But this is the closest that I’ve been able to find in a publicly-available dataset that is representative of the Mormon population.

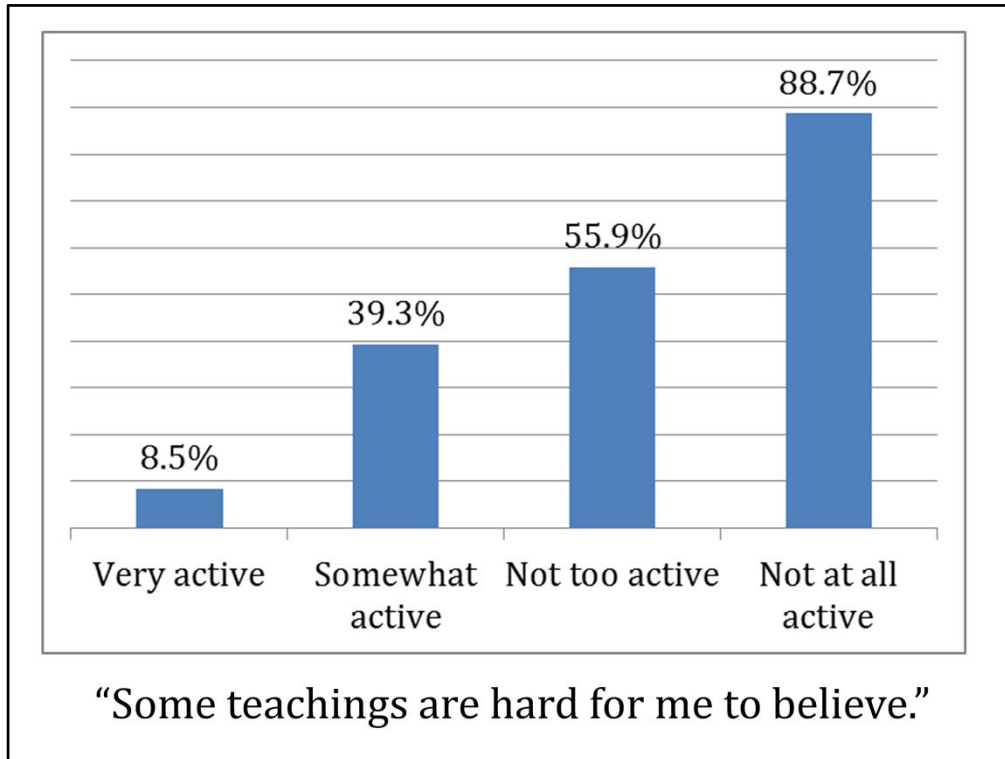
For the purposes of this presentation, I am going to say that those who picked the first option are “doubters” while those who picked the second option are “TBMs” (True Believing Mormons).



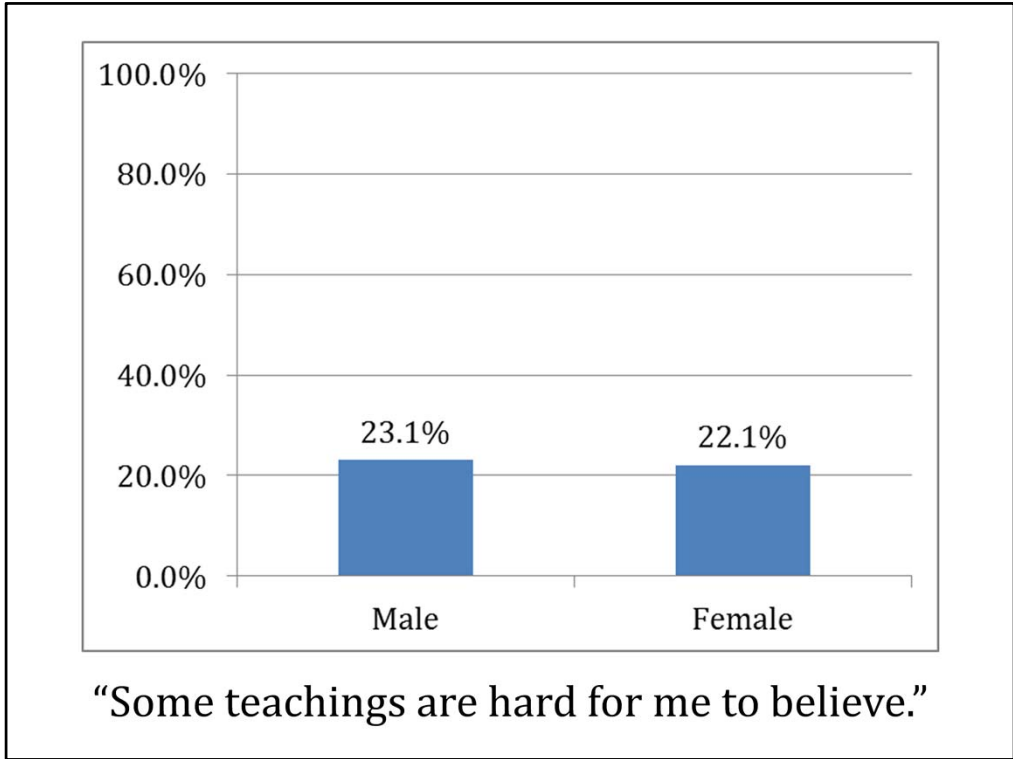
This is for everyone in the survey. Active and non-active alike.

About 0.4% of respondents said "neither" or "both". Another 0.2% said "don't know." They were excluded from this analysis.

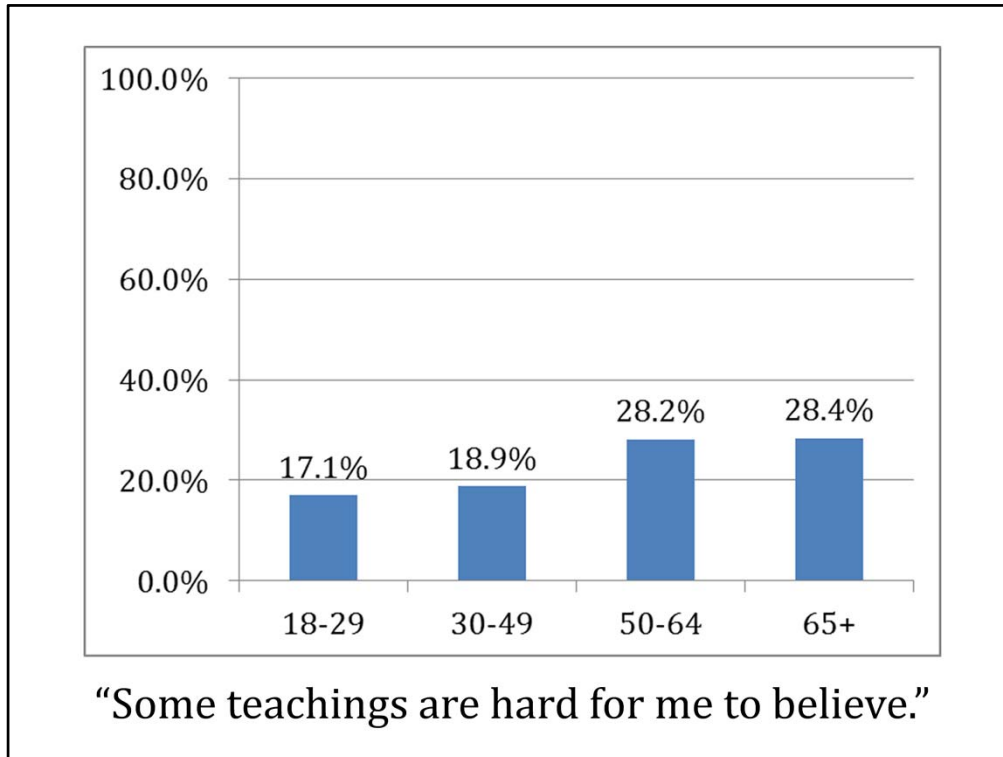
Given that this is limited to *only* those who currently identify as Mormon, about 85% of which are active, it is still stunning that nearly a quarter admits to some degree of doubt in the teachings of the LDS Church. And this was in 2011 – five years ago. It would be fascinating to see if this has changed in the last five years.



This is self-described activity, not objective measurement of their level of activity.



Virtually no difference between men and women.



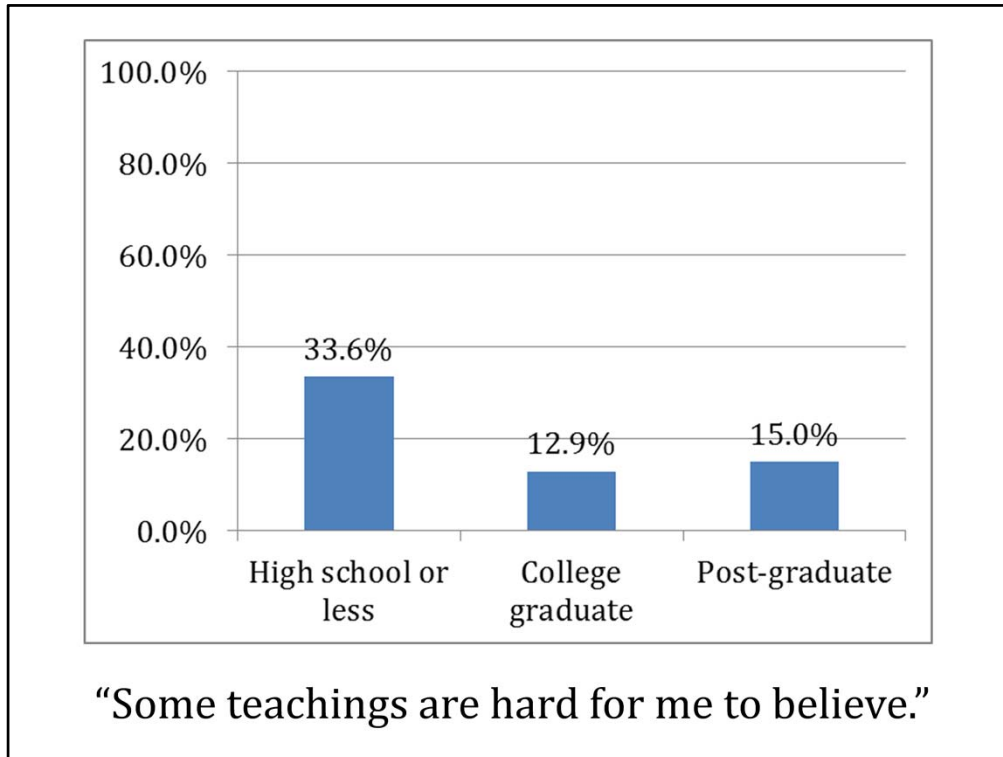
This is interesting. The popular narrative is that it’s the Millennial generation and younger people who have doubts. Here it seems that older Mormons are more likely to express doubts than younger Mormons.

That being said, a few things to keep in mind:

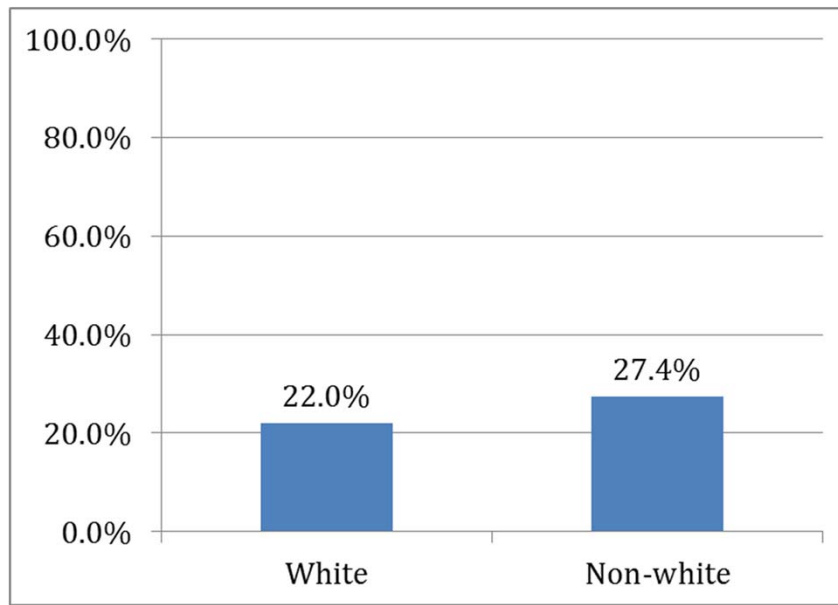
1) This does not include high school students – there is a good deal of drop-off among American teenagers when it comes to organized religion. So by the time they get to age 18 they might already have left or stopped identifying as Mormon.

2) Same for those who are in younger generations. It’s possible that those with doubts have simply left while older members with doubts stick around because they are more invested (family, friendship circles, etc.). This survey does not measure former Mormons.

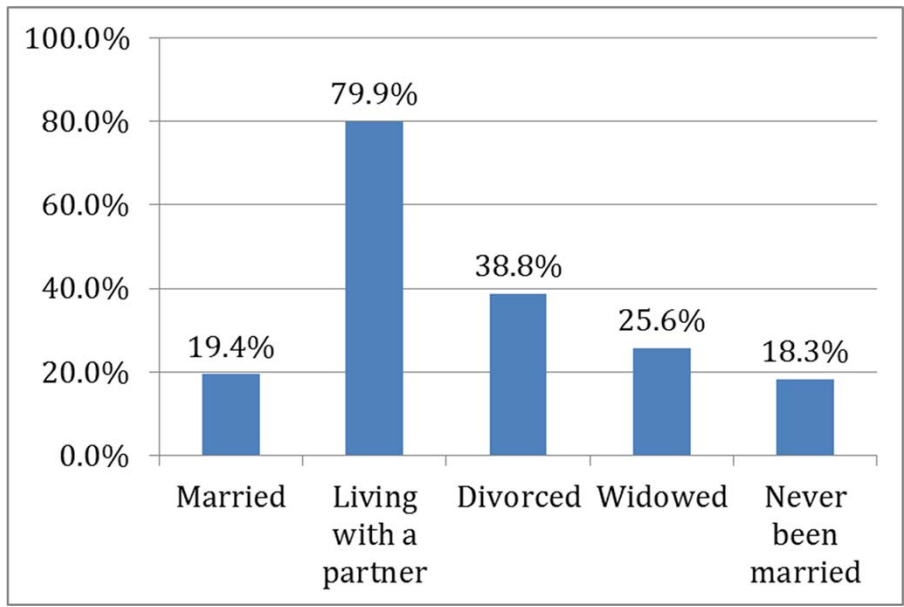
But of those who currently identify as Mormon, younger Mormons are less likely to be doubters than older Mormons.



Similar trend can be seen here. The popular narrative is that those who are well-educated tend to “intellectualize” themselves and have more doubts. But they have already left and so are not included in this analysis. Of those who currently identify, those with more education report lower levels of doubt than those with less education.

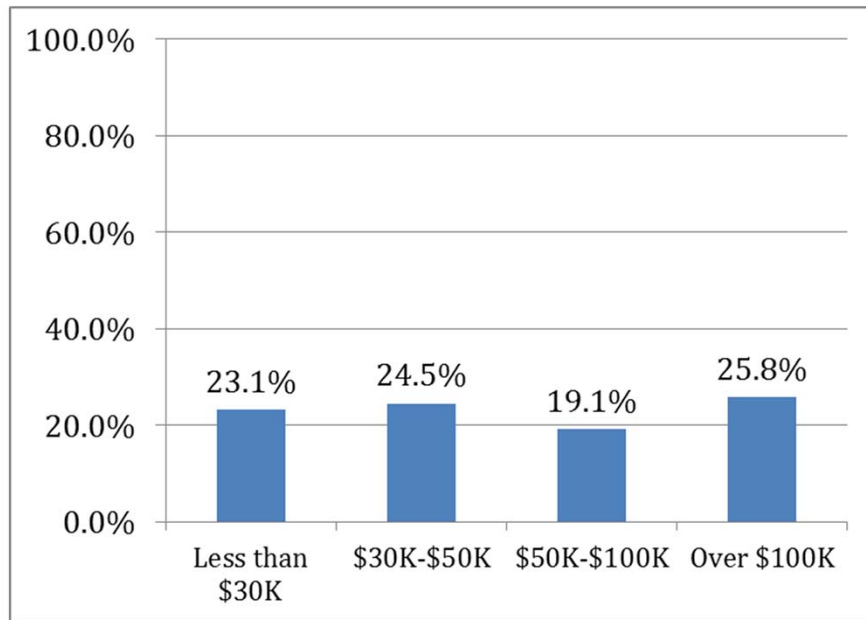


“Some teachings are hard for me to believe.”

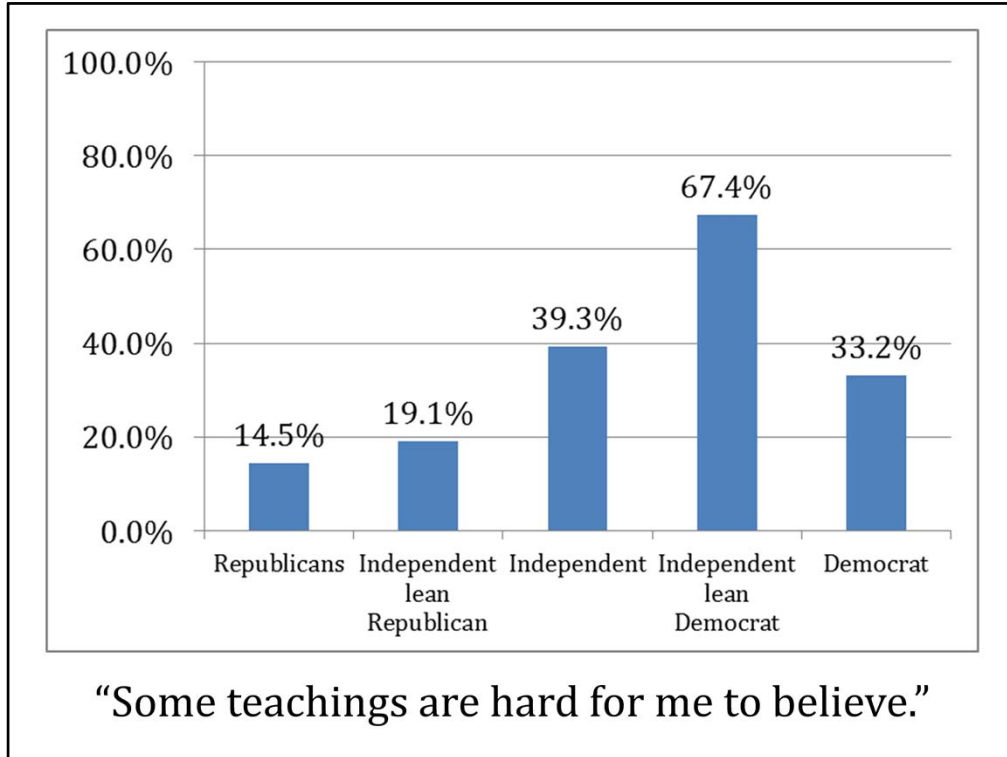


“Some teachings are hard for me to believe.”

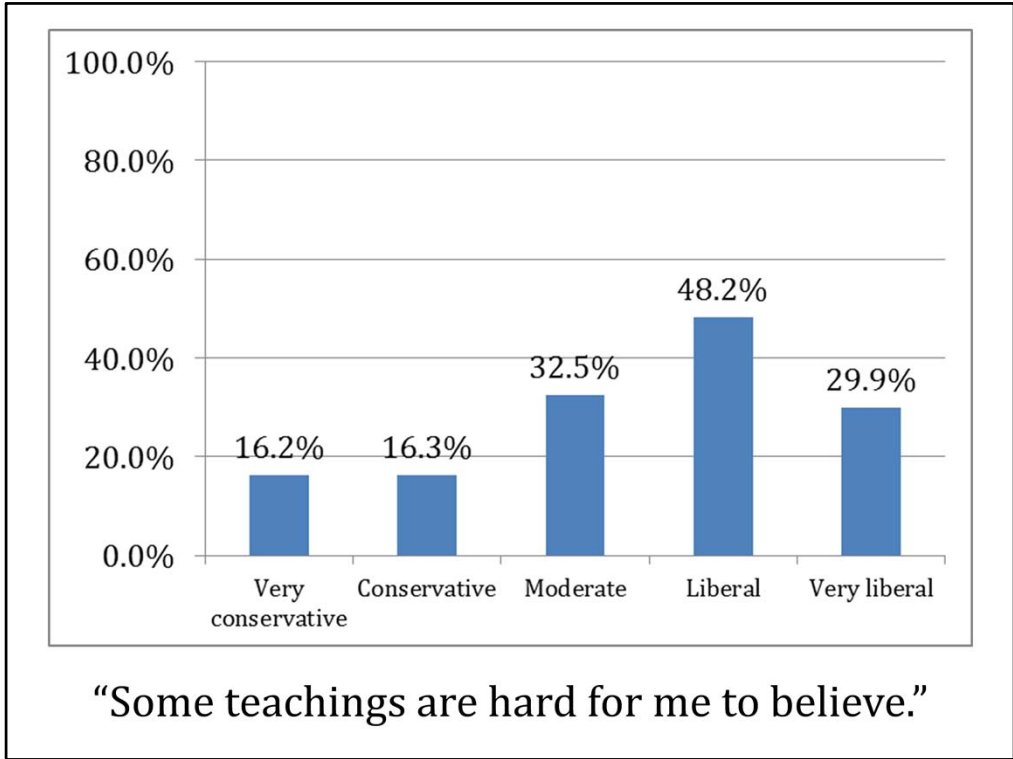
It is no surprise that those who find themselves in situations that are disapproved by the Church to some degree (cohabitation, divorced) would have higher levels of doubt.



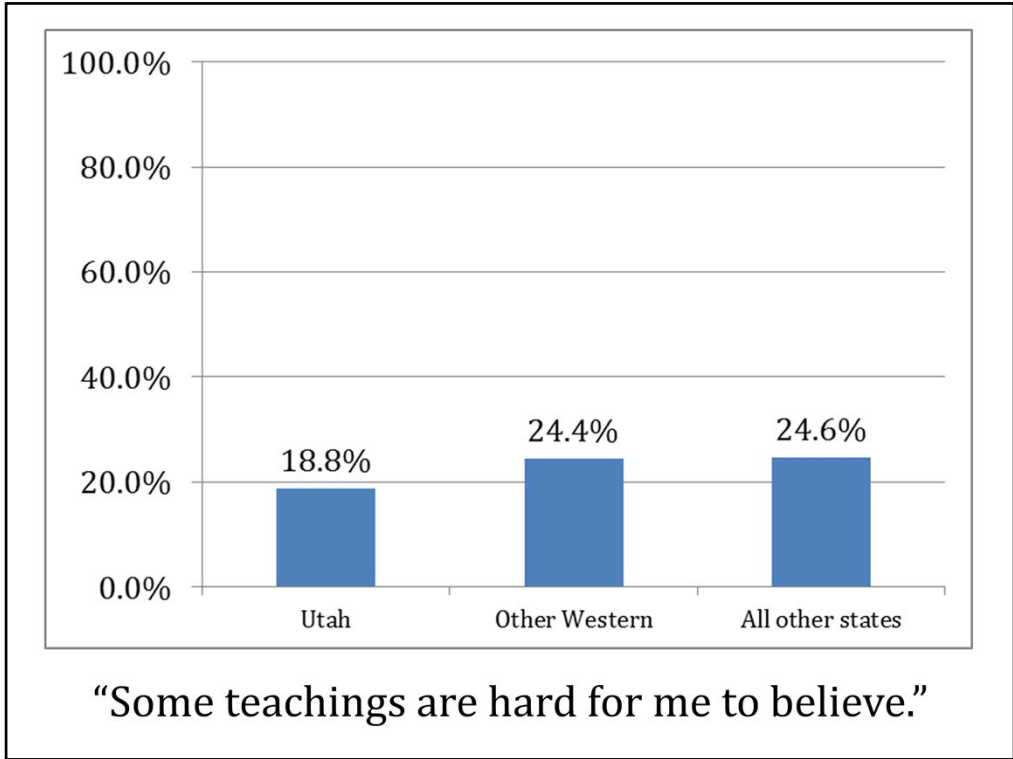
“Some teachings are hard for me to believe.”



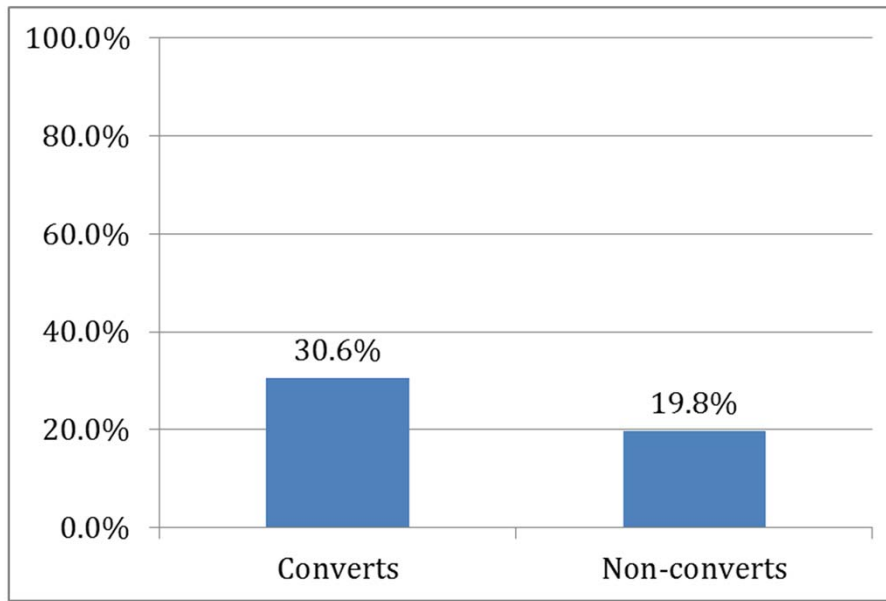
This is interesting. As we might expect, Democrats are more likely to report doubt than Republicans, but Independent-lean-Democrats are much more likely than Democrats.



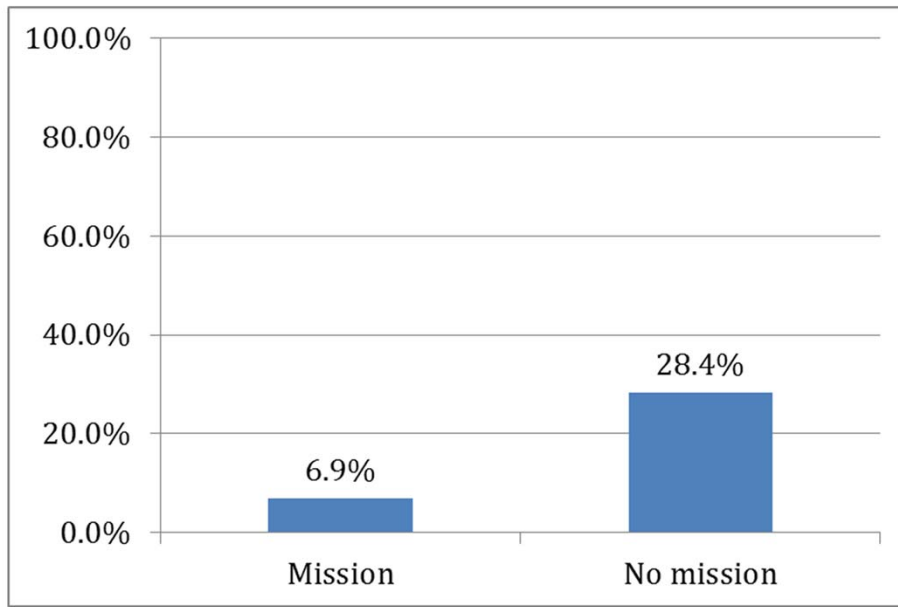
Similar pattern as before.



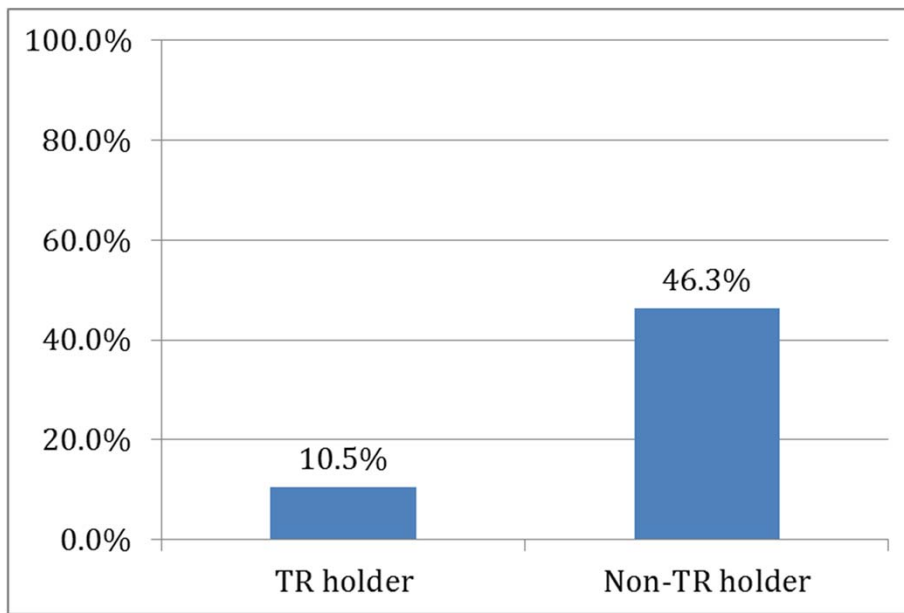
Not a significant difference.



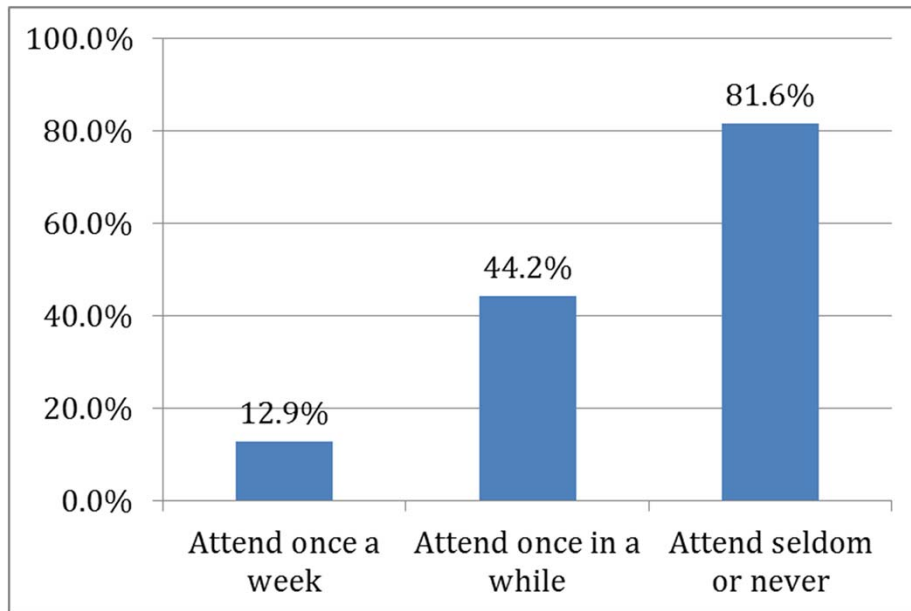
“Some teachings are hard for me to believe.”



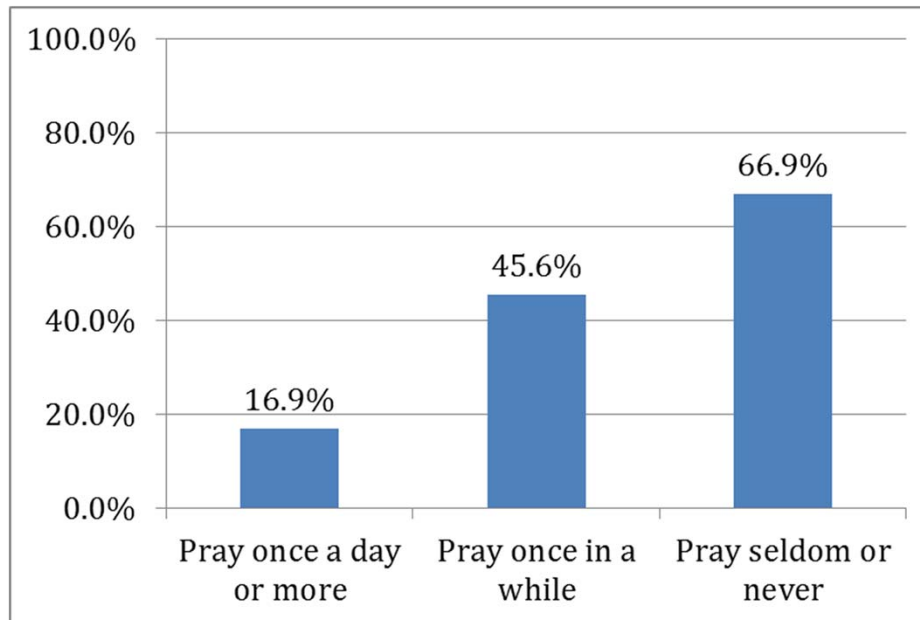
“Some teachings are hard for me to believe.”



“Some teachings are hard for me to believe.”



“Some teachings are hard for me to believe.”



“Some teachings are hard for me to believe.”

Multivariate analysis

- What is this?
- What matters?
 - Income, partisanship, convert, frequency of church attendance, mission, frequency of prayer
- What doesn't matter?
 - Marriage status, gender, age, race/ethnicity, income, political ideology, Utah, TR holder

A “multivariate” analysis is used because there is a good deal of overlap between the various factors we just looked at. Example: older people are likely to have higher levels of education AND be married AND have higher incomes. A multivariate (multi-variable) lets us sort out the independent effect of each of the other factors while controlling for the effect of all the others at the same time.

The multivariate analysis revealed what matters and what does not when controlling for each of these others.

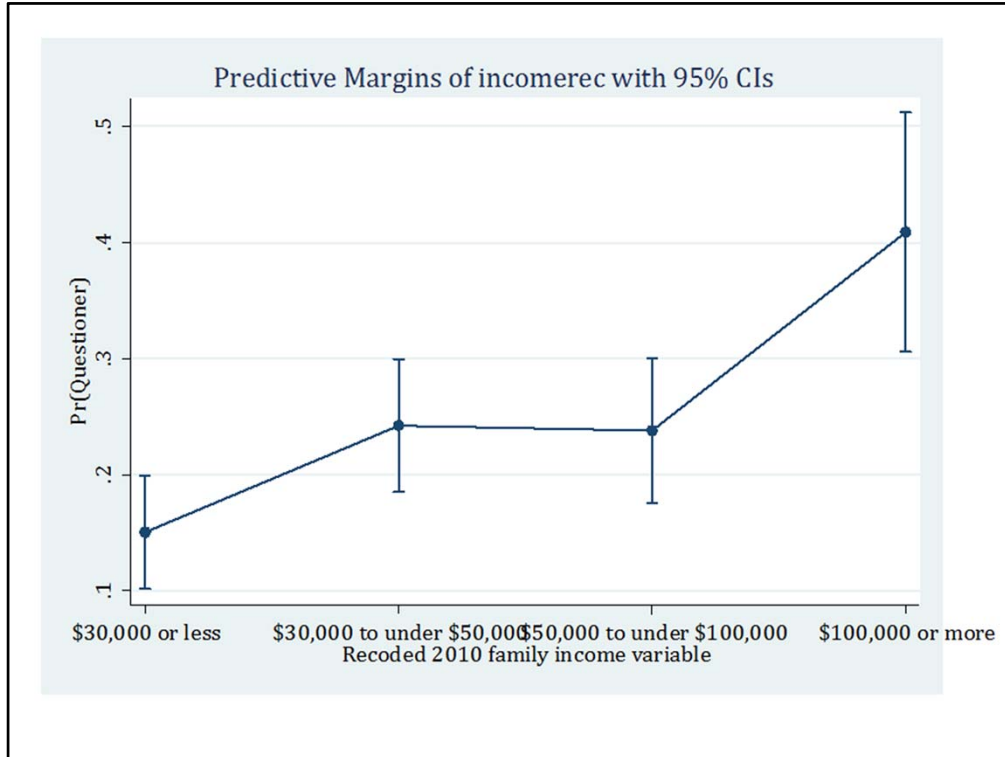
Here are the results from Stata (statistical analysis software) for interested parties. And I am using $p < 0.10$ as the cut-off for statistical significance and used a logistic regression approach because of the binary dependent variable.

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Logistic regression                               Number of obs   =       878
                                                  Wald chi2(14)   =      124.59
                                                  Prob > chi2     =       0.0000
Log pseudolikelihood = -1314.7425              Pseudo R2       =       0.3048
  
```

questioner	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
marriedwidow	-.2256152	.331018	-0.68	0.496	-.8743985	.4231681
sex	.2610752	.3101347	0.84	0.400	-.3467776	.868928
agerec	.205238	.1710114	1.20	0.230	-.1299381	.5404142
racethnrec	.0693261	.463096	0.15	0.881	-.8383254	.9769775

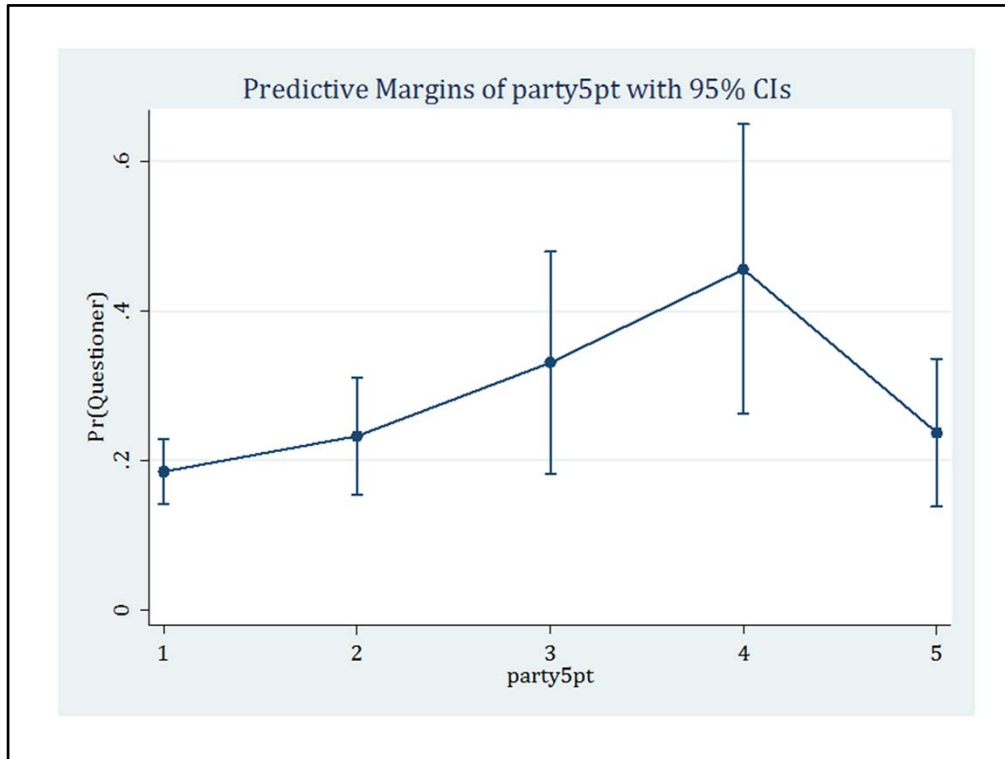
incomerec		.6099431	.1548513	3.94	0.000	.3064402	.9134461
educrec		-.183741	.1521486	-1.21	0.227	-.4819467	.1144648
ideo		.0776894	.1843668	0.42	0.673	-.2836629	.4390417
party5pt		.1987956	.1079261	1.84	0.065	-.0127356	.4103269
utah		-.132144	.3270687	-0.40	0.686	-.7731869	.508899
convert		.9661507	.3666935	2.63	0.008	.2474446	1.684857
attend		.6058684	.1416896	4.28	0.000	.3281618	.883575
mission		-.7039904	.3767605	-1.87	0.062	-1.442427	.0344466
trholder		-.5868393	.3972472	-1.48	0.140	-1.36543	.191751
prayer		.2896704	.133628	2.17	0.030	.0277644	.5515765
_cons		-5.543501	1.187847	-4.67	0.000	-7.871638	-3.215364



This chart is showing the independent effect of income on the probability that someone says that “some teachings are hard to believe” instead of “I believe wholeheartedly in all the teachings.” The y-axis shows the probability on a 0-1 scale. The whiskers around each dot show the “95% confidence interval” – we can be 95% confident that the true effect of the variable is somewhere within those intervals.

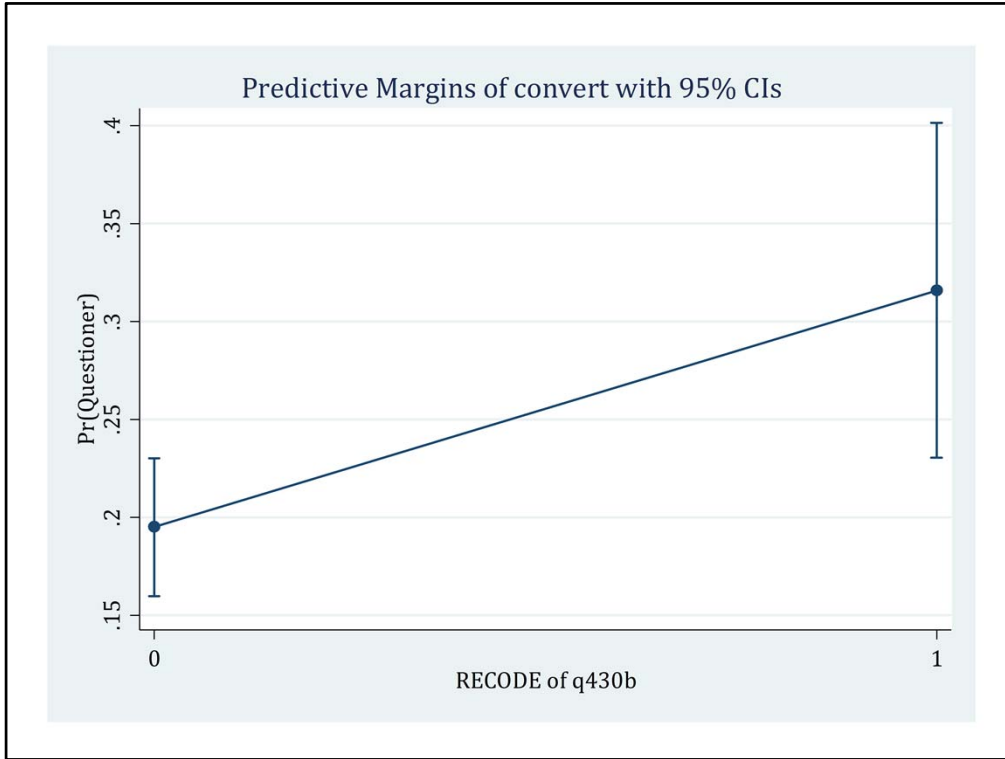
Here, it’s telling us that all other things being equal, someone with an income of \$30K or less is about 15% likely to say “some teachings are hard for me to believe” while someone making more than \$100K is about 40% likely.

The Book of Mormon “pride cycle” appears to be confirmed! 😊

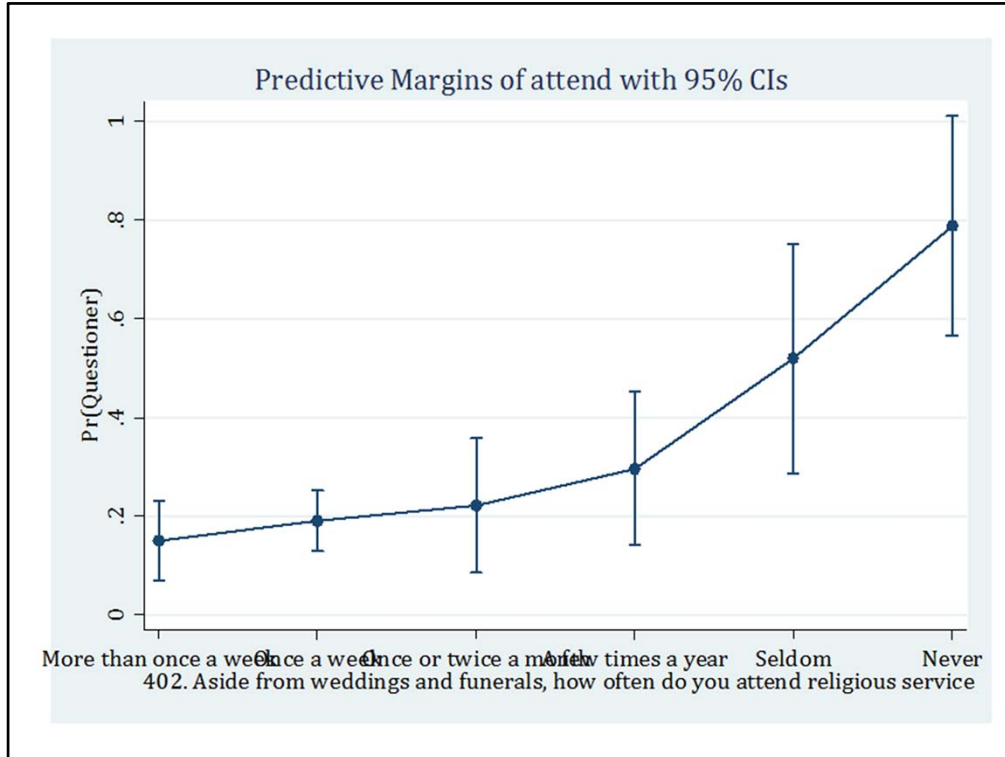


X-axis: 1 = Republican, 2= Independent-lean-Republican, 3=Independent, 4=Independent-lean-Democrat, 5=Democrat

We see the same effect as before. Independent-lean-Democrats are more likely to express doubt (45% likely) than are Democrats (25% likely).

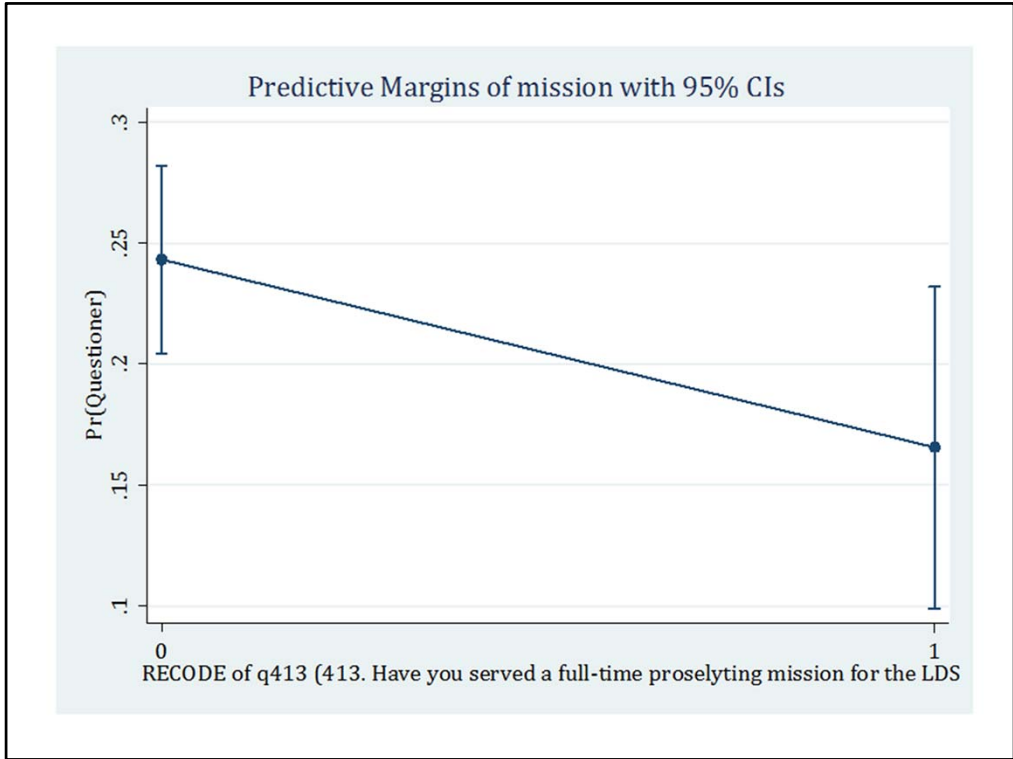


Converts to the church are about 12% more likely to express doubt than those born in the church.

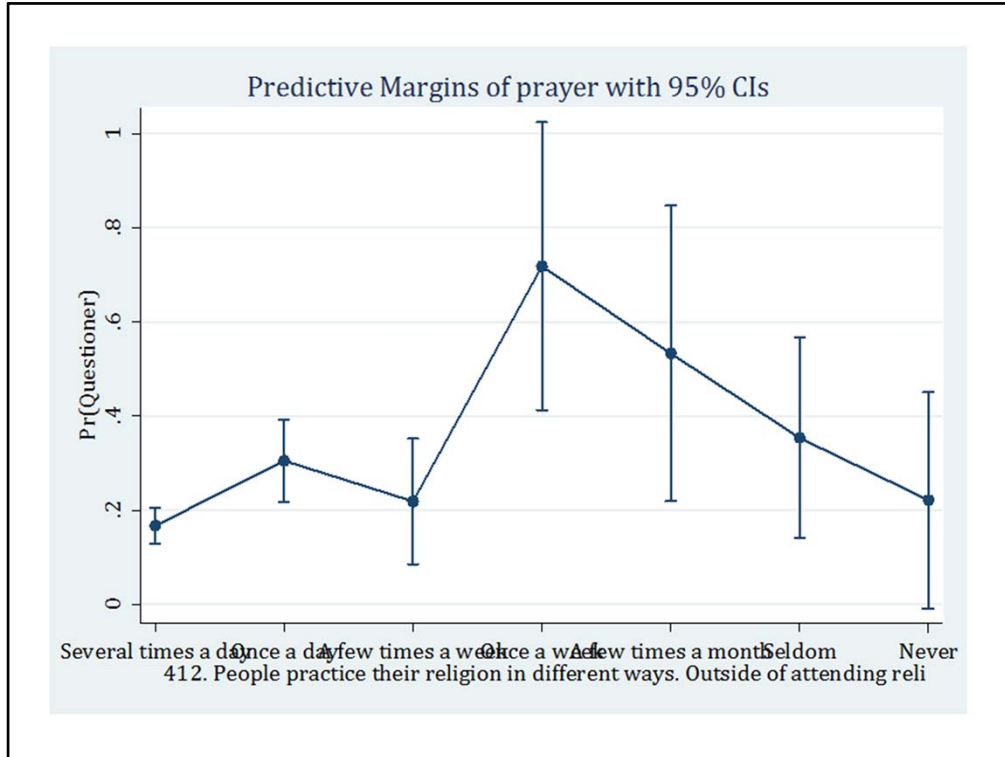


Here we see that frequency of church attendance doesn't start to affect likelihood of expressing doubt until you a few times a year or less.

Those who attend every week or more are about 20% likely to express doubt, with those who never attend about 80% likely (again, controlling for all other variables). But going a few times a year is not all that different from weekly. (Only a 5% difference.)



Returned missionaries are about 10% less likely to express doubt than non-RMs.



Prayer shows us something different than church attendance. Someone might go to church for social reasons, but prayer is much more personal.

This is interesting: those most likely to express doubt are those who pray occasionally (once a week or so). They're about 70% likely to express doubt. But those who pray a LOT and those who NEVER pray are both about 20% likely to express doubt!

**Who is most/least likely to be a doubter
(on at least some teachings)?**

- | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| • Wealthy | • Poor |
| • Democratic-leaning | • Republican |
| • Independent | • Born in the church |
| • Convert | • Very active |
| • Inactive | • Returned missionary |
| • Didn't go on a mission | • Prays more than once a day |
| • Prays about once a week | |

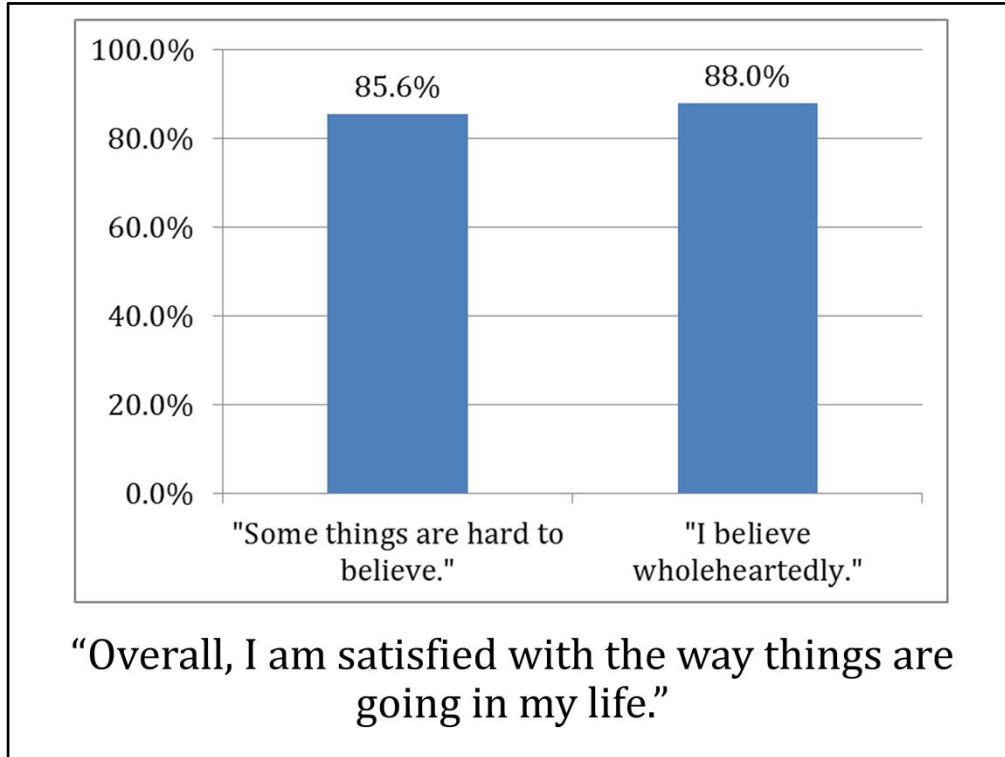
97% LIKELY TO BE A DOUBTER

99% LIKELY TO BE A TBM

This is taking a hypothetical individual with the most extreme predictors of doubter vs. TBM and then statistically predicting their likelihood of identifying as one or the other.

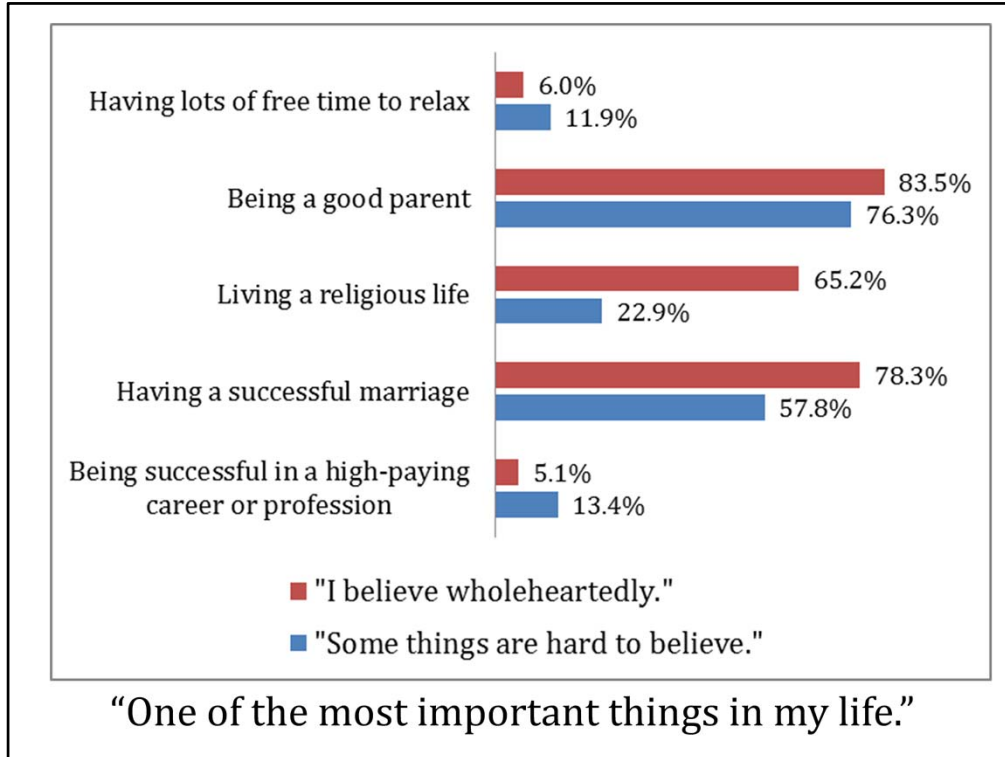
Note that it's religious behaviors and factors much more than demographic factors. Age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, Utah vs. non-Utah – none of them predict how someone answers this question.

This also does not perfectly address cause and effect. Do Mormons doubt because they do not attend church OR do they not attend church because they doubt? Probably both to a large extent. Different data is needed to be able to figure out what causes what (need both Mormons and former-Mormons in the data sample).

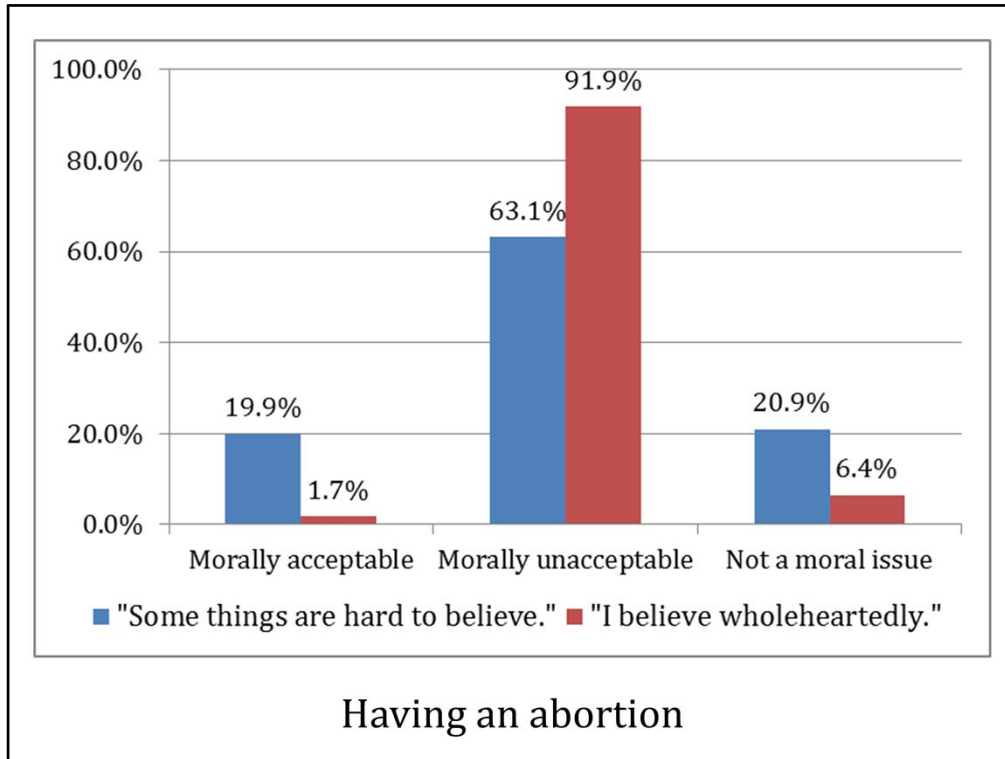


Now let's look at how those who express doubt are different in their religious attitudes and behaviors than those who claim TBM status.

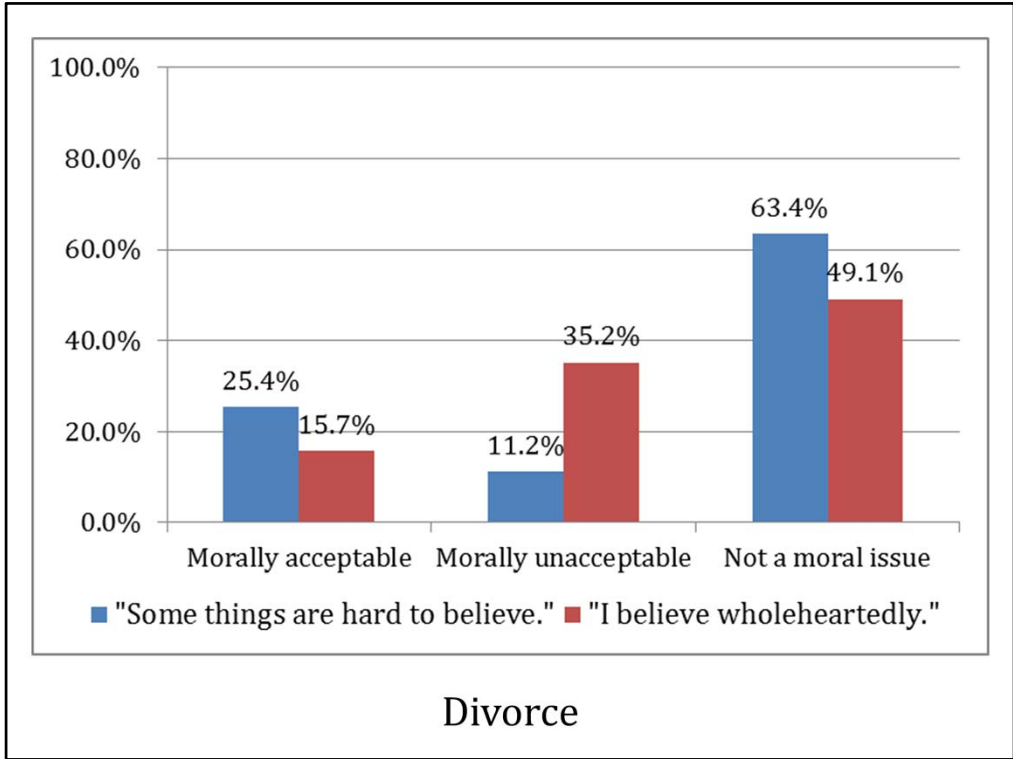
There is not a substantive difference in how satisfied they are with their lives. They both seem about as happy.

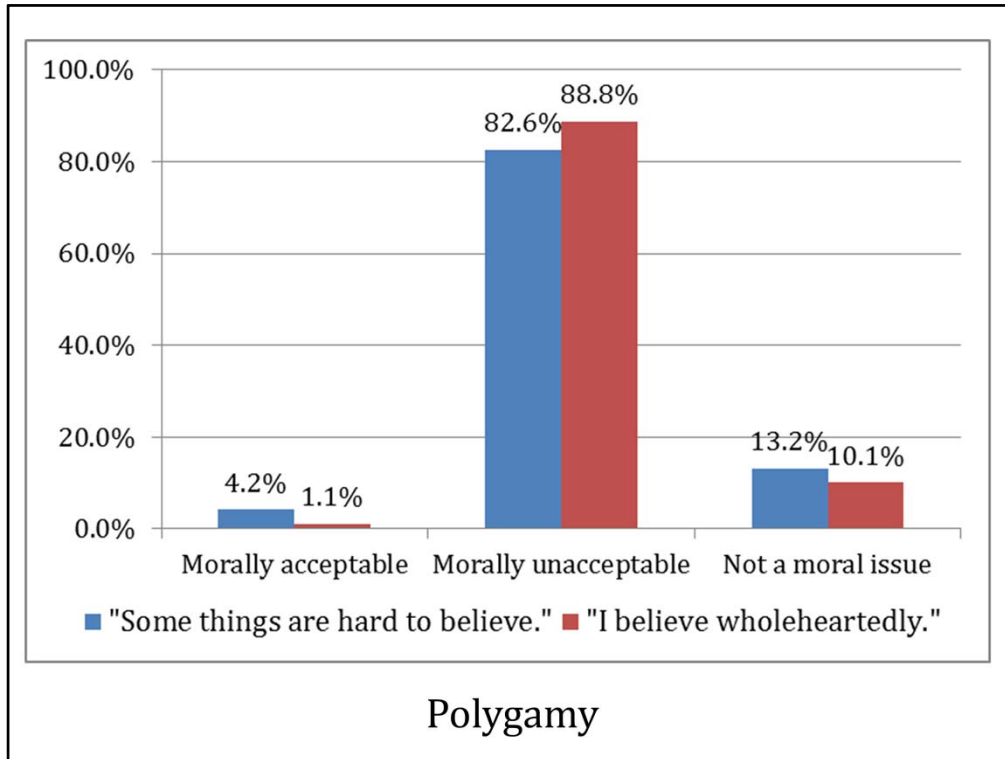


Doubters and TBMs are similar in terms of some of their life goals but different in others. Notably, they are different in how many of them say that “living a religious life” or “having a successful marriage” is one of the most important things in their lives.

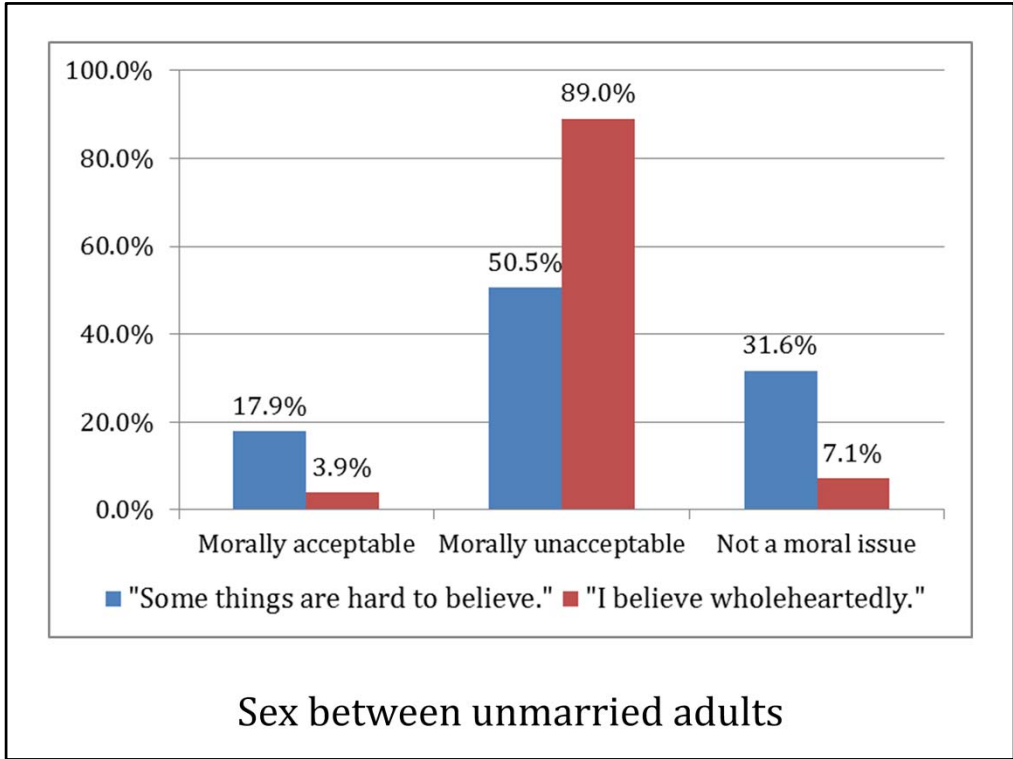


Note that a majority of both doubters and TBMs believe abortion to be morally unacceptable. However, we do see doubters more likely to say morally acceptable or not a moral issue.

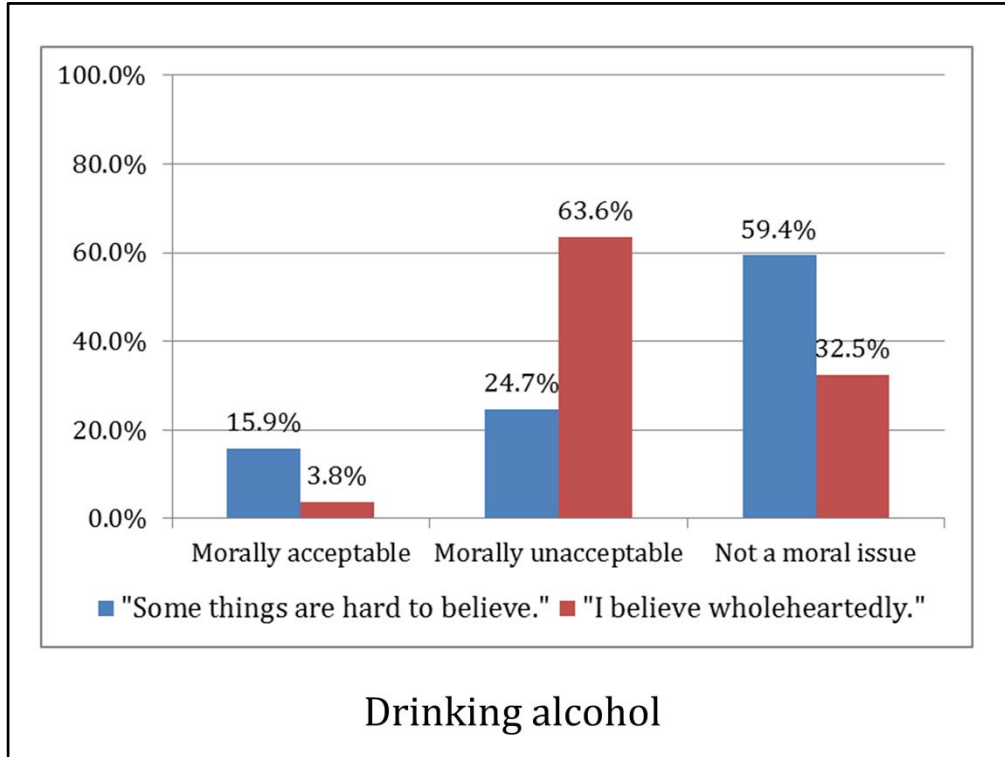




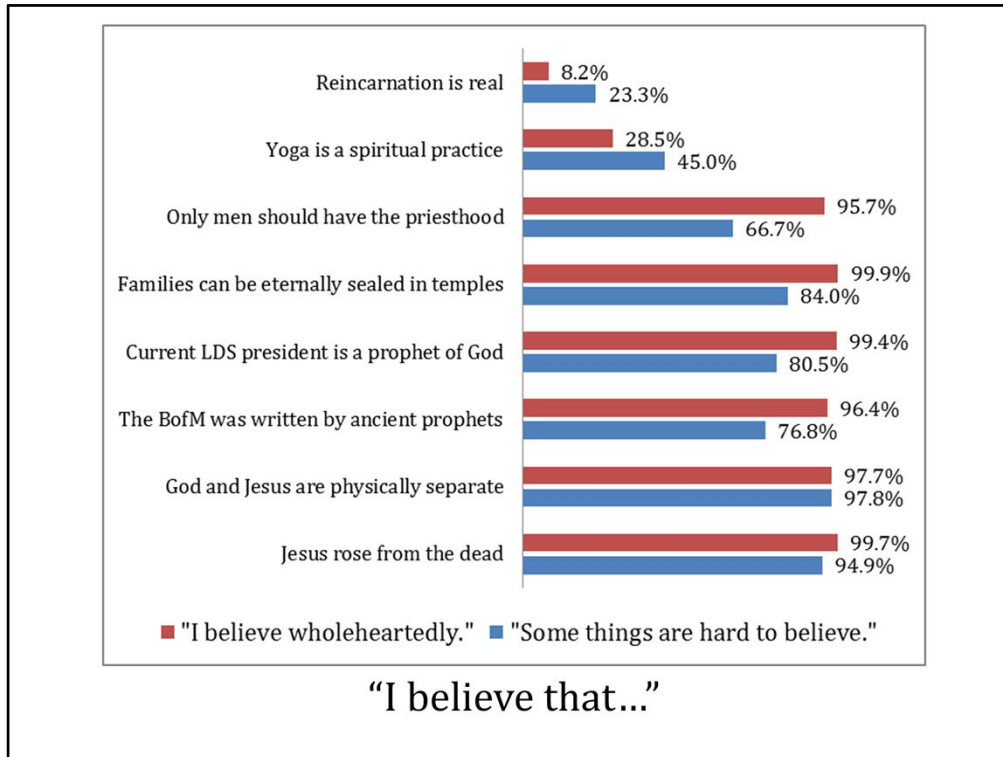
Very little difference on polygamy between doubters and TBMs.



A significant difference on attitudes toward sex between unmarried adults.



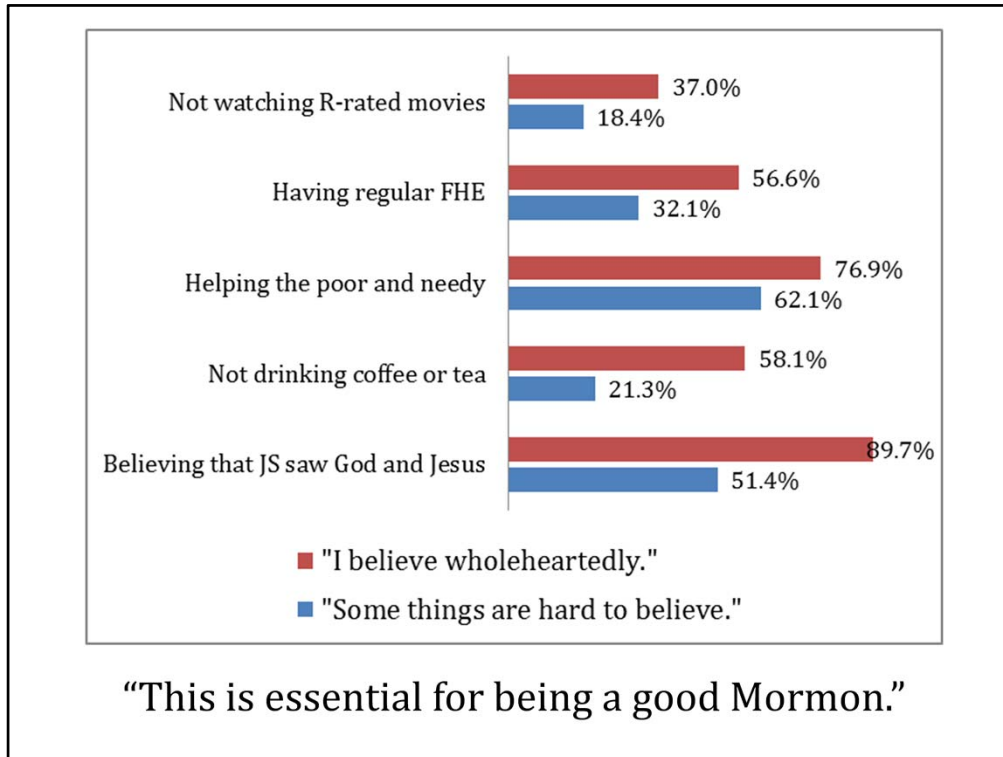
A significant difference on drinking alcohol. Most doubters do not see it as a moral issue while most TBMs see it as morally unacceptable.



This is how many doubters compared to TBMs reported belief in a variety of statements. They are virtually identical when it comes to the Resurrection and nature of the Godhead. But even a majority of doubters agree with other fundamental beliefs of Mormonism such as the historicity of the Book of Mormon, prophetic calling of the church president, eternal families, and male-only priesthood.

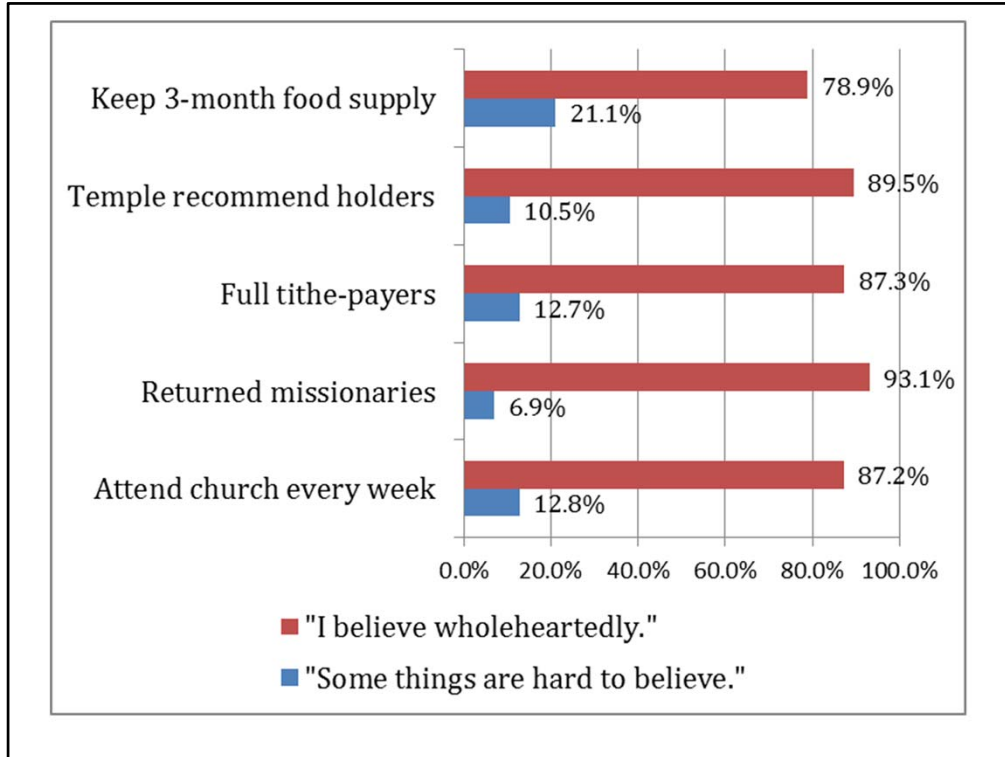
This is important because it shows that most doubters still believe the fundamentals of church teachings. So they must be doubting the non-fundamentals.

(Those who doubt the fundamentals have probably left and/or no longer identify as Mormon.)



There is wider variation between doubters and TBMs in terms of what they believe are essential to “being a good Mormon.”

The widest difference can be seen on observance of the Word of Wisdom and the need for a literal belief in the First Vision.



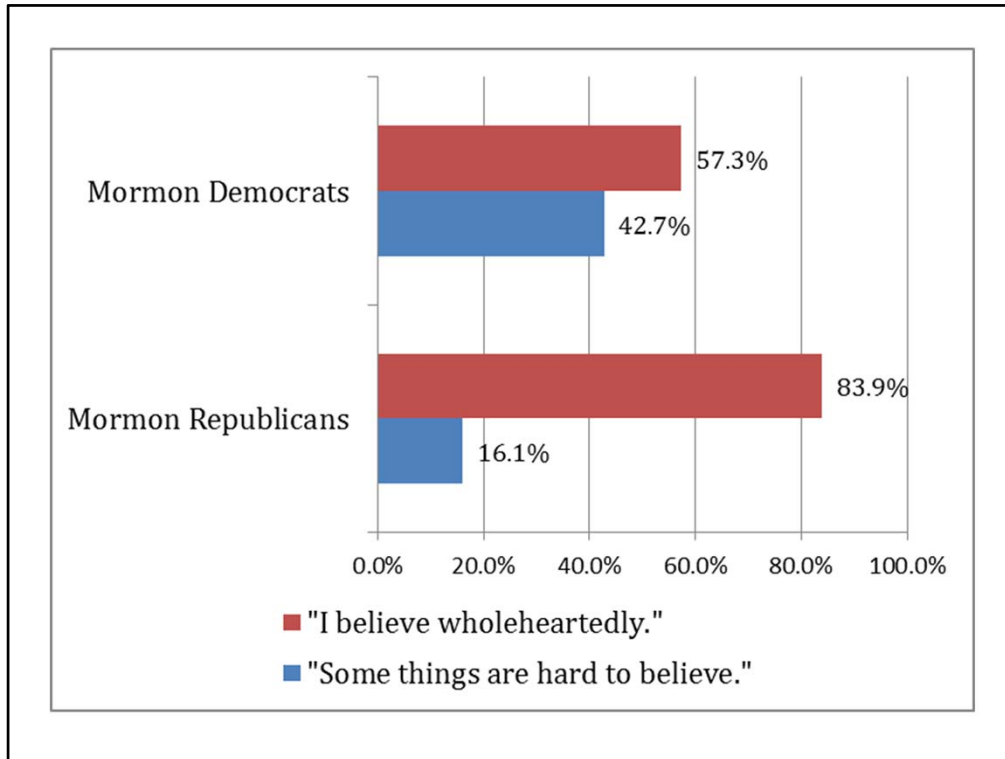
This looks at things from another angle. It is showing what proportion of Mormons who do certain things are doubters vs. TBMs.

For example, of Mormons who attend church every week or more, only about 13% are doubters. The other 87% are TBMs. Similar proportions for temple recommend holders, returned missionaries, and full tithe-payers.

This is important if one considers the incentives of the institutional church. What do they want? They want full tithe-payers, active attenders, RMs, food supply stockers, and temple-goers. Given that doubters are less likely to do all of these things, the incentive of the church (I would think) is to try to prevent doubting as much as possible.

Also, whose concerns are they more likely to be responsive to – the doubters or the TBMs – if those groups want different things? Who pays the bills? Who fill the seats?

This suggests that doubters might have more influence if they showed up more and did all these things that the church wants.



This is also an interesting perception. Many perceive Mormon Democrats to be “faithless” and all-around less valiant in their testimonies of the gospel. It seems that there is some validity to this. However, we also see that a *majority* of Mormon Democrats are still TBMs.

Summary

- Doubters are distinguished by religious, not demographic characteristics.
- Mormon doubters are about as satisfied with their lives as TBMs.
- They are similar to TBMs in many ways but clearly different in others.
 - Strong majority of doubters still believe basic church teachings.
- Only about 10% of “ideal” Mormons are doubters.
- We need more data!

Questions?