

ANALYSIS CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OPINION FAITH

# Applying Moral Foundations Theory to current and former Latter-day Saints

While listening to what current and former Latter-day Saints say about their lives, it can be valuable to also understand what they tell us about core values and what matters most to them.

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The statue of the Angel Moroni atop The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Salt Lake Temple is barely visible as fog envelops the Salt Lake City skyline early Thursday, Nov. 29, 2018. | Ryan Jensen, Ryan Jensen

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**By Josh Coates, Stephen Cranney**

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*Editor's note: The following is the third article exploring findings from the 2023 Current and Former Latter-day Saint Survey. The survey was conducted by the B.H. Roberts Foundation, an independent organization not affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.*

In our previous article, we explored different segments among Latter-day Saints based on the 2023 Current and Former Latter-day Saint survey, a large representative study of over 3,800 current and former members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These came from national Facebook ads and postcards sent to a representative distribution of households within counties that had populations that were at least 15% Latter-day Saint based on the 2020 U.S. Religious Census estimates. (You can read more about the methodology here.)

In this article, we will explore the survey results from the sample of 1,183 individuals that identified as former members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the context of this exploration it's important to note that although this is a relatively large statistical sample of former Latter-day Saints, undoubtedly there are many former members who have no interest in surveys related to their previous faith or decline for other reasons. So this data represents only those that chose to participate in this survey.

The survey asked a variety of questions to former Latter-day Saints, including questions related to their beliefs and affiliation with religion. We found that nearly half (about 44%) of former Latter-day Saints said they do not believe in God, or they aren't sure if there is a God and they don't believe there is a way to find out.

However nearly a third (about 29%) say that they either know God exists, or tend to believe in God, and about 26% of former Latter-day Saints pray at least once a week.

Despite a significant number of respondents believing in God, over 70% of former members consider themselves “nones” and are unaffiliated with a religion, though roughly two thirds of former Latter-day Saints surveyed claimed to have membership records with the Church. All respondents self-identified as either former or current Latter-day Saints — in other words, the survey takers told us what they considered themselves.

When comparing demographics between those that identify as current Latter-day Saints, and those that identify as former Latter-day Saints, we found that former Latter-day Saints are slightly younger in age but similar in gender distribution as current members.

With respect to **marriage**, about 20% of former Latter-day Saints are married to believing members of the Church, and about 30% are married to former Latter-day Saints. And, according to our findings, former Latter-day Saints are twice as likely to have been divorced than Latter-day Saints generally, and nearly four times as likely to identify as LGBTQ. We also found that former Latter-day Saints were more than four times less likely to have had their **marriages** sealed in the temple when compared with current Latter-day Saints.

Inquiring why individuals left the church was included in our survey, albeit with reservations. The relationship one has with an institution of faith has been compared to **marriage**, and research has shown that divorce narratives are subject to certain understandable biases when asking couples to explain the reasons for divorce. Much like asking why a **marriage** ended, responses to questions about why people split with their faith are by nature subjective and influenced by strong feelings and biases. This illustrates the challenge of relying upon survey data alone for an accurate and more comprehensive understanding of matters of faith.

Former members of the church expressed that conflicts with local leaders and Word of Wisdom issues were among the least important considerations in leaving, whereas historical issues related to Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon and the treatment of Black people in the past were said to be the most important reasons. Policies related to LGBTQ+ people and women were also cited as important.

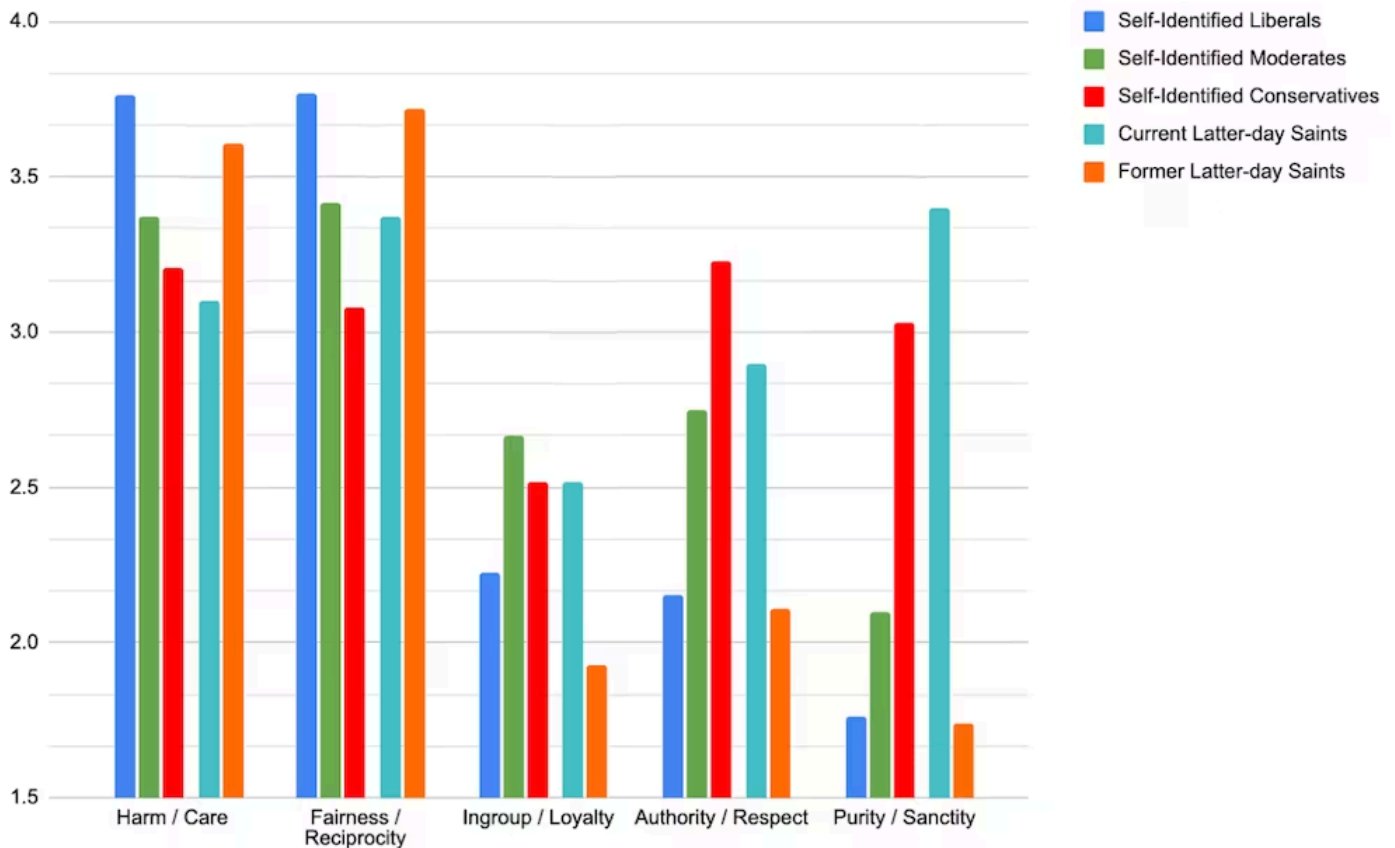
## **Diverging moral foundations.**

In order to better understand current and former Latter-day Saints we asked respondents fundamental questions related to how they perceived right and wrong. These questions have been developed by noted social psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph who sought to create a framework for understanding the foundational values that contribute to moral decisions.

This model, known as Moral Foundations Theory, has been utilized by researchers to try and better understand the ideological differences in different populations. Moral Foundations Theory measures the moral drives that help shape people's political, moral and social outlooks. It had never been applied to current or former Latter-day Saints until now.

By way of background, the moral foundation's theory proposes five foundational values pairs that people consider in making moral decisions: **fairness/reciprocity** (measured by agreement with statements such as "justice is the most important requirement for a society"), **harm/care** (e.g., "compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue"), **ingroup/loyalty** (e.g., "people should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong"), **authority/respect** (e.g., "respect for authority is something all children need to learn"), and **purity/sanctity** (e.g., "chastity is an important and valuable virtue").

## Moral Foundation Scores



This graph visualizes the Moral Foundation values of self-identified political identities compared with those of current and former Latter-day Saints. Data has been aggregated and normalized from Graham 2012 and CFLDS 2023 survey data. | Source: B.H. Roberts Foundation 2023 Current and Former Latter-day Saint Survey, of 2,625 self-identifying church members.

We compared the moral foundations of current and former Latter-day Saints with a spectrum of self-identified politically liberal, moderate and conservative Americans. In Moral Foundation values, Latter-day Saint scores are comparable to politically moderate and conservative Americans, with the exception of Purity/Sanctity, which Latter-day Saints value significantly more than any other political demographic. We also found that former Latter-day Saints scores are most similar to politically liberal Americans, but are significantly less likely to value Ingroup/Loyalty.

The Moral Foundation differences between current and former Latter-day Saints suggest a change in moral values associated with a departure from the church, although we did not test for how and when this shift may have happened. While conventional thinking is religion drives one's partisan worldview, political scientists such as Michele Margolis at the University of Pennsylvania and David Campbell at the University of


Notre Dame, among others, have found that partisan associations can also drive religious affiliation or disaffiliation. For example, Campbell notes in an interview with the Niskanen Center, “you can even find Americans pulling away from their own religious identity as an allergic reaction to the religious right.”

We did not explore to what extent this might apply to former members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But the differences in moral foundations, along with the survey data, with all its limitations, nonetheless provide fresh insights into how active and former Latter-day Saints see the world which we hope will prompt further research.

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