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*The Religious Landscape of Wyoming and Montana*

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Earlier this year, the prestigious Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released the results of its U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. This massive survey interviewed more than 35,000 people and created an important portrait of religious adherence for the nation.

Unfortunately, this survey failed the states of Wyoming and Montana. Because it surveyed only 272 people from the two states, it had to analyze them together to create a statistically valid sample. Since the two states have quite different religious characters, both historically and presently, the survey reveals little useful information about the religious nature of these two states. This is clear both for Catholicism and Mormonism.

The Pew survey indicates that 23 percent of the two states are presently Catholic. The number not only hides the difference between the two states, but seems rather high in comparison to surveys taken during the last decade. While the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) puts Montana Catholic members at 22 percent, it numbers Wyoming's Catholics at only 18 percent. The North American Religion Atlas (from the late 1990s) puts the numbers even lower: Montana at 19 percent and Wyoming at 16 percent.

The imbalance between the two states is historic, for immigrants from Catholic countries such as Ireland and Italy came to work in Montana's mines or settle along its railroads. Although a similar trend occurred in Wyoming, it had fewer mines and miles of train lines. So not only is the Pew percentage somewhat high, but there should be at least a 3 or 4 percent difference between the two states.

Or perhaps not. According to the 2000 United States census, Wyoming has a Hispanic population of 6.5 percent (and growing), while Hispanics comprise only 2 percent of Montana's citizens. Given that Hispanics in general belong to the Roman Catholic Church, perhaps they account for an increase (previously unnoticed by the surveys) in Catholic adherence in Wyoming and hence raise the Catholic proportion of the population to the number indicated by the Pew Survey. It is a shame the survey cannot help us resolve this question.

With regard to adherents of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, combining the two states also skews the data. Wyoming, particularly in the western regions, was closely aligned with Mormon growth. Part of the present-day state belonged to Utah Territory, and a larger part was encompassed by the State of Deseret envisioned by the Mormon leadership.

More significantly, many Mormons migrated into Wyoming in the late 1800s and early 1900s, some encouraged by Wyoming governors and others by Wyoming leaders such as Buffalo Bill Cody. Montana had no significant Mormon population until after World War I, when families began to enter the state to clear new farms.

This difference in the two states' histories with respect to Mormonism casts suspicion on the reliability of figures reported by the Pew survey. The survey indicated that just 5 percent of the population of the two states are Mormon, but this hides their differences. The 2001 ARIS survey put Wyoming's population at 7 percent Mormon while Montana's stood at only 3 percent.

The Religion Atlas indicated an even larger difference: Wyoming rose to nearly 10 percent, while Montana remained at 3 percent. My own experience around the state suggests the percentage may be even higher, but I have no hard data to back that up.

In the end, the Pew Survey of America's Religious Landscape has done a good job for the nation and for the more populous states, but it has failed to give a clear picture of the religious character of Wyoming and Montana. Since the three surveys cited have all been sponsored by institutions located in large cities of the eastern United States, maybe the solution is for western entities to sponsor their own survey. Perhaps the universities of Wyoming and Montana should take the lead. This would be just the kind of action that UW's proposed Center for the Study and Teaching of Religion in the American West could carry out.