

Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity -some discussion points

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"How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman Empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization?" How did the number of Christians grow from approx. 1000 in A.D. 40 to approx. 33,882,008 in A.D. 350?

A growth rate of 40% per decade for 300 years!!!

1. Stark says that the central sociological proposition about conversion is:

"Conversion to new, deviant religious groups occurs when, other things being equal, people have or develop stronger attachment to members of the group than they have to nonmembers." P.18

This point is a central one in his argument in the book, because he goes on to demonstrate how Christians developed these attachments.

2. Stark states the following theoretical proposition:

"New religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive and discontented, and those affiliated with the most accommodated (worldly) religious communities." P.19

This proposition is based on Stark's and others research on 20th century religious movements. He goes on to point out that successful movements requiring conversion grow "...through social networks, through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments." P.20 This finding is solidly grounded in research as well.

3. In the **second chapter** Stark asks the question of whether or not the early church recruited only the outsiders, lower class persons to the new faith. On page 33 he states

"The fundamental thesis is simply put: If the early church was like all the other cult movements for which good data exist, it was not a proletarian movement but was based on the more privileged class." Stark notes the contrast between sect movements and cult movements. *Sect movements* occur by schism within a conventional religious body when person desiring more otherworldly versions of the faith break away to "restore" the religion to a higher level of tension with the environment. *Cult movements* are new faiths at least in the society being examined. These movements violate prevailing religious norms and become targets of hostility.

He states at least four interesting propositions and presents data from contemporary recruitment patterns. Before you can understand the impact of the propositions advanced in this

chapter you need to understand the different types of rewards that religion can provide.

"The starting point is to notice that religion can in fact compensate people for their inability to gain certain things they desire. However, the inability of humans to satisfy desires has two quite different aspects. First, some people are unable to gain desired rewards that are only *scarce*--- rewards that others are able to obtain, or to obtain in more ample amounts. These include the tangible rewards such as wealth and health, the lack of which underlies all deprivation interpretations of religion. Clearly, religions provide a variety of effective mechanisms by which people can endure such deprivations, including promises that earthly sacrifice will merit heavenly recompense. But we must also recognize a *second* aspect of deprivation: the ability of religion to compensate people for desired rewards that seem to be absolutely *unavailable* to anyone, at least in this life. The most obvious of these, and perhaps the one most intensely sought by humans, is victory over death. No one, rich or poor, can gain eternal life by direct methods in the here and now. The only plausible source of such a reward is through religion, and the fulfillment of this promise is postponed to another world, a world known only through religious means. Finally, we must recognize that as organized social enterprises, religions are a source of *direct rewards* to members. That is, religious organizations reward some people with status, income, self-esteem, social relations, entertainment, and a host of other things they value. ... " (Pp.35 -36)

a. The power of an individual or group will be positively associated with control of religious organizations and with gaining the rewards available from religious organizations. (This proposition explains the absence of lower classes from more conventional religious groups.)

b. The power of an individual or group will be negatively associated with acceptance of religious compensators for rewards that actually exist. (This proposition suggests that the deprived seek religious compensation for their lot in life.)

c. Regardless of power, person and groups will tend to accept religious compensators for rewards that do not exist in this world. (This proposition suggests that faith comforts everyone regardless of status.) See p. 36 for Stark's treatment.

d. " Religious skepticism is most prevalent among the more privileged. " p.37 Skepticism, Stark notes, does not entail immunity to the appeal of the essential supernaturalism of all religions.

In the rest of the chapter he presents data that supports the view that "Cult movements over recruit persons of more privileged backgrounds. " His argument is that had the early church been composed entirely of lower economic background adherents, the Roman Empire would have viewed it as a more political threat and would have repressed it more severely than they did. The contemporary evidence presented shows that in

America recent cults have a higher percentage of persons who have attended college than the mainline denominations or sectarian groups. *The privileged will be the most aware of the weaknesses in the plausibility structure of conventional faiths.*

4. In **chapter three** Stark returns to the network viewpoint.

"People are more willing to adopt a new religion to the extent that it retains cultural continuity with conventional religion(s) with which they already are familiar." p.55

" Social movements grow much faster when they spread through preexisting social networks." p.55

This forms the basis for looking at the synagogues of the Jews in the Diaspora found in all the major cities in the Roman Empire. These congregations were used to receiving teachers from Jerusalem and had some family and friendship connections with people in Israel. Thus the early Christian missionaries had an audience to whom they could speak without simply preaching on street corners. These congregations were accommodated to the cultures of the cities in which they existed and were probably more open to the gospel teachings than synagogues in Israel. On the fringes of these congregations were people attracted to the beliefs of Judaism called "God-fearers." These individuals were potential converts as well.

Stark's point is that the Jews living outside of Israel provided a network through which Christianity could and probably did spread.

5. In **Chapter Four**, Stark discusses the impact of two great epidemics on the survival rates of Christians and pagans.

This chapter demonstrates the plausibility of three propositions based on the work of historians of medicine and disease as well as historians of the early church. The key is that epidemics around 160 A.D. and 250 A.D. each killed large numbers (30%) of the population. Stark's first point is that pagan religion and pagan gods were indifferent to human suffering and not thought likely to intervene. In addition they had no promise of an after life. #1 *Epidemics swamped the explanatory and comforting capacities of paganism and Hellenic philosophies.*

Pagan religion had no religious teaching that caring for the sick was a good idea. Confronted with dying friends and neighbors the likely response of the well person was to get away from the infected before they became ill too. Germ theory of disease was not known at that time. Pagan religion did not link religious belief with social responsibility. Stark points out that Matthew 25:35-40 proposed a startling new morality. #2. *Christian values of love and charity had from the beginning been translated into norms of social service and community solidarity. When disasters struck, the Christians were better able to cope and this resulted in substantially higher rates of survival.* Neither Romans nor Christians had any special knowledge of how to respond to the disease. But evidence shows that even basic nursing care (like providing water and food) would have increased the survival rate. Given the knowledge of the time this higher level of survival would have been interpreted as a miracle.

(Stark credits Wm. H. MacNeil, *Plagues and Peoples* for a brief discussion of these points.)

Stark concludes the chapter by coming back to his network hypothesis that new religions grow through networks. If pagan who became ill were abandoned in these two great epidemics more of them would have died than Christians. Thus more social ties or bonds that kept them in the pagan community would have been lost. #3. *Large numbers of peoples in an epidemic would have lost the social ties restraining them from becoming Christians.* Further Christians may have not only cared for each other but may have cared for pagans as well. This could have served to attract people to the religion as well. Stark hypothesizes that pagans would have lost more of their friendship and family networks than Christians. In the aftermath of the plagues, pagans who survived may have become part of a network including Christians and thus potential recruits. Stark does the math for a hypothetical city of 10,000. He uses an assumption of a 10% mortality rate for Christians and a 30% mortality rate for pagans for both epidemics. Given his earlier calculations he estimates .4% of the population as Christian in 160 A.D. a ratio of 1 Christian to 249 pagans. Going through the assumptions mentioned above and the growth rate of 40% / decade by the year 260 A.D. at the end of the second epidemic the ratio would have changed to 1 Christian for every 8 pagans, if the population had remained constant at 10,000.

For more details examine the arguments on pages 88 through 93.

6. In **Chapter 5** Stark looks at the role of women in the rise of Christianity.

Christianity offered greater status to women including leadership roles than did pagan religions and households. Stark assembles evidence that the early Christian congregations may have been predominately female in composition. This would have made the groups very different from pagan society at large. He reviews three major consequences both for women themselves and for the rise of Christianity related to the large number of women in Christian congregations.

Stark believes that *primary conversion* (where the believer plays an active role in his or her own conversion and becomes an adherent based on positive evaluations of the particular faith recognizing that attachments play a major role in forming these positive evaluations) was more common among women than among men. (*Secondary conversion* is more passive and involves somewhat reluctant acceptance of a faith on the basis of attachments to a primary convert.) Further some high status women became converts. Christianity approved of marriage between Christians and pagans. Given a surplus of women in Christian groups this prevented "an abundance of childless, single women," and provided a source of secondary conversions. This argument emphasizes the importance of the network hypothesis advanced earlier in the book. Christians spread the faith to people that they know or to people they get to know. On page 114 Stark notes that Greeley proposes that in marriages the person with the stronger faith often brings

the spouse into the fold. Both "just concubinage" (sanctioned by Callistus, Bishop of Rome, about 200 A.D.) and marriage to pagans were some of the ways that Christians managed to maintain an *open network*. Building bonds with non-Christians and avoiding becoming a closed community is, according to Stark, crucial to a high growth rate.

Second, within both the family and the religious community, Christian women enjoyed greater status. Marriage laws in the Roman Empire deprived women of most property rights. Christians treated widows better. Further women played important roles in early congregations. Stark notes "...there is virtual consensus among historians of the early church as well as biblical scholars that women held positions of honor and authority within early Christianity." (p. 109) This made Christians different from both Jews and pagans. Women had more control of their lives. Widows were protected rather than forced to remarry as often happened in Roman society. Women were given positions of leadership and rights that were more like those found in Sparta than those found in Athens.

Third low fertility was characteristic of the Roman Empire so much that rewards were given to citizens for fathering more children and penalizing those who were childless. (p.115) Roman males devalued marriage (p.117), and were given great sexual license before and after marriage, while married women were not. Female infanticide was widely practiced. Christianity did not approve adultery, female infanticide, abortion, and suggested that non-reproductive forms of sexual expression were inappropriate. These positions led to greater fertility among Christians than among pagans. Stark suggests that greater fertility among Christians was encouraged by the sanctified marital bond as well as stances against abortion and infanticide. The symmetrical relationship described by Paul in I Corinthians 7:2-7 "was at total variance, not only with pagan culture but with Jewish culture as well..." (p.123) (My emphasis.) Stark's summary of the chapter on page 128 is well worth being a starting point for discussion.

7. In **Chapters 6 & 7** Stark examines the condition of the cities at the time of the rise of Christianity.

In Chapter 6 he focuses on where Christianity grew. Looking at some data points on twenty-two cities, he looks at variables that might have made the populations of those cities most receptive to Christianity and looks at the impact of those variables on the date the city in question was known to have a church. This chapter examines distance from Jerusalem, distance from Roman, whether or not the city had a synagogue, whether or not the city had a Gnostic presence. His findings are consistent with the well-known historical view that the Christian movement emerged most rapidly in the cities of Asia Minor. He had hoped to look at some measures of social disorganization in these cities because "in modern studies, unconventional behavior is strongly correlated with various measure of population turnover and instability." (p.144) As he gathered his data he realized that

all of the cities of the Roman Empire were "incredibly disorganized." Thus he decided to do a case study on an important city in the growth of Christianity--Antioch.

In Chapter 7 Stark focuses his attention on Antioch where a strong Christian community developed. Doing research on historical discussions of what city life was like he concludes that we are talking about spatially compact densely populated cities where water was so scarce bathing was impractical. Population density was probably higher than contemporary Bombay, India. Life expectancy was under 30 years. His summary paragraph on pp. 160-161 captures the essence of city life in that period.

"Any accurate portrait of Antioch in New Testament times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred. A city where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching maturity. A city filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers. A city so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents could prompt mob violence. A city where crime flourished and the streets were dangerous at night. And, perhaps above all, a city repeatedly smashed by cataclysmic catastrophes: where a resident could expect literally to be homeless from time to time, providing that he or she was among the survivors.

People living in such circumstances must often have despaired. Surely it would not be strange for them to have concluded that the end of days drew near. And surely too they must often have longed for relief, for hope, indeed for salvation."

The Christian message brought a new "way of life" into this urban chaos. A way of life and community that promised making life in the city more tolerable.

8. **Chapter 8** examines how sacrifice can be viewed as a rational choice for the early Christian. Even being killed by someone can be viewed as a rational choice in the context of the early church in Roman Society as reconstructed by Stark. Of course many commentators have seen this choice as irrational or deluded. Probably all of you are familiar with Karl Marx criticism of religion as the "opiate of the masses" namely a doctrine of falsehoods predicated on the idea that life on earth in deprived circumstances can be accepted because you will receive a reward in the afterlife. Or perhaps you are familiar with Sigmund Freud's view that religious belief is an illusion founded in some personality irregularity that can be treated with proper therapy. To understand what Stark is saying in this chapter requires an understanding of a number of points about human behavior as social scientists are interpreting them now. Not many Christians were martyred and most of the martyred were leaders not the rank and file members of the movement. Stark suggests, following some other commentators, that killing the leaders without persecuting the rank and file may have strengthened the Christian movement at a time when people were noticing that

Christ had not returned in the lifetime of the disciples generation.

There are several key propositions in Stark's argument that martyrdom is a rational choice and not the choice of a deluded mind.

Religion supplies compensators for rewards that are scarce or unavailable.

(Review what a compensator is from chapter 2 or see p. 168)

Individuals choose their actions rationally, including those actions, which concern compensators.

"Rational choice involves weighing the anticipated costs and benefits of actions and then seeking to act so as to maximize net benefits." (p. 169)

People differ greatly in their relative evaluations of specific rewards or benefits.

"...To call Mother Teresa an altruist and thus classify her behavior as non-rational is to deny the finest of human capacities, our ability to love. Thus although rational choice theories restrict behavior to that which is consistent with a person's definitions of rewards, it has very little to say about the actual content of those rewards. The leaves all the room need for people to be charitable, brave, unselfish, reverent, and even silly." (p.171)

The perceived value of a religious compensator is established through social interactions and exchanges.

Individuals perceive a religious compensator as less risky, and hence more valuable, when it is promoted, produced, or consumed collectively.

A religion's compensators are perceived as less risky, and hence more valuable, when there is credible evidence that participation in the religion generates tangible benefits that are not readily explained in secular terms.

Religious leaders have greater credibility when they receive low levels of material reward in return for their religious services.

Martyrs are the most credible exponents of the value of religion, and this is especially true if there is a voluntary aspect to their martyrdom.

The Free Rider Problem Religion involves collective action, and all collective action is potentially subject to exploitation by free riders.

"One need not look far to find examples of anemic congregations plagued by free-rider problems--a visit to the nearest liberal

Protestant church usually will suffice to discover "members" who draw upon the group for weddings, funerals and (perhaps) holiday celebrations, but who provide little or nothing in return. Even if they do make substantial financial contributions, they weaken the group's ability to create collective religious goods because their inactivity devalues the compensators and reduces the "average" level of commitment." (p. 175)

Sacrifice and stigma mitigate the free-rider problems faced by religious groups.

First-By demanding higher levels of stigma and sacrifice, religious groups induce higher average levels of member commitment and participation. Second- By demanding higher levels of stigma and sacrifice, religious groups are able to generate greater material social, and religious benefits for their members.

Stark summarizes the argument of the chapter as follows:
 " Membership in an expensive religion is, for many people a 'good bargain.' Conventional cost-benefit analysis alone suffices to explain the continued attraction of religions that impose sacrifices and stigmas upon their members. This conclusion is, of course, in extreme contrast with the conventional social science view that to pay high religious costs only reflects irrationality, or at least woeful ignorance. However, more sophisticated analysis reveals that members of strict religious organizations have substantial reason to believe that their information about compensators is sufficient and thus their behavior fulfills the rational choice proposition. This suggests why the recent introduction of rational choice theories into the social scientific study of religion has been recognized as a major shift in paradigms (Warner, 1993) - the irrationalist position is in full retreat." (P. 178)

Stark closes the chapter with an account of the heroic journey of Ignatius of Antioch to his death in Rome. Also he observes that the martyrdom of James and his followers in Jerusalem in the 60's and of Peter in Rome came at a time when such witness could encourage the Christian movement in the face of their small numbers.

9. In Chapter 9 Stark examines of the overall place of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Think not about Christianity, as you have known it as a dominant religion in the United States, but think of Christianity as a minor group of believers such as the followers of Bahai or of Reverend Moon. This will help you picture the place of Christianity in a religious situation where other religious groups were dominant. Paganism was the order of the day with many different temples available to many different gods. These temples were well supported by the state and by wealthy contributors up to the time of Constantine.

Stark states, " In many respects Rome provided for a greater level of religious freedom than was seen again until after the American Revolution. ... Here I merely want to suggest briefly

that although Christians stood in formal, official disrepute for much of the first three centuries, informally they were free to do pretty much as they wished, in most places, most of the time.
" (p. 192)

Christianity was not a secret sect. Christians took Christian names. Tombs bore Christian inscriptions. Stark points out that Christians even held public demonstrations protesting the persecution of their leaders without suffering reprisals for these demonstrations.

In this chapter Stark introduces the concept of the *religious economy*. "A religious economy consists of all the religious activity going on in any society. Religious economies are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market of current and potential customers, a set of religious firms seeking to serve that market, and the religious 'product lines' offered by the various firms. The use of market language to discuss things often thought to be sacred was not, and is not, meant to offend, but to enable me to import some basic insights from economics to help explain religious phenomena." (pp.193-194)

Once again Stark introduces three propositions for us to consider:

1. *The capacity of a single religious firm to monopolize a religious economy depends upon the degree to which the state uses coercive force to regulate the religious economy.*

2. *To the degree that a religious economy is unregulated, it will tend to be very pluralistic.*

(By pluralistic Stark means the number of active religious firms having a significant market share. The larger the number having a significant market share the more pluralistic the religious economy.)

3. *Pluralism inhibits the ability of new religious firms to gain a market share.*

Stark suggests that since the Roman religious economy was pluralistic something had to be very wrong with paganism for Christianity to grow so dramatically. Paganism was still strong when Constantine converted so why did it dramatically decline in the fourth and fifth centuries?

a. In an excessively pluralistic religious economy people may have been unwilling to give their unqualified allegiance to any single cult or temple.

b. Pagan religions were expensive to maintain since they relied on a professional priesthood and on elaborate feasts and festivals. Funds for this came from the State and from wealthy donors. A decline in these funds would mean a quick decline in the religion.

c. The religious economy was becoming more volatile with the introduction of other religions such as the worship of Isis. Stark argues that openness to new religions in the study of cities shows that wherever Isis went Christianity followed.

d. Finally he argues that some evidence exists that the religious climate in general may have been one of "widespread irreverence."

At this point Stark returns to introducing a more familiar argument found in the sociology of religion that as religions evolve, they move toward monotheism. Those who have read Karen Armstrong's *A HISTORY OF GOD* will appreciate her comprehensive study of this in Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

Stark introduces several propositions

1. *As societies become older, larger, and more cosmopolitan, they will worship fewer gods of greater scope.*

2. *Distinguishing the supernatural into two classes ---good and evil---offers a rational portrait of the gods.*

(Good consists of the intention to allow humans to profit from exchanges. Evil consists of the intention to inflict coercive exchanges or deceptions upon humans, leading to losses for the humans.)

3. *The older, larger, and more cosmopolitan societies become, the clearer the distinction drawn between good and evil gods.* (p. 201-202)

The argument is that in the face of a religious economy with many less respected deities, monotheism became more attractive.

Finally Stark returns to the religious economy concept and notes the difference between firms, which demand exclusive commitment, and firms, which take "multiple religious involvements for granted." (p.203) He notes that exclusive firms engage in the collective production of religious experience. Non-exclusive firms cannot sustain the collective production and therefore specialized in privately produced religious experience.

This leads to two propositions developed by Lawrence Iannaccone, which Stark endorses.

1. *Whenever religious firms exist to provide private commodities, competitive forces and risk aversion will lead consumers to patronize multiple firms, thereby diversifying their religious portfolios.*

2. *Whenever religious firms exist to facilitate the production of collective goods, the firm and its patrons will demand exclusivity to mitigate free-rider problems.* (p.204)

Paganism was essentially a religion that provided private commodities. This led to non-exclusive commitment.

Christianity called for exclusive commitment and this produced a sense of belonging.

Groups asking for exclusive commitment "...must offer a comprehensive belief system for all ages. Involvement in an exclusive religious group does not necessarily cause people to

lose the urge to diversify, but it denies them the opportunity to do so if they are to share in the potent religious rewards of such involvement. And just as the weakness of paganisms lay in its inability to generate belonging, the fundamental strength of an exclusive faith is its strength as a group. " (Pp. 206-207)

So Christianity in Roman times produced a community with close ties between the clergy and the rank and file. Clergy were not professional salesmen of religious goods, but teachers and friends selected on the basis of their established character. The church relied on small contributions from many of the congregation rather than large contribution of the wealthy few or on state support.

10. In Chapter 10, Stark has one more thesis that he wants to touch on briefly. His argument is that Christian doctrine supported the practice of the religion that he has shown was so successful in recruiting adherents. *Central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations.* (p.211)

First given the nature of paganism "...the idea that God loves those who love him was entirely new." "Moreover, the corollary that because God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they love one another was something entirely new."

Second "...a major way in which Christianity served as a revitalization movement within the empire was in offering a coherent culture that was entirely stripped of ethnicity. All were welcome without need to dispense with ethnic ties ... Among Christians ethnicity tended to be submerged as new, more universalistic...cosmopolitan norms and customs emerged. (213)