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The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries Rodney Stark

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Reviewed by John W. Welch and Kathryn Worlton Pulham

The burden Rodney Stark undertakes to bear in this book is a heavy one. He ventures to show that long before Constantine’s Edict of Milan, Christianity had spread across an empire to become the force that would cause rather than result from the emperor’s decree. This rapid rise of Christianity cries out for a thorough study of the sociological and socio-economic environment of its first four centuries. Having illustrated a plausible growth curve for the rise of Christianity, sociologist Stark observes and delineates easy parallels between the rise of the Christian movement and the growth of modern religions, giving particular attention to Mormonism.

Stark is well known for his projections of the future growth rates of Mormonism as a new world religion. For many reasons, Latter-day Saints should take particular interest in the very readable and informative explanations given by Stark to account for the extensive Christianization of the Roman Empire by the middle of the fourth century.

Stark’s Thesis and Sociological Approach

In his ten self-contained chapters, many of which come from the previously published Stark canon, Stark illuminates several crucial events and historical trends that transpired in the first centuries of Christianity. Based on extensive sociological data, his conclusions rely on a very lengthy and competently extracted bibliography of the best sources on life in the world of postapostolic and precreedal Christianity. Stark’s basic thesis, which may well come as a surprise to many historians, holds that normal geometric population growth rates, when coupled with peculiar demographic factors, demonstrate that the Christian population of the Roman empire would have exceeded on its own steam half of the population of the ancient Mediterranean world by the year 350. Thus, Christianity did not arise out of nowhere when Constantine adopted it as his state religion. In effect, he co-opted the most vigorously growing religion capable of enduring the social concerns of his day.

In the course of playing out his account of the rise of Christianity, Stark brings to the table a set of well-established sociological theories, developed and validated through modern social scientific research.
theories explain to a large extent many phenomena, such as the dynamics of upper-class preferences for new religious movements, profiles of why mission activity succeeds, effects of networking in close social circles, demographic impacts of epidemics, birthrates, women’s attraction to the religion, urbanization, cost-benefit analyses of martyrdom, and personal sacrifice as a rational human choice.

Though his arguments are oftentimes posed creatively and persuasively, Stark somewhat naïvely asserts that ancient and modern models for religious experience and conversion are congruent. He frequently relies too much on the repeatability of history: what has happened in one case dictates what did or should happen in another. Here Rodney Stark as sociologist consciously places himself and Isaac Newton as physicist on comparable planes—scientists who supposedly both develop universal truths. Stark asks us to “consider a physics that must generate a new rule of gravity for each object in the universe. And it is precisely the abstract generality of science that makes it possible for social science to contribute anything to our understanding of history” (22–23). Sociology as an explicative science based on the abstract and unpredictable, however, cannot be promoted to the status of universal truths. Though Stark admits that “some historians might be tempted to embrace such an assertion . . . that basic social . . . processes were different in the days of Rome from what they are now,” he promises that “no competent social scientist would consider” the claim that general social theories of religious conversion cannot span almost two thousand years of history (45). Even so qualified, the notion forces skepticism. Ancient and modern sociology are not of the same vintage. Stark’s reliance on absolutes—even inconsistently in many cases—weakens his arguments, which therefore should not be overrated.

Moreover, some of Stark’s explications are problematic. While as a sociologist he is required to follow the line of economic rationale even when explaining the irrational line of religious conversion, he fails to intersect the two. The book relegates religious conversion to a rational choice cost-benefit theory while at the eleventh hour it only lamely mentions the spiritual virtue of conversion as “its own reward” (215); the approach overly reifies conversion. Those interested in absorbing a more intense dialogue on the subject might read Steve Bruce’s Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory, in which Bruce specifically takes aim at Stark’s economizing of conversion. Although Bruce finds preposterous Stark’s materialization of religious experience, Latter-day Saints can to some extent allow Stark his free-market theorizing, considering the lack of true spiritual conviction among converts by the time of the fourth century, when the divergence from original Christianity had well evolved.
Stark’s Use of Mormon Parallels

As stated, Stark has taken up an ambitious task. Along the way, he compares what he has learned through his study of the growth of new religious movements in modern times with what he finds in the ancient experience. On five occasions, Stark draws explicitly on the Mormon experience:

1. Steady Mormon growth without the need for mass conversions in recent times shows that early Christianity could have grown at a similar manner and rate. “The numerical goals Christianity needed to achieve [in its first three hundred years] are entirely in keeping with the modern experience” of Mormonism, which has grown at a rate of 43 percent per decade. Evidence shows that early Christianity grew at a rate of 40 percent per decade, which under purely normal circumstances would have brought Christianity to a total of 56.5 percent of the population by the year 350 (6–7).

2. Stark’s research among new religious movements has shown that “attachments lie at the heart of conversion and therefore that conversion tends to proceed along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments” (18). The first early Mormon recruits were among Joseph Smith’s family and circle of close friends, and it appears that Jesus’ first converts were also from a similar group. Again asserting a comparison between early Christianity and early Mormonism, Stark argues that “the statistics . . . require that Christianity arose through pre-existing networks” (56). Actually, very little historical evidence can be adduced from the records to clarify what social networks and affiliations existed in advance of early Christian conversions. But assuming that the early Christian mission to the Jews continued and succeeded well into the second century, as Stark argues, then preexisting networks of Jews throughout the Roman empire probably existed and were crucial in the growth of early Christianity, consistent with the modern data from Latter-day Saint missionary work.

3. Another social law important for Stark is that “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” (55; italics removed). Just as “the message of John the Baptist and of Jesus gave form and substance to the dreams of a kingdom which had haunted many of their compatriots for generations” and just as early Christians emphasized continuity with the Old Testament by quoting frequently from the law and the prophets, so Christian converts to Mormonism can retain much of their original cultural heritage while adding to it (55). By not asking converts to discard the Bible but to add a new set of scriptures to their religious library, “Mormonism does not present itself as an alternative to Christianity, but as its fulfillment. Joseph Smith did not claim to bring revelations from a new source, but to bring more recent tidings from the same source” (55).
4. Likewise, in exploring the question "How could a rational person accept grotesque torture and death in exchange for risky, intangible religious rewards?" (179), Stark again draws an interesting comparison between the Mormon experience and what we know of early Christian persecutions. In both cases, the movements retained members precisely because of the high costs involved, not in spite of them: inevitably so, the worth of a cause will increase proportionately when much is invested into it. Interestingly, Stark points out that the persecutors of early Christianity were interested in seizing and punishing only the leaders, while crowds of obvious ordinary Christians went unpunished. In attempting to destroy Christianity from the top down, the persecutors made the mistake of assuming that the flocks of early Christians would disperse as soon as their shepherds were eliminated. Interestingly, opponents of early Mormonism made a similar erroneous assumption. Mormon opponents in Nauvoo assumed that the death of Joseph and Hyrum would end the Mormon fervor, and the Salt Lake Tribune and the national press predicted after Brigham Young's death that Mormonism would follow him to the grave. In both cases, the opponents underestimated the commitment of the rank-and-file members of the movement, who took advantage of organizational opportunities in the Church to perpetuate their mode of worship.

5. Stark corrects the long-standing generalization that all religious movements originated in lower-class deprivation. According to this thesis, Mormonism had a proletarian basis. But the accounts are neither documented nor credible considering that Mormonism in this context was viewed incorrectly as a Protestant sect rather than a new religion. Stark sees the mistake in this. In researching the economic class of typical converts, Stark has found that the people most prone to embrace new religious movements are those who have a substantial privilege in society but are not in the top economic echelons. In a lengthy discussion, Stark posits the necessity for a convert to have relative deprivation, such that only those who are at least somewhat deprived will see the need for (supernatural) compensation. These middle-ground privileged converts are typically educated and sophisticated enough to embrace the new ideas inherent in a new religion. Stark produces significant evidence that early Christian converts were well educated, blessed with intellectual capacity, and possessed sufficient social standing and privilege to host and perpetuate the new religious congregations. Likewise, Stark finds that the earliest Mormon converts came from a relatively prosperous area of western New York, were on the whole better educated than many of their neighbors, and displayed considerable intellectual sophistication. Moreover, extending this parallel, Stark points out that neither Mormonism nor early Christianity remained "a middle- and upper-class movement forever but eventually penetrated all classes"
(30–43; quote on 43). Although it does not take phenomenal wealth to launch a new religion, without sufficient resources from a person like Martin Harris or the benefactors who contributed to the building of the Kirtland Temple, the initial capital required to launch a new movement would fail. Likewise, it appears that several of Paul’s essential collaborators, such as Lydia in Philippi and Prisca and Aquila in Corinth and Ephesus, were comfortably wealthy people; beyond that, many factors indicate that Paul himself (with his special status as a Roman citizen, exceptional education away from home, his ability to travel extensively, and the means to correspond with the aid of a personal scribe) was also in a comfortable financial situation.

Further Possible Parallels

Although Stark draws explicit parallels to Mormonism on these five occasions, he could have done so at many more stages of his argument. A Latter-day Saint reader might find surprising the absence of some obvious parallels that would do nothing but bolster Stark’s claims. Consider the following representative ideas mentioned in his portrait of early Christianity. Each of these elements has easily recognizable parallels in the Mormon experience: demographically, a slow but steady growth rate at first (7); the eventual emergence of a central seat that directs the broadening organization (9); the importance of a few major group conversions in the initial stages of growth (13); but more significantly the steady expansion of the religion based on friendship networks of members (17).

Challenging stresses, such as the epidemics that plagued the Roman empire in the second and third centuries but allowed Christianity to grow more rapidly when compared with the general population and forced relocations (76–77), can be compared with the catastrophic destruction brought upon the general society by the U.S. Civil War, World War I, and World War II, each of which allowed for Mormon advances vis-à-vis the rest of the population. Early Christianity responded to the social crises of its day by giving theological meaning to deep suffering (80) while providing physical welfare and relief (87), and miracles were especially important in confirming religious growth (90). Sociologically, women converts were in a majority in early Christianity (100) as reflected in the significant roles offered to women in early Christian congregations (109). An early “oversupply of marriageable Christian women” (111), together with socially and religiously adaptive practices and an approving ecclesiastical policy toward religiously mixed marriages, increased the relative fertility of Christians over and above the normal society (114–15). Stark also mentions the relative ease of travel (135) and the chaos of new urban settings (144) that were new in the world of early Christianity, conditions that also existed as new developments in the nineteenth century.
High social costs of conversion were also involved (167), but evidence of benefits and strong testimonials of eternal rewards, even in the face of martyrdom, encouraged membership loyalty (173–74), while the problems of free riders and false prophets were firmly handled (175). Certain stigmas of membership were happily borne (176), and costs of joining the group were simply subsumed into the enormous promises of future rewards (187–89).

Moreover, Stark points out, Christianity arose at a time when the state provided open opportunity for associations and organizations to form (191–93), while at the same time the strength of old religions was waning (191). Early Christianity offered a financially inexpensive, popular form of worship compared with the extremely expensive and aristocratic models of patronage and temple building and cult observances common in Greek and Roman religions (198). Moreover, Christianity seemed to follow only a few steps behind the trails blazed and the beachheads established by the worship of Isis and Serapis (199), and it attracted loyal membership by requiring exclusive loyalty to the Christian faith, while other religious options available did not require exclusivity. Similar conditions prevailed in antebellum protestant America.

Ultimately, Stark asks, “How was it done? How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman empire . . . become the dominant faith of Western civilization?” (3) Perhaps the more appropriate question is, Why did paganism fail? Just as the less rugged individualistic gnostic groups were marginalized by the fourth century, paganism diminished into what Stark economically describes as a noncompetitive “religious firm” devoid of belonging. Paganism’s (soon-to-be monopolistic) competitor would concertedly generate this feeling of belonging within its members, particularly women. Women escaped paganism’s brutality (female infanticide, forced abortion) and joined Christianity’s pursuit of “humanity” (215), thus making possible marital assimilation and hence in-the-faith childbirth. We could say, then, that Stark agrees at least in part with Brigham Young, who professed at the outset of polygamy that women (particularly plural wives) would provide the structural basis for the religion. Thus, another parallel emerges. In both early Christianity and early Mormonism, women were guardians of religion. Recognizing this point takes one step towards answering the question Stark poses.

Agendas for Future Research

Typical of his engaging unconventionality, Stark invites us to consider a set of excellent questions that should well set the agenda for further research, especially for Latter-day Saint scholars. Good questions are rare commodities, and Stark’s questions open obscure doors onto early Christian history. For the most part, Latter-day Saint approaches to the early
centuries of Christianity have been primarily negative. Typical works on the Apostasy by Latter-day Saint authors present the story as one of darkness and despair, with little good happening as the ways of early Christianity were warped and distorted beyond recognition. Stark, with his proclaimed interest in Christian conversion patterns, missionary work, fellowship, morality, and charity, is in a strong position to attest to the survival of these virtues throughout the so-called Dark Ages. Fortunately, Latter-day Saint scholars are in the same position and can pick up where Stark has left off. This book urges a research agenda to repeal the perception that no Christian virtues survived the Apostasy.

In this regard, Latter-day Saint scholars might look more attentively at the parable of the wheat and the tares given by Jesus in Matthew 13. According to this parable, which is Jesus’ prophecy of the coming Apostasy, the wheat and the tares would be allowed to grow side by side until the day of final judgment. This parable tells us that much of the wheat would survive into the period of apostasy and loss of authority, and the problem would be, not the nonexistence of many good and true things, but the inability of people to distinguish in those early years between the wheat sown by the Savior and the tares sown by the evil one. The Restoration of the gospel, however, allows us to see what was wheat and what was tare. By applying to history the keys of knowledge restored by the Prophet Joseph Smith, scholars may thus identify vestiges of the teachings of Jesus Christ that survived well into and throughout Christian history. The task of the Restoration is to bring the true and living church “out of obscurity” (D&C 1:30); fittingly, Stark sheds light on many corners of this long and recursive process, from its obscure beginning in antiquity to implications in the latter days.

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