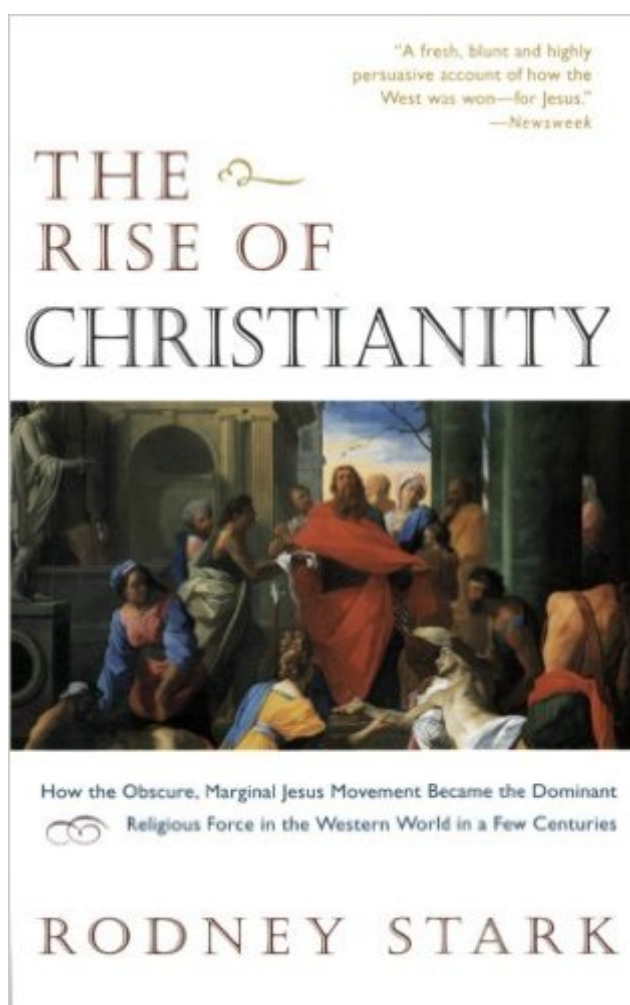


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The Rise Of Christianity: How The Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became The Dominant Religious Force In The Western World In A Few Centuries



Synopsis

This "fresh, blunt, and highly persuasive account of how the West was wonâfor Jesus" (Newsweek) is now available in paperback. Stark's provocative report challenges conventional wisdom and finds that Christianity's astounding dominance of the Western world arose from its offer of a better, more secure way of life. "Compelling reading" (Library Journal) that is sure to "generate spirited argument" (Publishers Weekly), this account of Christianity's remarkable growth within the Roman Empire is the subject of much fanfare. "Anyone who has puzzled over Christianity's rise to dominance...must read it." says Yale University's Wayne A. Meeks, for The Rise of Christianity makes a compelling case for startling conclusions. Combining his expertise in social science with historical evidence, and his insight into contemporary religion's appeal, Stark finds that early Christianity attracted the privileged rather than the poor, that most early converts were women or marginalized Jewsâand ultimately "that Christianity was a success because it proved those who joined it with a more appealing, more assuring, happier, and perhaps longer life" (Andrew M. Greeley, University of Chicago).

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Customer Reviews

This is the mystery of two millennia, right? How does an obscure sect led by an executed convict go from less than 100 adherents to an estimated 6 million on the eve of Constantine's "conversion" in the early fourth century? Social scientist Rodney Stark did more than puzzle: he created a set of testable hypotheses and tried, via secondary literature (he reads no ancient language and disclaims

any expertise in the traditional scholarship of early church history), to probe the key issues. Along the way, he uses contemporary social science findings from demography, the sociology of small groups, the psychology of conversion, medical statistics, and every other conceptual lever he could divine to create a compelling mosaic of findings, arrayed in discrete topical chapters (each of which had a former life as a scholarly article). Others have pointed out, as does Stark himself, that his work is a strictly scientific enterprise: his own religious views are for himself. He is a sociologist of religion. He gives respectful attention to the historical record of the early church, which consists almost exclusively of the well-known testaments from the early church - New Testament accounts, non-canonic letters and gospels, and works by Eusebius, Tertullian, and their peers. But in the end, the "miracle" of the expansion of the early church seems explicable by a number of readily understandable facts and processes. For example, the forty percent growth rate per decade from 30 CE to 300 CE, which arithmetically gets one from 40 converts to 6 million, seems virtually miraculous - until Stark compares this rate to the growth achieved by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints - the Mormons - which in the past century has averaged just over 40 percent per decade.

Rodney Stark uses a sociological perspective to reconsider the development of Christianity from the early first century until it became the dominant faith and official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Stark, who is currently a university professor of social sciences at Baylor University, begins with the basic premise that the development of Christianity is not purely a social and political factor, but rather the product of human faith that stands up to all social phenomena: from interaction with pagan values and persecution, to the various social crises such as epidemic and political disorder. Stark writes, "Whatever one does or doesn't believe about the divine, obviously God didn't cause the world to be Christian." That the world has become Christian and will continue to be Christian depends on human effort that is based on the reflection and commitment of that Christian faith and community. Stark states that the early Christian community gained its converts through a social network built by intimate interpersonal attachment. Interpersonal relations within the early Christian community built a strong social network that allowed the steady growth of conversion during the first centuries. In this context, it becomes important for Stark to reconsider what was the social basis of the early Christian community. Many historians and sociologists in the twentieth century claim that Christianity and all religious movements are driven by the lower social strata in a community. For Stark, this assumption is no longer accurate because of the fact that the early Christians consisted of the privileged and the middle class in the community. Christianity was

pardoned by the political authority because it included members among the family, friends and relatives of the early believers.

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