

Book review the rise of christianity by rodney stark

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Mr.. Stark uses a quantitative approach to explain his theories on how Christians could have gained so many converts without miraculous methods. This quantitative approach included the use of numerical projections based on historical documents and sociological propositions to produce his own prediction on how Christianity grew. He uses economic language is used to attempt to make sociologicalscienceaccessible to the reader, and depicts converts as rational consumers making an Informed decision_ There Is a distinctacademicstyle to his words, which can come across as linear and pretentious.

Although he is not trained as a historian, Stark provides a sufficient historical context from which to understand the sociological information. Stark draws valid conclusions that should not be disregarded, but his style and format are not effective, as they do not truly cater to either a professional or non-professional audience. His emotional use of capitalized words, quotations, and Italics Is unnecessary and takes credibility away from his argument. The organization of this book does not follow a mall thesis, but Jumps around to countless propositions and ends without a succinct conclusion Rodney Stark was raised in

Jamestown, North Dakota. He started his professional life as a news reporter, but was quick to continue hiseducation. " Following a tour of duty in the U. S. Army, he received his Ph. D. From the University of California, Berkeley, where he held appointments as a research sociologist at the Survey Research Center and at the Center for the Study of Law and Society". He has since taughtSociologyand comparative Religion at the university of

Washington and Baylor university. He has published 32 books and more than 160 scholarly articles on subjects as diverse as prejudice, crime, suicide, and city life in ancient Rome. Most of his work has been with the study of religious sociology, and he has held various prestigious academic positions on boards relating to the subject. " He also has won a number of national and International awards for distinguished scholarship". 3 In *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark is very clear about his professional training versus his historical interests throughout this entire book.

He wants the reader to know that he is first and foremost a sociologist, and that his interest in including historical context is non- professional. In his preface, he writes, " I have always been a history buff, but for cost of my career I never really considered working with historical materials myself. I was content to be a sociologist and to spend my time trying to formulate and test sociology of religion". *The Rise of Christianity* is a sociologist's theory on how Christianity became the leading power in the world.

Stark wants his reader to know that he is not a historian, but adds historical information to give the sociological figures context. This is why he constantly reiterates that he is writing for a non- professional audience. Stark begins by explaining the " arithmetic of growth". This is a ERM he uses to explain to the reader that sociology has a lot to do with projecting numbers. In his first chapter, he establishes a probable growth rate at which Christianity could have grown to its size in population by year DADA.

He projects what the population should have been based on historical accounts as well as figures from scripture, and uses references from other historians and sociologists to provide credibility to his projection. From here he explains that a steady growth rate of around forty percent per decade from the beginning of the movement would not have required great miracles to achieve its' large numbers by the year 350. Next, he presents his first reasoning for not only numerical growth, but the growth of influence and prestige in the Christian movement. He begins by refuting the claim that Christianity was initially a movement of the lower classes.

He presents a few propositions about the value of converting to a new religion, and why it would have been probable for some early Christians to be prominent or wealthy figures in society. Stark explains that many of these conversions would have been Jews. He presents the social benefits of cultural continuity that specifically catered to Jews, as well as existing social networks among Jews and Christians. He uses social scientific theory to explain why it is probable that the mission to the Jews did not fail, as would have been previously thought.

Christian doctrine paired with the plague ridden Roman Empire presented a favorable combination for making Christianity attractive to potential converts, and weakening the Pagan population. " Love thy neighbor as thyself", a well-known doctrine directed Christians to tend to their sick during times of plague. Pagans " behaved in the opposite way... Throwing them (the ill) into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt". This caused the disease to spread more deadly through the pagans.

They left bodies in the open, spreading germs (which they didn't know existed) quickly. Pagans that were still alive were more likely to convert to Christianity, recognizing the strong community and more favorable philosophy. Stark's next proposition for why Christianity spread so quickly had to do with its unique appeal to women, something paganism was lacking according to Stark. The sexual commitment of "husbands to their wives" was a new concept of this time. This was an ideology that was attractive to women, because of the lack of respect for women in pagan culture.

Infanticide, abortion, and undervaluing the female life were explanations for Stark's theory that Pagans lacked doctrines and values that would provide them with fertile women and an abundant population. Christian's marital commitment to one another, their value of the female life, and non-existent infanticide or abortion would have led to them having a significantly larger population according to Stark. Using these projections, he goes on to present numerical predictions that would have provided Christians with a larger population want to take refuge in the perceived safety of the Christian community.

The Christians were well known to have grown mostly in urban settings, according to Stark. He paints a picture of what Roman cities what would have been like during the rise of Christianity, and the picture is not pretty. He specifically focuses on the city of Antioch, and describes a city with a life expectancy in the early twenties, no plumbing, cramped living quarters, crime, and constant natural disaster. Christianity told its followers that the

chaos of the world was worth enduring, because your reward for your good work here will be in the Kingdom of Heaven.

This theology, according to Stark, would have been especially attractive to inhabitants of Roman cities who constantly suffered. He concludes his final chapters by reinforcing his theory that the chaos and suffering during this time presented Christianity with a rare opportunity to grow from a cult movement to a world power. He emphasizes the gentle and kind Christian dogma, and how inhabitants of Roman cities and surrounding areas would have embraced that new kind of theology. He explains that Christian "virtue" was attractive, and this caused consistently high conversions.

According to Stark, there was no need for miraculous conversion events to achieve Christian's scale of growth. The opportunity a disordered Roman Empire presented to the Christian cult, permitted a steady growth rate to continue through the first four centuries A. D. In his preface, Stark states that some of his chapters were written first as essays for scholarly journals to see how an audience would react to his thoughts on the subject. This explains why the structure of his book is not fluid, and has no sense of continuity.

He explains that this book was a bit of a hobby project for him to combine his profession of sociology with his love for history. "I am a sociologist who sometimes works with historical materials and who has, in preparation of this volume, done his best to master the pertinent sources albeit mostly in English". His sociological conclusions are reliable and interesting, but his

experience has mostly been science writing. Stark may need more practice writing to a non-professional audience to gain a sense of fluidity, and clarity.

The format of this book is stimulating (for me, a person who loves scientific writing) half of the time, and the other half of the time it is difficult to read.

An excerpt from his first chapter reads, " Since this book is a work of both history and social science, I have written it for a nonprofessional audience. In this way I can make sure the social science is fully accessible to historians of the early church, meanwhile preventing social scientists from becoming lost amidst obscure historical and textual references".

By stating that his chosen audience is nonprofessional, he gives himself the freedom to add in these unnecessary comments about sociologists being unable to follow textual references. Putting the sociological figures into historical context for Stark seems forced and slightly pretentious. At the beginning of each new chapter, Stark clearly states his thesis, provides any previous propositions he may have had on the subject, and leaves little room for opposition.

He provides ample sources of other historians and social scientists that are in agreement with his theses, but few refutations. Rodney Stark provides a central proposition to this work in the first chapter, " 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 but it seems to be an enormously over simplified explanation of why people convert to new religions.

He does not address any other possible reasons for making the choice to convert to a new religion such as, connecting with the theology of a religion of which one has no social connections, having social connections in a religious group that are negative, but overlooking this fact to pursue individual growth within a religion, or having equally strong connections to individuals that associate with different religions, but making a choice to convert to a religion based on personal free-will.

This main proposition that people only convert when their social connections inside that religion are stronger than connections outside of that religion mess more like one reason out of many, rather than the main proposition to tie in all other information. He makes very clear that his position is that, without strong social connections to members of a new cult, or sect, potential members will not make the rational choice to convert. Within this proposition, there are certainly many underrepresented converts. Mr..

Stark excessively uses capitalized words, quotations, and italics to make his argument. Examples of this usage can usually be found in the first few sentences opening a chapter. His opening passage of "The Role of Women in Christian Growth" reads, "Amidst contemporary denunciations of Christianity as patriarchal and sexist, it is easily forgotten that the early church was so especially attractive to women that in 370 the emperor Valentinian (Pagan) issued a written order to Pope Damasus requiring that Christian missionaries cease calling at the homes of pagan women."

Although some classical writers claimed that women were easy prey for any foreign superstition,' most recognized that Christianity was unusually appealing... "(p. 95) It is important that not only the emotional use of italics and quotations be cited here, but also the leading sentence. This sentence introduces this work's next pitfall, which is that Stark brings up irrelevant topics to heatedly dismiss other scholars who he disagrees with.

In the wording of the leading sentence mentioned above, Stark dismisses the unidentified contemporaries he refers to as denouncing Christianity as patriarchal and sexist. This disagreement is irrelevant in the context of this book, because he suddenly refers to Christianity as a whole (patriarchal and sexist) as opposed to the Christianity of the first four centuries A. D. In *The Rise of Christianity* when Rodney Stark is citing historical documents regarding the four centuries A. D. It is clear to the reader that Christianity may very well have been the leading feminist religion in the year 370. It is irrelevant to rant about his distaste for contemporaries who think Christianity is sexist in general. William Grimes, writer for the New York Times, says it best in his review of another Rodney Stark's, "The Victory of Reason"; "Mr.. Stark's pugnacity often gets the better of him. He is contemptuously dismissive. "

References *The Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark