

BOOK REVIEW

of

Rodney Stark,

The Rise of Christianity,

Princeton University Press, 1996 [Harper Collins paperback edition, 1997].

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

A book with this title might imply an historical summary of the early centuries of Christianity, with many references and quotations from more detailed works: a rehash of well-known material but perhaps with a slightly different slant. However, having read Stark's book *For the Glory of God* (see the *Evangel News*, July 2004), and being delighted with the fresh, studious content, I anticipated more and was not disappointed. Stark, being a Professor of Sociology and Comparative Religion at the University of Washington, approaches his writing after thorough research and with an objective of making some new contribution. If you are looking for a one-volume book on the history of the first several centuries of Christianity, you would do better elsewhere. But if you are already familiar with that history and would like some fresh insights as to the *how* and *why* of the rise of Christianity (Stark is a sociologist), then I would highly recommend this book. How is it that Christianity, beginning as an obscure sect, became the dominant religious force in the Roman Empire within 300 years, bringing with it dramatic sociological and cultural changes? One may say it was Christ building His Church, and miracles should be expected. But Stark, the sociologist, wanted to see if he could develop a theory with formal methods of analysis and apply it wherever possible and appropriate: he has reported his findings in the book under review.

The Rise of Christianity has ten chapters. Chapter 1 is titled Conversion and Christian Growth. Chapter 2 is The Class Basis of Early Christianity. Chapter 3 is The Mission to the Jews: Why It Probably Succeeded. Chapter 4 is Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion. Chapter 5 is The Role of Women in Christian Growth. Chapter 6 is Christianizing the Urban Empire: A Quantitative Approach. Chapter 7 is Urban Chaos and Crisis: The Case of Antioch. Chapter 8 is The Martyrs: Sacrifice as Rational Choice. Chapter 9 is Opportunity and Organization. Chapter 10 is A Brief Reflection on Virtue.

In Chapter 2, Stark writes that "For most of the twentieth century historians and sociologists agreed that, in its formative days, Christianity was a movement of the dispossessed – a haven for Rome's slaves and impoverished masses. . . . Moreover, many scholars confidently attributed this conception of early Christians' social origins to Paul on the basis of his first letter to the Corinthians, in which he notes that not many of the wise, mighty, or noble are called to the faith." However, Stark reports that "a consensus has developed among New Testament historians that Christianity was based in the middle and upper classes". This result is based on several lines of reasoning and investigation. First, it is known from reliable sources that there were Christians among the aristocracy in Rome in the second half of the first century. Second, the language and style of early church writers were addressed to a literate, educated audience. Third, based upon studies of other movements for which good data exist, and assuming that early Christianity would follow the pattern, it was not likely to be a proletarian movement but based on the more privileged classes. Also, "people must have a degree of privilege to have the sophistication needed to understand new religions and to recognize a need for them."

In Chapter 3, Stark opens the chapter by writing "Nothing seems more self-evident than the proposition that the rise of Christianity was accomplished despite the failure of the mission to the Jews." We all acknowledge that Christianity began within Judaism: Jesus was a Jew, as were the apostles. But, agreeing with Stark, surely most of us have assumed, or perhaps were taught, that the early Church soon became predominantly, almost exclusively, Gentile. The Jews, for the most part, rejected Christ. Stark, however, concludes that "not only was it the Jews of the diaspora who provided the initial basis for church growth during the first and early second centuries, but that Jews continued as a significant source of Christian converts until at least as late as the fourth century and that Jewish Christianity was still significant in the fifth century." In other words, the mission to the Jews, as was Paul's habit as reported in the New Testament, was successful. Of course, not all Jews were converted to Christianity, and therefore Jews still remain, but many did receive Christ as the Messiah. They were, of course, assimilated, and therefore lost their Jewish distinctiveness.

In Chapter 4, Stark complains that most modern books on the rise of Christianity omit any reference to the role that epidemics played. "This is no small omission. Indeed, Cyprian, Dionysius, Eusebius, and other church fathers thought the epidemics made major contributions to the Christian cause. I think so too." Stark claims that "in the aftermath of each epidemic, Christians made up a larger percentage of the population even without new converts." The reasons seem clear. The survival rate of Christians was substantially higher than that of the general population. Why? Because the Christian values of love and charity were translated into norms of social service and community solidarity. Afflicted Christians were cared for. Afflicted pagans were abandoned, unless cared for by a Christian. The pagan response was to flee. Christians stayed at risk to themselves, in order to serve others.

Space does not permit going into detail on the positive impact of Christianity upon women and the role they played in terms of Christian growth, how Christianity grew most rapidly in urban centers and the positive impact it made upon those centers, how deep conviction sometime resulted in martyrdom, and how this bravery and devotion impressed Christians and pagans alike, how Christian theology was immensely important in shaping attitudes and behavior, and how these attitudes and behavior contrasted strongly with that of the surrounding Greco-Roman world, such that, in the final words of the book, "what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity. In this sense virtue was its own reward." If anyone were to suggest to you that all religions are equal, or that your religion is only a personal matter, or that Christianity has nothing to do with politics, or society, you may want to recommend this book to them.