

## BOOK REVIEW

of

Rodney Stark,

*One True God,*

Princeton University Press, 2001.

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

In this book, Rodney Stark considers the consequences of belief, for the individual and for society, in one true God. That is, he investigates the implications of adhering to an exclusive faith; a faith that holds that there is but one God. He concentrates especially on those that hold that there is an objective reality to their faith, who study the theology of their faith and the implications of it. The subtitle to the book is *Historical Consequences of Monotheism*. Stark acknowledges that “All religions involve conceptions of the supernatural. Most people in all societies believe that there is *something* that somehow is above, beyond, over, or otherwise superior to the natural world.” Many people, including intellectuals and some theologians, hold to a conception of “God” that is an essence that is impersonal. In popular culture, perhaps “The Force” would be an expression of the same concept. Stark claims that “there is no more profound religious difference than that between faiths involving divine beings and those limited to divine essences.” Stark continues, “Indeed, because only divine beings *do* anything, religions are also distinguished as to whether they are ‘revealed’ or ‘natural.’” While many cultures and religions give evidence of once holding to the concept of one God, such as in Hinduism, the primary monotheistic religions of today number but three: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. In all three cases the concept of one God is held, the objective part of the faith has been revealed and recorded in scripture, and some doctrines are held in common such as Abraham being the Father of the faithful. Most of the material presented in the book is limited to Christianity, Judaism would be second, and a little given to Islam.

*One True God*, following an Introduction, has but five chapters. Chapter 1 is titled God’s Nature: A Theory of Gods. Chapter 2 is God’s Chosen: Monotheism and Mission. Chapter 3 is God’s Wrath: Religious Conflict. Chapter 4 is God’s Kingdom: Religious Persistence. Chapter 5 is God’s Grace: Pluralism and Civility. The chapter titles suggest that the three dominant monotheistic religions are compared as to the nature of God, and this is what Stark does in the book. But also, as suggested by the chapter titles, he investigates the impact of beliefs on missions, conflict, persistence, and civility, which is also the case.

In the Introduction, echoing the last statement immediately above, Stark writes that the book is about the social consequences of monotheism. But also in the Introduction, Stark writes “until very recently, nearly all social scientists who studied religion did so from antireligious motives, and premised their work on atheism – and many still do . . . During the nineteenth century antireligious social science was rampant.” Stark severely criticizes this position as unscientific, stating that the unbiased investigator should minimize his own private beliefs without passing judgment as to the existence of God or the truthfulness of a particular belief system.

In Chapter 1, Stark begins by quoting Exodus 3:14: “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM.” Stark’s concern in Chapter 1 is to establish what he considers the two most important concepts about God that separate the world’s religions. The first concept is about the basic existence of God, as having being or as limited to an essence. While all religions involve the supernatural, is God a real being that acts and thinks, or is He an essence or force behind nature? “Many Western intellectuals, including some theologians and bishops, have reduced their conception of ‘God’ to an essence as impersonal as Immanuel Kant’s . . . there is no more profound religious difference than that between faiths involving divine beings and those limited to divine essences.” The second concept is the source of authority for a particular religion. Faiths that are limited to a divine essence rest on human wisdom. Faiths that adhere to a divine being may be “revealed.” Since only divine beings *do* anything, revealed religion is limited to those with divine beings.

In Chapter 2, Stark begins by quoting Psalm 117: “Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples.” Stark disparages the widely held view “that all modern religions are but survivals of more primitive and credulous cultures, and equally invalid.” That is, he criticizes the notion of monotheistic faiths evolving out of more primitive faiths. He claims that “a substantial number of the most primitive societies believe in one High God.” And favorably referring to Lang, Stark writes “it is equally plausible that primitive forms of animism and ghost worship represent *degeneration* from earlier, purer forms of religion.” For the first few centuries of Christianity, the new faith was very evangelical and put a high priority on missions, but this ceased soon after the conversion of Constantine. In spite of the fact that “the people of the Roman Empire traveled more extensively and easily than any . . . would again until the nineteenth century,” “throughout the whole period of the Roman empire not a single example is known of a man who was appointed bishop with the specific task of going beyond the frontier to a wholly pagan region in order to convert the barbarians living there.” The reason that Stark gives is that “From a popular mass movement, supported by member donations and run by amateurs and poorly paid clergy, under Constantine Christianity was transformed into an elite organization, lavishly funded by the state, and bestowing wealth and power on the clergy.” A significant missions thrust of Christianity was not renewed until more than a thousand years later, beginning in the nineteenth century. It is startling to consider this. While Stark believes that Constantine’s conversion was genuine, the negative impact upon Christianity presents a lesson we would be foolish to ignore. Now, of the estimated 185,000 American Protestant missionaries abroad, Stark estimates that fewer than 5% are from liberal denominations.

Space does not allow details of the remaining chapters, but Chapter 3 documents the history of conflict between rival religions, and tells the sad tale of persecutions and religious wars. In Chapter 4, Stark documents the persistence of the Jewish faith, writing that “Viewed as a whole, the extent, duration, and militance of Jewish persistence is breathtaking.” In Chapter 5, Stark attempts to answer the question, “How can fundamentally selfish creatures be induced to live in harmony?”

This book by Rodney Stark, *One True God*, is an excellent companion volume to others by Stark in the Evangel Library: *The Rise of Christianity*, and *For the Glory of God*.