Rational choice: Why monotheism makes sense

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Some ideas are so potent as to be world-changing. For Rodney Stark, Christianity encompasses just such a set of ideas. In his view, Christian beliefs and images of God shaped the course of Western civilization. And not only that; they changed it for the better.

Stark is a leading sociologist of religion who draws on a formidable body of empirical research to explain how religious beliefs spread and why religious groups flourish or fail. While some thinkers regard belief in the supernatural as incidental to the practice of religion, Stark finds it essential.

He is also convinced that a prejudice against religious belief has distorted modern scholarship and continues to infect academic opinion. He has challenged most of the prominent modern theories of religion, including Marxism (religion is a mask for class consciousness), functionalism (religion serves as a moral restraint or social glue) and psychological reductionism (religion is a form of infantile wish fulfillment).

Stark also dissents from the views of two giants of sociology: Max Weber, who regarded religious consciousness as nonrational, and Émile Durkheim, who contended that ritual, not belief, is the core of religion and that society itself, not God or the gods, is the real object of worship.

Stark offers an alternative theory. His main propositions: religion is a reasonable human activity; beliefs about the supernatural are religions' central and most consequential aspect; beliefs are spread not by cultural fiat or coercion, but through networks of family and friends; religious practices and institutions may rise and fall, but the human demand for religion will not wither away.

Looking to broaden the application of his sociological tools, Stark, who recently joined the faculty at Baylor University, has in the past decade turned his attention to history. This work has led to another of his contentions: the most powerful and

progressive religious idea is monotheism.

In his two most recent historical analyses, *One True God* (2001) and *For the Glory of God* (2003), Stark argues that monotheistic belief not only shaped Western history but also cultivated and in some cases gave birth to values that changed the world for the better. In the forthcoming *Victories of Reason* he will go even further, contending that the most significant advances in knowledge, liberty, human rights and material well-being—what we like to call progress—stem not from Greece or the Enlightenment or modernity but from Christianity itself.

“There comes a time when you have to choose sides,” he observes. “Either you think Western civilization is a good thing and that Christianity has been a major piece of it, or you don’t. I do believe in Western civilization, I make no bones about that. The politically correct doesn’t cut it for me.”

Much of the debate over Stark’s work has focused on his application of “rational choice theory” to religion. Originally derived from economics, rational choice theory is now used across the social sciences to explain human behavior as a self-interested, choice-making affair. Applied to religion, the theory holds that humans will choose and pursue spiritual goods in the same way they pursue material ones—according to their interests and by calculation. When choosing religious affiliation and level of commitment, people will weigh rewards against costs and they will try to get the most for their investment. Religion, by this reckoning, is an exchange of goods with God or the gods.

Rational choice is a presupposition of another sociological model embraced by Stark: the “theory of religious economies,” which posits that churches and other religious groups operate in a market in which they must compete for adherents. The more open the market, the stronger the competition will be.

Critics of these approaches worry that the language of “cost” and “risk,” and the model of churches as religious “firms” competing for market “share” and of believers as “investors” whose religious preferences and affiliations are likened to “portfolios,” reduce religion to yet another marketable product and turn believers into consumers. Proponents, on the other hand, point out that Jesus himself spoke repeatedly of loss and gain, of pearls and treasures, of hoarding farmers and investing stewards. He was, after all, a man of promises, and he made offers.

“The songs we sang when I was growing up,” Stark points out, “almost all told about a religious reward—what a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear; we’re not alone; there is salvation out there.”

That economic terms apply to religious behavior indicates a larger truth for Stark: both economic and religious choices are governed by reason. “To the extent that I’m a rational choice person, with a small R and a small C, all I’m saying is that religious commitments are not discreditable acts. They’re sensible, sane, often very well-thought-out kinds of behaviors.

“Of course, we make lots of mistakes and we have lots of impulses, but people are as sensible about their religion as they are about everything else—no more sensible perhaps, but surely no less. What I’ve fought my whole life is the ‘irrational choice theory’— that people are religious because they don’t know any better or they can’t help themselves. In any other area of social science, scholars recognize that people are choosing and thinking, but many scholars don’t like religion, and so people aren’t allowed to choose that.”

Boston university sociologist Nancy Ammerman is sympathetic to Stark’s point that religion is rational, but has reservations about focusing on exchange and reward. “The notion that religion is fundamentally about getting doesn’t ultimately ring true to me,” said Ammerman. “It seems to me religious life is about a relationship between human beings and a divinity, and relationships have other dimensions besides exchange. They’re about persons, emotions, shared experiences—a whole range of things that aren’t captured inside an explanatory scheme that says what we’re about is ‘I’m after things I can’t otherwise get and that you can give me.’”

Ammerman also finds rational choice theory vulnerable in its emphasis on the individual. “It’s a particularly modern notion that I’m going to look at my world and assess all the options and figure out what’s best for me. Too much of life was routine and delimited in earlier times, and there wasn’t enough of a range of possibilities to make such choices. It’s not that individuality or choice never existed before, but that these are rather dramatically accentuated in the modern situation.”

Stark does not deny that the world limits choices, but he insists that options almost always exist: “Even in a society with only one religion, most people choose not to be very religious. In other words, if you can’t choose denomination, you can choose [level of] intensity. Anthropologists will tell you that in the smallest tribes there are

atheists. And lots of Amish kids leave, after all. So there are choices out there, and in the end we have to decide."

While Stark's early sociological research showed that people come to new religions and new churches through the testimony and influence of others, he maintains that the message is as important as the messenger. In fact, the stronger the message, the more zealous that messenger is likely to be—and the more effective. This, he argues, accounts for the success of strict or conservative churches in a so-called secular age.

"Strong churches are strong in the first instance because of doctrine," he says. "It's their conception of God—is it vivid or is it vague?—that determines the power of churches. One of the things that I've found ironic about most of the declining denominations—and they're mostly the liberal ones with the fairly vague theology—is that there must be millions of people out there for whom those are the compatible religious ideas. But the difference between them and those growing Baptist churches is that the Baptists go out and scare up some members and the liberals don't—and I think the reasons are doctrinal. There isn't enough there to fire them up to go out and call on their neighbors. You can look at the Episcopalians and the United Church of Christ and find some congregations that are doing very well, but they tend to be more conservative theologically."

For Ammerman, the notion that strong beliefs determine the success of churches suggests "a very Protestant and for that matter a very conservative Protestant way of understanding the strength of religion. Within Catholicism or Judaism you can be a very strong, practicing religious person without necessarily knowing what the beliefs are supposed to be or believing very strongly. The point is that you're orienting your whole life around a set of practices that puts you into a kind of relationship with the sacred, with God. It's not about having strong beliefs about salvation or about the Bible or about the afterlife; it's about how you practice a set of rituals or how you live your life, as in the case of orthodox Judaism, that orients you toward God. A lot of people argue that you can be a very good Jew and not believe in God!"

Stark maintains that strong belief is precisely why traditional Catholicism and orthodox Judaism are experiencing a revival. "If you don't think there's a higher power to appeal to," he observes, "prayer is nonsense. Rituals are powerful because they have meaning, and it seems to me this meaning is the ball game. What does the Bible say? That he who believes is baptized. So there's pretty good company out

there arguing that the core of Christianity is a set of beliefs."

If strong images of God impassion evangelizers and attract converts today, Stark reasons, such images should also explain the historical appeal of monotheistic faiths. In fact, he is convinced it is the content of monotheistic belief—that there is one true, ubiquitous, compassionate, just, all-powerful God—that has given the three great monotheistic faiths a decided advantage.

"The one true God has enormously attractive features compared to a whole rabble of little gods," he says. "First of all, those little gods can't do much for you. Second, you're not at all sure they would. That's why it seems to me historically that the great monotheisms have always overwhelmed the polytheisms. And at the philosophical level it makes better sense. The God of Christianity or Judaism was a much more credible kind of presentation to Romans than was that whole pantheon."

A large part of that credibility is based on trust: God cares. "The monotheistic gods offer an enormous amount of concern for us," Stark explains. "And to the extent they're concerned about us, there are certain protections that we call morality that those kinds of gods really get behind. They say, 'I can see you anywhere, and I care, and I punish.' One of the great things that distinguishes the monotheisms is the assumption that God really does care and consequently imposes a moral standard."

In his first historical work, *The Rise of Christianity* (1997), Stark revealed how faith in a compassionate God revitalized Western culture. Because Christians believed in a loving God who in turn enjoined them to love one another, and because this love was not restricted to family or even tribe, Christians cared for one another in ways that were unusual in the pagan and Jewish worlds. By sharing things in common, nursing the sick and protecting women and children, Christians made the promises of God effective and thus attractive. Converts, Stark argues, "rationally chose" Christianity because it offered the best life—and the most humanity—they could get.

But conversion alone did not account for the growth of the early church. It grew for internal reasons, which Stark proposes were also a fruit of faith; respect for women and unborn life led to increased fertility, care of the sick to decreased mortality. If Christianity had not offered a credible, compassionate God, it not only wouldn't have flourished, it might not have survived at all.

The monotheistic God possesses another, equally powerful advantage: rationality. For Christians, the fact that God's ways are rational means that they can be

understood, gradually and in part, by human reason.

In *For the Glory of God*, Stark makes a case for the progressive and rational nature of Christian belief by exposing a number of falsehoods and antireligious myths that have enjoyed a long run in the popular imagination and the academic world. These myths include the notion that fanatical inquisitors were responsible for the execution of millions of alleged witches; that benighted medieval churchmen suppressed scientific knowledge; and that plantation economics, not Christian moral fervor, brought an end to slavery. All these notions, Stark insists, are untrue.

Stark dismisses claims by popular writers that religious zealots executed “millions” of witches. His sources put the death toll closer to 60,000. The historical record yields other statistical surprises as well. Between 1540 and 1700, for example, the Spanish Inquisition reviewed 44,701 charges of heresy, blasphemy, sexual offenses, superstition and witchcraft. Only 826 of these resulted in executions. “I was astonished when I began reading on the Inquisition and realizing, my God, these people hardly ever executed anybody! I was led to believe they executed tens of thousands and that it wasn’t a good Saturday afternoon unless they burned 480 people. They probably burned 480 people in Spain all told. The idea that the real purpose of the Inquisition was to welcome people back into the church properly just escapes everybody.”

Historian Jeffrey Burton Russell of the University of California at Santa Barbara believes Stark has correctly identified misconceptions about witch hunts, including claims about the death toll. That kind of exaggeration, says Russell, “distorts not only the facts but the entire perception of the role of the church and the role of Christianity and the nature of society. It’s like believing that people in the Middle Ages thought the earth was flat. It gives us another club with which to beat those ignorant people back then, who were of course mainly Christians.”

Russell also confirms Stark’s finding that the Inquisition acted as a brake on the public craze rather than as fuel. “In fact,” Russell notes, “both the Inquisition and the *Parlement* or supreme court of France, where you have some strong central authority, were very effective in restraining the convictions for witchcraft—most of which come out of isolated areas of weak governance. When those cases are appealed up to responsible bodies of lawyers, judges and administrators, a vast number and even a sizable majority of them are thrown out, because these authorities are trained to examine evidence and to evaluate it. So just because Mrs.

Smith says that Mrs. Brown is a witch isn’t enough.”

“The better educated people wanted some strenuous proof,” says Stark, “and that was the attitude of the Spanish Inquisition: ‘I believe in witches, but I’ve never met one! I’ve looked at 1,800 people, not a witch among them, and I’ve rebaptized all of them.’”

The appeal to reason also dominated Christian learning. Science, Stark points out, did not emerge in opposition to Christianity but within it: the first universities were established by the church, and early science was conducted almost exclusively by people in holy orders. Stark’s roster of the most eminent 16th- and 17th-century scientists reveals that a majority were personally devout and many were themselves church officials. What is significant for Stark is that the first scientists were not only religiously affiliated but religiously inspired. Science was a calling to discover God’s plan in the arrangement of nature, or, as Stark puts it, to “know God’s handiwork.”

Such knowledge was considered attainable, he says, because monotheisms are motivated by what God has revealed and promised; they are thus future-oriented. Polytheisms, essence religions and mystery cults, on the other hand, invoke unalterable forces and eternal returns; they attribute events to inevitability, inscrutability and whim. Real science—meaning a system of generalized, testable principles—emerged only where belief in a rational creator and an orderly creation prevailed.

“The ultimate basis for a scientific society requires that you make the assumption that God created something,” Stark explains, “and in the major monotheisms the sky is a lot higher. Gods aren’t in every tree and rock. Stars don’t move because God has sent angels to push them. I do think the philosopher was right who said you’ve got to believe that God is a mystery that can be solved—that the universe runs on the basis of rules that, once established, need no supervision.”

Even today, Stark says, the alleged incompatibility of science and faith is not supported by the facts. Recent surveys show that more than half of “hard” scientists such as physicists and chemists report a belief in God. A similar profile emerges in the life sciences. And if hard science is not antagonistic to religion, neither is strong religion inimical to science, insists Stark. “The most ardent evangelical Christians assume that the truth exists. And they don’t just mean that God is there but that the world is there.”

As for secular scientists, Stark surmises that they “now take as a given and very frequently don’t know the origin of the kinds of principles that people like Newton and Copernicus and others took from Christian theology. But once those principles—that the universe is lawful and predictable and knowable—are out and accepted, people can affirm them directly and don’t necessarily need to see the foundational statements that got us there.”

Jeffrey Burton Russell points out that among historians of science “there’s a strong debate going on between those who understand that the development of science is basically a Western European phenomenon, and that this is because of its Christian or Judeo-Christian roots, and those who maintain that religion blocked the progress of science until the 18th and 19th centuries, and that [science has] to struggle against religion. Scholars feel very, very strongly about these things.”

Strong feelings also attend the scholarly debate over the role of Christianity in the abolition of slavery. Historians agree that abolition was born in religious circles. What they don’t agree on is the extent—if any—to which religious beliefs informed the movement and guaranteed its eventual success. Stark argues that only adherents of monotheism, with their faith in God’s universal justice, compassion and uncompromising moral code, were in a position to deduce that slavery was sinful and thereby propel the liberation of slaves.

Christians reasoned their way from believing in divine righteousness to seeing the immorality of human bondage to advocating total, outright abolition. That it took 1,800 years reflects, for Stark, both the progressive nature of theology and the fact that slavery virtually disappeared from Europe following the collapse of the Roman Empire. It was not until the age of exploration that the issue arose again for Christians.

One of the misconceptions about New World slavery that Stark is eager to correct is the role of the Catholic Church and Catholic teaching. It was not, he argues, that the Catholic Church did not condemn slavery, as many believe; it was that no one listened. In the 15th and 16th centuries, not one but five popes issued bulls condemning in no uncertain terms the enslavement of Indians, and eventually Africans, in the New World. Two more weighed in during the 19th century. Yet New World colonies, Stark explains, were controlled by crowns, not churches. Thus while Jesuits fought for the rights of slaves and defended converted native communities, Spanish and Portuguese authorities supported slavery wholeheartedly—and armies

are stronger than friars.

Stark also finds that slave “codes” adopted in Catholic French and Spanish colonies allowed slaves a greater measure of dignity and even freedom than codes installed by the Protestant British and Dutch. Historians know that slaves living under Catholic-influenced codes were baptized and permitted to marry. In some places slaves could even own property and purchase their own freedom.

To these facts Stark adds an overlooked piece of data: the U.S. census of 1830 shows that the percentage of free blacks was significantly higher in Catholic New Orleans (41.7 percent of the total black population) than in other southern cities (6.4 percent in Charleston, South Carolina; 1.2 percent in Natchez, Mississippi). In Louisiana as a whole, Stark notes, “thirteen times as many slaves were freed as next door in Mississippi.

“Now if some policies that apply to slaves make it easy to become free and other policies make it almost impossible, that is a real demonstration that ideas, and in this case religious ideas, matter. The fact that the Church of England declared that the slaves were not baptizable humans and that the Catholic Church baptized them made a huge difference in the lives of the people we’re talking about.”

The story of abolition is a complicated one, as Stark’s investigation attests. Historian Mark Noll of Wheaton College points out that “what makes Christian support of abolitionism tricky [to analyze] is that there were also substantial Christian voices and movements oriented in two other directions: one actually in support of slavery and the other against abolition. Some Christians felt that abolitionists were social and theological radicals—and in fact, some of them were—and so they opposed abolitionism. The main stance of the Catholic Church, for example, was not so much pro-slavery as anti-abolitionism, because the church associated abolitionism with extreme individualism.”

Yet Noll does credit the early antislavery views of Dominican missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas, and he notes the importance of Pope Paul III’s pronouncement condemning the treatment of natives as if they were animals. “That’s not abolitionism,” observes Noll, “but it is a statement about human nature and human worth. The really critical mass of antislave activity, however, came in Britain, with the whole circle of mostly Anglican evangelical philanthropists. For the British, it was the actual experience of slavery in some of its most brutal forms in the West Indies

that precipitated thinking hard about slavery, which then precipitated biblical and theological arguments against it, which then led to political action."

Stark allows that the British abolition movement succeeded sooner—thanks to strong parliamentary action and Britain's vigorous interdiction of slave vessels. But in British colonies, too, he maintains, it was not secular Enlightenment notions or economic shifts or naval superiority that brought an end to slavery. It was devout Christian advocacy.

In the forthcoming *Victories of Reason*, Stark will attribute to Christian rationality and advocacy nothing less than the emergence of capitalism (pioneered by medieval monks, not industrious Protestants) and the foundational principles of equality and individual liberty that informed that most conspicuous Western achievement of all: modern republican democracy. While this last argument has a distinguished pedigree, Stark puts the case in boldest terms: "All that 18th-century philosophizing on things like individualism and liberty was coming straight out of 1,800 years of Christianity."

"Nobody asks where we got our notion that people ought to have some kind of moral equality," he observes. "But it seems to me the origins of these notions are in the New Testament. Jesus was constantly breaking the rules about whom you associated with. The fundamental Western assumption is that we're all equal in the eyes of God and that that matters above and beyond everything else. You've got Paul saying this repeatedly and Jesus demonstrating it and theologians progressively stressing it."

For Stark, refusing to acknowledge the influence of Christianity on Western civilization suggests an advanced stage of wrong-headedness: "What I find so astonishing is that the people who are willing to blame Christianity for having 'destroyed' civilization for 2,000 years are unwilling to see that it had any effects on another level. If we think that there is such a thing as Western civilization, that it is one of a kind and changed the world in very good ways as well as perhaps in bad ones, to fail to see that the central institution throughout most of this period is the church, is ignorant."

The walls of prejudice have weakened over recent years, Stark reports, as religious believers have entered the social sciences. Yet the secular curriculum has not begun to tremble, let alone crumble. Jeffrey Burton Russell suggests that a full recovery of Christianity's contributions to Western civilization is far from imminent: "I think it'll

take a generation or two, probably two or three, even to get back to some kind of a balance."

The value of Christianity to Western culture is no point of contention at Baylor. After a 30-year teaching career at the University of Washington, Stark recently became Baylor's first University Professor of the Social Sciences. As such, his role will be to attract talented Christian scholars in the field, enhancing the school's academic profile in accordance with its renewed religious mission. The goal, as Stark sees it, is "to give Baylor the resources it needs to participate in the national cultural wars." He adds: "There's no reason that a good Christian university can't be a good university."

Of his own religious beliefs, Stark is reticent to speak at length, in part, he says, because they are in some ways fairly new. He had considered himself a cultural Christian but not a professing one. That has changed. "At Baylor they do require a profession of faith, and I made one in good conscience. I could not have made such a profession years ago. I've never been an atheist, but I had difficulty with much of the paganism of the New Testament. But I worked through it, realizing that God speaks to people in terms they can understand and that this is what the pagan world could understand at that time.

"Calvin had a wonderful line about revelation being the ultimate condescension, that we are incapable of understanding God in his reality and so he has to condescend to us, to speak to us within our limits. That doesn't mean it isn't true, only that this was the form the message had to take. And when you recognize, as Augustine did, that theology is progressive, the paganism becomes an irrelevance."

What remains deeply relevant, in Stark's eyes, is the potency of religious ideas, of individual faith in those ideas, and of one person telling another the good news. That an intimate acquaintance with God and a handful of New Testament notions could have seeded the civilization we call Western—rational, bountiful, progressive and free—surpasses the concept of relevance altogether. The irony is that while Christianity inspired a moral fervor for things unseen but possible, its achievements are now so embedded in the culture as to be practically invisible.

"In our time," Stark reflects, "people can be doing Christian things and not even know it." One thing we do know is that Jesus instructed his followers to become leaven in the world. As Stark sees it, that is precisely what they did—and history proves it.