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The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History

Stark examines other factors, such as paganism's weakness and the early church's social structure, which helped draw so many to the new faith.

Chapter 9 -- Opportunity and Organization

This chapter consists of two major parts. In the first I will assess the opportunity for a major new faith to emerge at this particular place and time. The second part of the chapter will focus on organizational features of the Christian movement that made it such a formidable challenger--many of these are the same features that brought about its persecution.

OPPORTUNITY

Typically, the fate of new religious movements is largely beyond their control, depending greatly on features of the environment in which they appear. Here, two important factors are involved. The first is the degree of state regulation of religion. Where the state is prepared to vigorously persecute any challengers to the conventional faith(s), it will be extremely difficult for new religions to grow. The second is the vigor of the conventional religious organization(s) against which new religions must compete. Usually, there is no significant market niche for a new religion to fill because most people are already reasonably satisfied participants in the "older" religion(s). However, once in a while the conventional religious organization(s) are sufficiently weak to provide an opportunity for something truly new to arise and flourish.

Roman Regulation of Religion

In many respects Rome provided for a greater level of religious freedom than was seen again until after the American Revolution. But just as deviant religious groups have often discovered limits to the scope of freedom of religion in America, so too in Rome not just anything was licit. In particular, from time to time Jews and then Christians were deemed to be "atheistic" for their condemnation of false gods. I shall pursue this matter later in the chapter when I distinguish between religious economies based on the principle of religious portfolios and those based on exclusive commitment. Here I merely want to suggest briefly that although Christians stood in formal, official disrepute for much of the first three centuries, informally they were free to do pretty much as they wished, in most places, most of the time.

As was established in the previous chapter, dreadful as the persecutions were, they were infrequent and involved very few people. Hence the early Christians may have faced some degree of social stigma but little actual repression. Henry Chadwick reported that when a Roman governor in Asia Minor began a persecution of Christians during the second century, "the entire Christian population of the region paraded before his house as a manifesto of their faith and as a protest against injustice" (1967:55). The more significant part of this story is not that the Christians had the nerve to protest, but that they went unpunished.

In similar fashion, archaeological evidence shows that from very early days, house churches

were clearly identifiable--the neighbors would have been entirely aware that these were Christian gathering places (White 1990). In addition, soon many Christians began to take names that were distinctively Christian--scholars have no difficulty identifying them as such today (Bagnall 1993), and surely non-Christians in antiquity were sufficiently perceptive to have done so too. Funerary inscriptions also often bore clearly Christian identifications (Meyers 1988; Finegan 1992).

That Christians were not a secret sect is, of course, patent in the fact that they grew. If a group is to attract outside members, potential converts must, at the very least, be able to find it. Moreover, for a group to grow as rapidly as Christians did, it must maintain close ties to nonmembers--it must remain an open network. Thus had Roman repression been so consistent and severe that the Christians actually had become a hidden underground movement, this book would not have been written. A truly underground Christianity would have remained insignificant....

The Weakness of Paganism

Henry Chadwick assured his readers that "Paganism was far from being moribund when Constantine was converted to Christianity, and E.R. Dodds noted that in the fourth century paganism began "to collapse the moment the supporting hand of the State [was] withdrawn from it." I quote these two distinguished scholars to illustrate the general agreement among historians that paganism was brought down by Christianity and that the conversion of Constantine was the killing blow--that paganism declined precipitously during the fourth century when Christianity replaced it as the state religion, thus cutting off the flow of funds to the pagan temples.

No one can doubt the evidence of the dismantling of paganism in the fourth and fifth centuries, as countless temples were torn down or converted to other uses....

Nevertheless, the idea that paganism's weakness was caused by Christian political power fails to explain how Christianity managed to be so successful that it could **become** the state church. As outlined [in previous chapters], on theoretical grounds I must propose that Christianity would have remained an obscure religious movement had the many firms making up Roman pluralism been vigorous. That Christianity was able to wedge out a significant place for itself against the opposition of paganism directs our attention to signs of weakness in paganism.

Let us begin with pluralism per se. However new gods traveled the empire and gained adherents, it seems to me that by the first century the empire had developed **excessive** pluralism--that the massive influx of various new gods from other parts of the empire had by then created what E.R. Dodds called "a bewildering mass of alternatives. There were too many cults, too many mysteries, too many philosophies of life to choose from." Faced with this array, people are likely to have been somewhat overwhelmed by their options and therefore to have been somewhat unwilling to stake very much on any given cult. Moreover, since the population was not expanding, more temples to more gods ought to have reduced the resources--both material and subjective--available to each. If this is true, then we ought to be able to detect some signs of decay. Indeed, any significant decline in support for paganism should have registered rather soon. After all, paganism was expensive to maintain, since it was embodied in elaborate temples, was served by professional priests, and depended on lavish festivals as the primary mode of participation. I must quote Tertullian, **Apology 39**:

The Salii cannot have their feast without going into debt; you must get the accountants to tell you what the tenths of Hercules and the sacrificial banquets cost; the choicest cook is appointed for the Apaturia, the Dionysia, the Attic mysteries, the smoke from the banquet of Serapis will call out the firemen.

The funds for all of this came from the state and from a few wealthy donors, rather than from a rank and file. If funding ever declined seriously, the decline ought to have been visible immediately.

In fact, there are abundant signs of pagan decline. In his remarkable study **Egypt in Late Antiquity**, Roger S. Bagnall reported a rapid decline in "inscriptions dedicating sacred architecture." He continued:

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that imperial support for the construction, renovation, and decoration of buildings in Egyptian temples declined markedly after Augustus, shrank gradually through the reign of Antoninus, fell off precipitously after that, and disappeared altogether in the middle of the third century....

[In addition to the decline in imperial support] the religious economy had become extremely volatile. Faiths from the "Orient" did seem to come into sudden vogue and attract many participants. The cult of Isis (or, more correctly, the cult of Isis and Serapis) seems to have originated in Egypt in about the third century B.C.E.--reworked from older traditions. From Alexandria, the Isis cult spread across the empire. But not everywhere, and not at a constant rate.

Tim Hegedus has coded a scale of the spread of Isis, and from his work I am able to assign scores as to when the Isis cult arrived (if it did) in most of the twenty-two Greco-Roman cities discussed in chapter 6. It has been suggested that the spread of new cults such as that of Isis demonstrated religious needs unmet, or not well met, by the traditional pagan temples and shrines. In a sense, then, examination of the expansion of Isis worship might map market opportunities and thereby anticipate the expansion of Christianity. It is with some satisfaction that I can report a highly significant correlation of .67 between the expansion of Isis and the expansion of Christianity. Where Isis went, Christianity followed.

A third aspect of the weakness of paganism has do with the lack of public reverence. This may have been another consequence of such a crowded pantheon, and it may also have to do with pagan conceptions of the gods themselves. Before making any attempt to demonstrate this claim, I must express my respect for Ramsay MacMullen's warning that it is extremely hard to discover the religious situation in our own time, let alone in such "a remote and ill-documented period." In demonstration of this point, MacMullen assembled a set of contradictory quotations from the sources as to the general state of pagan piety: for instance, the assertion that the Romans "in Juvenal's day . . . laughed at anyone professing faith in an altar or temple," as contrasted with Lucian's claim that "the great majority of Greeks" and all Romans "are believers." Which? Moreover, I fully share MacMullen's disdain for historical psychologisms, such as the view that this was an age of "anxiety," or that in this era occurred "a failure of nerve," or that it was a time of "enthusiasm." As an experienced opinion pollster I also share his skepticism about characterizing the "feelings and thoughts of fifty million people" on the basis of some literary quotations or a few inscriptions.

Nevertheless, I think there may be a substitute for an opinion poll of religious belief in antiquity. What is wanted is a sample of unfiltered public attitudes. Consider, then, the archaeological discovery that the walls of Pompeii abound in extremely blasphemous graffiti and drawings, some of them very obscene as well. While I harbor no thoughts that these were connected to the city's fate, they arouse my deepest suspicions about the overall state of reverence--not simply because some residents were prompted to create them, but because no one was prompted to remove or cover them. MacMullen commented that "we may take [the existence of similar graffiti] for granted elsewhere, if there were other sites so well preserved." I may be leaping to unjustified conclusions, but these data speak to me of widespread irreverence.

Blasphemous graffiti may also reflect that pagan gods were not entirely godlike as we understand that term today (or as the early Christians understood it).... E.R. Dodds pointed out that in "popular Greek tradition a god differed from a man chiefly in being exempt from death and in the supernatural power which this exemption conferred on him." Moreover, while people often appealed to various gods for help, it was not assumed that the gods truly cared about humans--Aristotle taught that gods could feel no love for mere humans. Classical mythology abounds in stories in which the gods do wicked things to humans--often for the sport of it. Arthur Darby Nock noted that worship of such gods need not have inspired sincere belief So perhaps what the walls of Pompeii really communicate is a rather casual,

utilitarian, and even resentful view of the gods.....

ORGANIZATION

Thomas Robbins pointed out that one was "**converted** to the intolerant faiths of Judaism and Christianity while one merely **adhered** to the cults of Isis, Orpheus, or Mithra." MacMullen made much the same point: "At the very towering peak of their appalling rage and cruelty against Christians, pagans never sought to make converts **to** any cult--only **away** from atheism, as they saw it. Toleration gone mad, one may say...."

In chapter 8 we saw that things are very different when religion is produced by collective actions. Such groups... can and do demand exclusive commitment. If they are to do so, of course, they cannot limit themselves but must be full-service firms taking what Iannaccone called "a department store approach to religion." They must offer a comprehensive belief system and spiritual and social activities appropriate for all ages. Involvement in an exclusive religious group does not necessarily cause people to lose the urge to diversify, but it denies them the opportunity to do so if they are to share in the potent religious rewards of such involvement. And just as the weakness of paganism lay in its inability to generate belonging, the fundamental strength of an exclusive faith is its strength as a group.

E. R. Dodds has put this as well as anyone:

A Christian congregation was from the first a community in a much fuller sense than any corresponding group of Isiac or Mithraist devotees. Its members were bound together not only by common rites but by a common way of life.... Love of one's neighbour is not an exclusively Christian virtue, but in [this] period Christians appear to have practiced it much more effectively than any other group. The Church provided the essentials of social security.... But even more important, I suspect, than these material benefits was the sense of belonging which the Christian community could give.

Central to this sense of community and belonging, one common to all exclusive religious groups, were the strong bonds between the clergy and the rank and file. You did not approach Christian clergy to purchase religious goods, but to be guided in fulfilling the Christian life. Nor were the clergy distanced from their flocks--they were not an initiated elite holding back arcane secrets, but teachers and friends, selected, as Tertullian explained, "not by purchase, but by established character" (**Apology 39**, 1989 ed.). Moreover, the church depended on the rank and file for its resources. According to Tertullian:

There is no buying and selling of any sort in the things of God. Though we have our treasure chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he is able; for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety's deposit fund.

Not only did this free Christianity from any dependence on state support, it also gave a greatly reduced role to the wealthy--small donations rapidly added up. Consequently, the early church was a mass movement in the fullest sense and not simply the creation of an elite. Ramsay MacMullen recognized that the failure of Roman authorities to understand this fact accounts for the strange aspect of the persecutions: that only leaders were seized, while crowds of obvious Christians went unpunished. That is, when the Romans decided to destroy Christianity, "they did so from the top down, evidently taking it for granted that only the Church's leaders counted." This mistaken judgment was, according to MacMullen, based on the fact that paganism was utterly dependent on the elite and could easily have been destroyed from the top.

It is worth mention too that the early church abounded in ascetics whose testimony as to the worth of faith would have been extremely credible.... Finally, because Christianity was a mass movement, rooted in a highly committed rank and file, it had the advantage of the best of all marketing techniques: person-to-person influence.

CONCLUSION

Christianity **did not** grow because of miracle working in the marketplaces (although there may have been much of that going on), or because Constantine said it should, or even because the martyrs gave it such credibility. It grew because Christians constituted an intense community, able to generate the "invincible obstinacy" that so offended the younger Pliny but yielded immense religious rewards. And the primary means of its growth was through the united and motivated efforts of the growing numbers of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relatives, and neighbors to share the "good news."

From Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity pp.196-215 (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ) 1996

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