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Rodney Stark: One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism □ □

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◆ Introduction ◆

The God of the universe is the God of history.
—Martin Buber

More than three thousand years ago, somewhere a group of people began to worship One God. Whether they were Jews, Persians, Egyptians, or someone else will probably never be known, but perhaps no other single innovation had so much impact on history. Consequently, while many wonderful books have made the last decade an exciting time for anyone interested in broad assessments of the past, I was prompted by their example to write a reminder that history is not shaped by “material” factors alone. Granted, germs, geography, printing, sailing ships, steel, and climate have mattered, but probably none of them so much as human ideas about the Gods.*

All of the great monotheisms propose that their God works through history, and I plan to show that, at least sociologically, they are quite right: that a great deal of history—triumphs as well as disasters—has been made on behalf of One True God. What could be more obvious? Well, one thing more obvious is that writing about the social effects of Gods just isn’t done these days. It is widely assumed in scholarly circles that historical inquiries into such matters as the social consequences of monotheism are long outmoded and quite unsuitable. Of course, many who hold these views are the same ones who continue to express their certainty

* Being a traditionalist in matters of style, I decided it was appropriate to capitalize “God” when referring to the deity of one of the great monotheisms. This proved needlessly invidious, so I have capitalized “God” and “Gods” in all cases (but not “godlings”). I assume that Gods can be of either or no gender, and therefore I have not used the term “Goddess” except in several instances where I refer to a specifically female deity such as Isis.

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that religion is rapidly dying out, while shielding their eyes and ears against the obvious signs of religious vigor all around them (Stark, 1999c). Invincible biases are regrettable, but there is a bright side to this one: It has afforded me the opportunity to reopen a subject that has been neglected for many decades during which a great deal of very important new material has been assembled and more powerful social scientific tools have been developed.

However, rather than just plunge into the tasks at hand, I thought it useful to offer a preliminary sketch of the chapters to come.

Chapter 1 is devoted to a theory of Gods. Why do humans care about Gods at all? What sorts of Gods have the greatest appeal? Why will people accept an exclusive relationship with One God, rather than pursue blessings from a pantheon of specialized Gods? Why has each of the great monotheisms taught not only that the One God is surrounded by a vast supporting cast, but that there exist very powerful evil supernatural beings? In short, what really constitutes monotheism?

Building on this theoretical base, Chapter 2 explores the missionizing imperative. Many faiths spread, but only monotheisms are able to sustain organized efforts by the rank and file to convert others. How has this shaped history? Why did Buddhism die out in India, its land of origin? What was the impact of Jewish missionizing on the Greco-Roman world? Why did medieval efforts to Christianize northern Europe fail? Did Islam really convert most of the people of the Middle East and North Africa in only a few years, or was this an illusion? How did images of God enter into the resumption of Christian world missionizing in the nineteenth century, and do they explain why some denominations have dropped out of the mission enterprise? And what about Hindu missions to the West?

Chapter 3 shifts the focus from conversion to repression. When and why does monotheism generate bloody and brutal conflicts? Having constructed a model to predict when monotheisms will attack or tolerate other faiths, I then apply it to the sudden outburst of fatal attacks on Jews that began in 1096, not only in Christian Europe but also in Islamic societies. I further assess why vigorous efforts by the Church and the State in this era to prevent attacks

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on Jews were successful in most of Europe but failed in the towns and cities along both sides of the Rhine River. I also seek the reasons for the “rediscovery” of heresy that occurred in Europe at precisely the same time.

If commitment to One True God makes groups militant in their efforts to overcome competing faiths, it makes them equally militant to retain their faith when they are a minority. Thus Chapter 4 attempts to explain how the Jewish diaspora was possible. How were the Jews so often able to withstand all efforts to convert them? Why, on many occasions, did entire Jewish communities commit suicide rather than convert? Here it proves especially useful to explore circumstances in which Jewish communities did assimilate (as in China) or did so to a substantial extent. The chapter concludes with an extended survey of Jewish assimilation in the United States.

Finally, Chapter 5 demonstrates how the potential for conflict can be muffled, even among militant monotheisms, by public norms of civility. Here the emphasis will be on the American experience with religious pluralism.

This is the first of a projected two volumes on the social consequences of monotheism. Both will be very historical, but this volume will be more purely historical, and the second will pay greater attention to slightly more cultural matters such as science, witchcraft, and the Reformation. Both volumes span sociology, history, and comparative religion. Assuming that few readers will be specialists in all three areas, I have written for nonspecialists. An additional reason for my doing so is that I believe writing for the general reader results in better scholarship. Jargon mainly deludes its users into thinking they have said something—if I can’t say something in clear prose, I assume it’s because I don’t understand it.

It is appropriate here that I confess I am not a historian by trade, and no part of this book is based on original historical research. For example, I did not comb medieval manuscripts to demonstrate that Christian missionizing broke down in the fourth century, leaving much of Europe un-Christianized. Instead, I had the pleasure of learning this by reading the work of historians such as Marc Bloch, Jean Delumeau, Alexander Murray, Keith Thomas, and many others. As in that instance, I have depended on the best histo-

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rians to educate me about any particular historical topic, and I have usually concurred with their interpretations. My contribution consists of assembling these historical pieces into a more comprehensive structure as a test of original sociological theories, which, in turn, are meant to illuminate the history.

It also seems appropriate for me to acknowledge that 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 (Stark, 1999; Stark and Finke, 2000). This was evident as far back as when Thomas Hobbes, one of the celebrated “founders” of social science, dismissed all religion as “credulity,” “ignorance,” and “lies,” and Gods as “creatures of . . . fancy” ([1651] 1956, 1:98). A century later, David Hume echoed Hobbes, dismissing all miracles as limited to “ignorant and barbarous nations” ([1748] 1962:123). During the nineteenth century antireligious social science was rampant. August Comte coined the word “sociology” to identify a new field that would replace religious “hallucinations” as the guide to morals ([1830] 1896, 2:554). Then, Ludwig von Feuerbach “discovered” that humans create Gods in their own image ([1841] 1957), while Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels found God in the economy, busy sanctifying “wage slavery” ([1844] 1964). At the start of the twentieth century, the famous French sociologist Emile Durkheim taught that the fundamental reality is that society itself is always the true object of religious worship: “god . . . can be nothing else than [society] itself, personified and represented to the imagination” (1915:206). Next came Sigmund Freud, who explained on *one page* of his celebrated psychoanalytic exposé of faith, *The Future of an Illusion*, that religion is an “illusion,” a “sweet—or bittersweet—poison,” a “neurosis,” an “intoxicant,” and “childishness to be overcome” ([1927] 1961:88). Even more recently, no reviewer as much as flinched when, on the first page of his book *Mystical Experience*, Ben-Ami Scharfstein (1973:1) revealed that “mysticism is . . . a name for the paranoid darkness in which unbalanced people stumble so confidently,” and went on to identify the supernatural as a “fairy tale” (ibid.:45). In similar fashion, Oxford’s distinguished Bryan Wilson (1975:81) identified “supernaturalist thinking” as an “indul-

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gence.” And from Louvain, Lilliane Voyé and Karel Dobbelaere (1994:95) recently announced that “the successful removal by science of all kinds of anthropomorphisms from our thinking dooms the concept of ‘God as a person.’ ”

Our having access only to the human side of religion does not justify the assumption that religion is but illusion and that the Gods are imaginary products of “wish fulfillment.” It is entirely impossible for science to discover the existence or nonexistence of Gods. Therefore, atheistic *and* theistic assumptions are equally unscientific, and work based on either is equally deficient. One is, of course, entitled to one’s private convictions, but it is important to try to minimize their impact on one’s scientific work. The appropriate *scientific* assumption, and the one I have made every effort to observe, is *agnostic*: scientifically speaking, we do not know and cannot know whether, for example, the Qur’ān was spoken to Muhammad by an angel or merely by his own inner voices. And, scientifically speaking, it doesn’t matter! Our only access is to the human side of religious phenomena, and we can examine this with the standard tools of social science, *without* assuming either the real or the illusory nature of religion. The result will be better science, since both the atheistic and the theistic assumptions are faith-driven and often less than responsive to evidence. I suspect this was the point Max Weber had in mind when, after writing that he was “absolutely unmusical religiously,” he added, “But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither antireligious *nor irreligious*” (his emphasis, in Swatos, 1998:548).*

Finally, even if they abide by the agnostic assumption, social scientists are unlikely to grasp the human side of phenomena for which they have no empathy. While it obviously isn’t necessary that social scientists who want to understand religion be religious, it is necessary that they be able to sufficiently suspend their disbelief so as to gain some sense of the phenomenology of faith and worship. Even Emile Durkheim seems eventually to have accepted this. In remarks made to a meeting of “free thinkers” in 1914, he ex-

* The phrase about being “unmusical religiously” is often quoted, but only once have I ever encountered his next sentence.

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pressed it this way: “[W]hat I ask of the free thinker is that he should confront religion in the same mental state as the believer . . . [H]e who does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment cannot speak about it! He is like a blind man trying to talk about color” ([1915] 1995:xvii). This was not Durkheim’s view when he was young, nor was it mine. But, just as Durkheim came to a more mature outlook, so have I.

It is in this spirit that I invite you to examine some of the direct consequences of monotheism on our common history.