Taking Religion Seriously

The Importance of Rodney Stark's Scientific Study of Religion for Theologians

I.   Introduction

In the beginning, religion was the central concern of social scientists, who came to a remarkable consensus about the key elements of religion with the notable exceptions of Adam Smith,[1] and to lesser extents, Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch.[2] Social scientists aimed to explain the persistence of irrational beliefs in the face of modernity. Eventually, the accumulation of unconvincing theories prompted scholars to adopt a new perspective, namely, to take religion seriously; among them are René Girard, Roy Rappaport, David Sloane Wilson and Rodney Stark. While this essay principally surveys Stark's research, it does so in dialogue with the others, as a way of showing the fruitfulness and also the arduousness of interdisciplinary research, which demands constant attention to the transition of terms and concepts from one theory to another.

Since the 1960s, Rodney Stark[3] and his fellow researchers[4] have pursued an ambitious project to produce the first deductive theory of religion[5] in order to

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[1] "Stark, however, stands in the tradition of Smith, who in *The Wealth of Nations* (Book 5, Chapter 1, Article 3) anticipates many, although not all, of Stark's most important themes: the competitive advantage of small, new, and strict sectarian groups; the deleterious effect of religious establishment, as well as of excessive remuneration, upon the energy and creativity of religious leaders; the desirability of a free market in religion (although unlike Stark, Smith favors free religious markets because they reduce zeal and fanaticism); the contrast between liberal morality and strict, traditional morality and the association of the latter with religious vitality; and last but not least, the conclusions that structures in one's own nation are best, as in Smith's praise for Scottish Presbyterianism and Stark's for the religious market of the United States" (Alles, "Religious Economics and Rational Choice," 95). Alles' parenthetical comment is gratuitous since Stark has argued that a free market in religion promotes civility and tolerance, which presumable stand in opposition to fanaticism even while maintaining higher levels of religious vitality or zeal. Cf. Stark, *The One True God,* 219-259.

[2] In addition to the three mentioned, these are David Hume, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Herbert Spencer, Edward Tyler, Emile Durkheim, William James, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Carl Jung and Sigmund Freund (Stark, *Acts of Faith*, 28).

[3] Rodney Stark (1934-) grew up in a Lutheran family in Jamestown, North Dakota and began his career as a newspaper reporter for the *Denver Post* (1956-57). Following a tour of duty in the U.S. Army (1957-1959) he returned to journalism at the *Oakland*

initiate a paradigm shift in the sociology of religion. A member of the Berkeley Circle of graduate students and researcher under the direction of Charles Glock,[6] these scholars through their empirical studies sought to revise the standing of religion in the social sciences, moving away from atheist polemics to genuine scientific research.[7] This process commenced with the analysis of the American experience of religious pluralism and contrasted with the existing paradigm that emerged from the European experience of state-supported religion.[8] After twenty years of theorizing and publications, the first full-fledged presentation of this new approach appeared in 1987 under the title *A Theory of Religion* and co-

Tribune (1959-1961). He studied sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, where he held appointments as a research sociologist at the Survey Research Center (1961-1970) and at the Center for the Study of Law and Society (1968-1971). His research focused on (1) deviance, crime and violence, (2) religion and prejudice, and (3) the nature, source and consequences of religiosity. In addition to his dissertation, "Policy Riots: Collective Violence and Law Enforcement" published in 1972, he coauthored a number of studies with Charles Glock. After publishing five books and graduating with a Ph.D., he left Berkeley in 1971 to become Professor of Sociology and of Comparative Religion at the University of Washington (1971-2003). Stark joined the faculty of Baylor University in 2004. He has published more than 30 books (some of which appear in translation) and more than 140 scholarly articles. He is past president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. He also has won a number of national and international awards for distinguished scholarship. Married, for most of his adult life Stark has described himself as an agnostic – never having been an atheist, but having trouble with faith – and an admirer of Christianity and Western civilization. As his research brought him progressively into fresh contact with Christianity and the pervasiveness of anti-Catholic prejudice in scholarship that often distorted the truth relationship between science and Christianity, he discovered that he was in fact a Christian, though one without affiliation.

[4] In particular, sociologist William Sims Bainbridge, sociologist Robert Finke and economist Lawrence Iannaccone.

[5] J. Simpson, "The Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Religion," 367. Chaves notes that Stark and Bainbridge admit at the conclusion of their book that they have not yet achieved the requisites for a deductive theory (M. Chaves, "On the Rational Choice Approach to Religion," 102-103). Yet, R. Collins praises the Stark-Bainbridge theory for its moderate level of formalization (R. Collins, "Review of *A Theory of Religion*," 402); and further judges it to be "a landmark in the sociology of religion…perhaps the most systematic general theory, with its axiomatic-propositional form and its derivation of a wide range of consequence" (in L. Young, *Rational Choice Theory and Religion*, 161).

[6] Professor Charles Glock, (1919-) sociologist and expert in survey research, in 1958 founded and then directed the Survey Research Center at the University of California at Berkeley during its first decade (1958-1967).

[7] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 18.

[8] R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress towards a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," 1045.

authored by William Bainbridge. Discussed two years later at the plenary session of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion,[9] the subsequent diffusion of the theory led to fruitful research, strong criticism and further revisions. Whatever the assessment of their proposal, it is acknowledged that Stark and his colleagues had initiated a dynamic and important research program in the sociology of religion[10] and played an influential role in proposing a new paradigm not only for the United States[11] but also for a new paradigm for the study of religion worldwide and historically.

In light of this theory and the counter-evidence of contemporary trends, Stark strongly rejected the secularization thesis, which correlates modernization with the decline of religion.[12] Thus began an exchange between him and Steve Bruce, a proponent of the secularization thesis and critic of Stark,[13] in which both adduced evidence from historical cases to vindicate their positions.[14] Not content to test the theory against modern examples, Stark published *The Rise of Christianity* in 1996 to show that his theory could throw light on the murky history of early Christianity and indeed he hoped it could do likewise to explain the origins of religion as such.[15] A refined version of the theory co-authored with Robert Finke appeared in *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* in

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[9] Proceedings from the 1989 plenary session on Stark's contributions to the filed were published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29:3 (1990): 361-36.

[10] D.S. Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 48; M. Chaves "On the Rational Choice Approach to Religion," 103; N.J. Demerath III, "Rational Paradigms, A-Rational Religion, and the Debate over Secularization," 111.

[11] Warner, "Work in Progress towards a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States."

[12] Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P. – Rest in Peace."

[13] Reviewing *Acts of Faith*, Bruce begins "There is a great deal to be said for grand mistakes, clearly and prolifically expounded; they force us to think. Rodney Stark's rational choice theory of religion has energized the social scientific study of religion by being big and wrong" (Bruce, "Reviews: Acts of Faith").

[14] Bruce, "Pluralism and Religious Vitality;" "Religion and Rational Choice: A Critique of Economic Explanations for Religious Behavior;" and "The Truth about Religion in Britain" (Stark – Finke – Iannaccone, "Pluralism and Piety: England and Wales, 1851"; Stark – Iannaccone, "Truth? A Reply to Bruce;" "Recent Religious Decline in Quebec, Poland, and the Netherlands: A Theory Vindicated").

[15] "Since the historical or archaeological evidence of religion's origins are irrevocably lost, only elementary theoretical principles about human existence can offer a possible and plausible account" (Stark, *Acts of Faith*, 83). Both Rappaport and Girard hypothesize about the origins of religion in light of their theories.

2000.   Stark subsequently applied this theory to monotheism[16] and the relationship between specific conceptions of God and their effect on the world.[17]

Committed to methodological naturalism,[18] Stark nevertheless criticizes as unscientific the widespread atheistic presuppositions of the social sciences.[19] His new paradigm presents religious belief and activity as thoroughly rational as any other mode of human activity.[20] Rationality in this case is a version of rational choice. Human beings pursue their goals by making rational calculations about costs and benefits. In this regard, Stark represents a decisive alternative to many contemporary theories of religion that explain religion as a byproduct or function of human cognitive processes.[21] He advocates, rather, an approach that explains religion as a byproduct of human desire. In all these cases, explanation remains entirely within the bounded universe of natural laws and physical processes. In his later writings, however, Stark supplements this explanation with second explanation, that is, divine revelation. Thus, Stark offers two accounts, one that explains religion as an outcome of human desires for unobtainable goods and another that explains certain religions as partially the result of divine inspiration.

Diverging from the Durkheimian tradition of defining religion as a matter of ritual and rites, Stark instead defines religion on ideas or beliefs about God. These, he argues, can motivate human behavior in profound ways when God is understood to be powerful, all knowing, good and engaged with human beings. Stark thereby combines assumptions about human desires for unobtainable goods (see below) and beliefs about the existence and attributes of beings or a

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[16] *One True God* (2001) and *For the Glory of God* (2003).

[17] *The Victory of Reason* (2005), *Discovering God* (2007), *God's Battalions* (2009), *The Triumph of Christianity* (2011).

[18] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 22-23.

[19] "In the end, what distinguishes the scientific from the old atheistic approaches to religion is fundamentally a matter of motives. As social scientists, our purpose should neither be to discredit religion or advance a religion of science. Rather our fundamental quest is to apply social scientific tools to the relationship between human beings and what they experience as divine. Science may examine any aspect of this relationship except its authenticity" (*Acts of Faith*, 21).

[20] Stark assumes that "people are as rational in making religious choices as in making secular choices." He qualifies the rational choice approach by acknowledging that people makes choices which they *perceive to be the best option* given their goals and range of possibilities. He allows for a variety of other factors that influence rational choices, but nevertheless maintains with the American sociologist of education, James Coleman (1926-1995), that "much of what is ordinarily described as nonrational or irrational is merely so because observers have not discovered the point of view of the actor, from which the action *is* rational" (*Discovering God*, 116-117).

[21] G. Alles, "Religious Economics and Rational Choice," 84-85.

being that can furnish these goods. The history of religions attests to varied conceptions of the gods or God. In Stark's view, the most important are those concepts of God that support ethical religions, which establish the internal and external controls over human behavior (morality) that new social circumstances demanded. These ethical religions, moreover, conferred significant advantages to their societies – in evolutionary terms, adaptations – that gave a decisive competitive edge over societies in which concepts of God were either polytheistic or religions were disconnected from ethics. The most successful ethical religions in terms of the numbers, global scope and cultural evolution are monotheistic, in particular Christianity.[22]

Stark also has elaborated arguments about the kinds of environments where religions flourish, namely, pluralistic, and where they languish, namely, regulated or monopolistic. He opposes, moreover, the view that religions, specifically monotheisms, necessarily promote violence and intolerance. In his studies on monotheism, he observes that other variables account for outbreaks of persecution and violence that are not properties of monotheism. Rather, given the American experience of pluralism, Stark predicts that civility and tolerance are likely outcomes given a truly unregulated and open religious economy in which the state does not prefers any group and in which all groups are free to pursue their own aims.[23]

Putting aside the belief that the natural laws that govern the universe come from nowhere and that everything is one, big, meaningless accident, Stark concludes his panoramic history of the conceptions of God, *Discovering God*, "I am no longer sufficiently arrogant or gullible to make that leap of faith. Instead I find it far more rational to regard the universe itself as the ultimate revelation of God."[24] In the span of forty years, Stark's thought evolved from believing in inevitable secularization or decline of religion under the weight of science[25] to conceiving of science as a mode of natural theology, another way of discovering God.[26] Consequently, Stark's research offers a chance to consider the importance of religion in human evolution, and the possibilities of future fruitful exchanges between the social sciences and Catholic theology.

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[22] Stark, "Gods, Rituals and the Moral Order." In contrast, Rappaport argues that morality arise out of the ritual form. Concepts of God, the beliefs and morality are products of ritual performance.

[23] Stark, *The One True God*, 219-259.

[24] Stark, *Discovering God*, 399.

[25] Stark, "On the Incompatibility of Religion and Science," 14.

[26] Stark, *Discovering God*, 399.

II.   The Old Paradigm

Writing in 1993 that "the sociology of American religion is undergoing a period of ferment, interpreted herein as a paradigm shift in process,"[27] Warner predicted not only changes in the sociology of American religion but indeed the sociology of religion as such. In order to appreciate the revolutionary nature of new paradigm, it will be rewarding to review four salient elements of the old paradigm that bring out the differences mostly clearly: (1) atheist assumptions, (2) irrationality of belief (3) correlation between religious unity and social peace and (4) the secularization thesis.

To begin, the old paradigm assumed that God did not exist. Atheism was taken to be the only legitimate point of departure for the scientific study of religion. Furthermore, since religion sustained the existence of a non-existent God, belief was necessarily designated irrational. For these reasons, social science aimed to explain the origins of this irrational belief by showing the real origins and functions of religion, on the one hand, and explain why human beings are so apt to believe in non-existent beings. The ethical motive behind social science was liberation from falsehood and superstition to secure the betterment of the human race. Just as astronomy replaced astrology, chemistry alchemy and so on, anthropology and sociology would replace religion, giving a proper rational foundation for humanity. Consequently, the social sciences not only proposed to explain certain human institutions, behaviors and beliefs, but also expected to contribute to funding meaning for human existence and sustaining human flourishing.

A. Social Science and the Study of Religion

The three major social scientific explanations of religion consist of (1) Marxist, (2) Freudian and (3) Durkheim/functionalist. Added to these traditional social science explanations are more recent attempts, often based on the emerging discipline of evolutionary psychology, that strive to bring together biological and cultural evolution into a common theoretical framework. While they propose different, sometime complementary explanations, these approaches share common interrelated assumptions: (1) naturalism (religion should be treated as a phenomenon within the natural order); (2) materialism (religion emerges from underlying material processes or structures, e.g., biological,

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[27] Warner, "Work in Progress towards a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 98:5 (March 1993), 1044.

psychological, sociological, economic); and (3) scientific methods (religion needs to be construed in such a way as to permit theorizing and testing).

At a minimum naturalism refers to a methodological position, which claims the right way to conduct scientific research, and may further imply a metaphysical claim that the supernatural does not exist. This second aspect elides into materialist explanations that reduce religion to natural processes or structures, denying a role for the supernatural or for beliefs. Materialist explanations, attempting to give an account of religions' origins, and functionalist explanations, attempting to give an account of the role religion plays in a society without explaining its origins, both reduce religion to unconscious domains of natural or social processes and structures. Supernatural beliefs and morals, therefore, are inherently irrational since they in fact do not refer to anything real. Functionalists distinguish between latent and manifest functions. The former explain what is really taking placing but hidden, and the latter is a conscious explanation ascribed to an action in terms of religious beliefs. For example, a ritual's manifest function is to propitiate a deity, but its latent (or seemly real) function is to produce social harmony.

The new paradigm holds the same assumptions about methodological (but not metaphysical) naturalism and adheres to the scientific method, but not materialism. As already noted, the new paradigm brings together assumptions about human desires and the use of cost-benefit reasoning to achieve these goals that lead to conditions in which supernatural explanations arise. According to the new paradigm, therefore, religion is firstly a matter of ideas, composed of supernatural explanations about the meaning of life — that is, the beliefs people intentionally hold about the gods or God, the morals that these beliefs establish in some cases, and the cultures they produce. Relying on a minimal biological foundation, namely, the appearance of intelligence, religion generates culture, which evolves in tandem with the evolution of the image of God.

B. Marx

Though the visibility of Marxism has diminished since 1989/1991, the importance of Karl Marx as a social thinker is a historical fact insofar as he proposed an influential model for social development, whose effects are deep, widespread and often unrecognized today. As a materialist, he held that culture, which includes religion, rests on the economic structure of a society. Human existence consists of an economic struggle on a progressive trajectory to a heavenly paradise on earth. Drawing from Feuerbach's explanation for religion as a manifestation of human alienations, Marx viewed religion as a tool used by the powerful to misdirect the oppressed toward seeking otherworldly justice and

away from achieving earthly justice. Often religion sanctified tyrants, thereby posing another obstacle to justice. At best religion left the poor with a meager solace, "the opium of the masses."[28] This last point, Marx and Engels claimed, explains why religion seemingly appeals mainly to the poor and oppressed,[29] a view elaborated subsequently in the Deprivation thesis[30], but today contested.[31]

C. Freud

The Viennese doctor, Sigmund Freud, invented psychoanalysis to relieve his patients of psychic disturbances, due especially to the repression of sexual desires. Freud made claims of establishing a scientific approach to the study of the human mind, in particular naming the unconsciousness, i.e., non- or irrational, facets of human choices and conduct. While his research is not well regarded today, Freud nonetheless played a pivotal role in launching psychology as a new science. Freud reduced religion to psychology; namely, group phenomena analyzed on the level of the individual, mental states and consciousness. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud suggest that religion emerges from abnormal psychology, that is, the unconscious malfunction of biological sexual instincts and their consequent psychopathologies.[32] Like many contemporary

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[28] In its proper context, this phrase means that religion offered consolation and comfort to the poor. Its sense of deluding and intoxicating the poor comes from its use out of context.

[29] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 28.

[30] In 1964, Charles Glock coined the term "deprivation thesis" and constructed a typology of deprivations corresponding to different kinds of religious responses. The thesis refers to a long-standing social scientific tenet – elaborated by Marxists and non-Marxists, such as Weber, Troeltsch and Niebuhr – that ascribes to religion the capacity to "transvalue" values by turning "worldly" values upside down. Thus, this thesis held that religions appeal to the marginalized and destitute but not the privileged because religion condemns wealth and power. Stark observes that evidence from surveys as well as the history of sect movements and asceticism does not support the deprivation thesis. Indeed, on the contrary, the correlation between asceticism and privilege appears impressive, leading him to concluded, "Thus, Marx might better have said that "religion often is the opium of the dissatisfied upper classes, the sigh of wealthy creatures depressed by materialism." Stark, *Exploring the Religious Life*, 43-45; 59.

[31] Stark, *Discovering God*, 118. Also see the footnote above.

[32] "The resultant account in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) of a "primal horde," the killing of the primeval father, and the subsequent repressed guilt and Oedipus complex buried in the unconsciousness of the whole human race, has been labeled a completely ahistorical fabrication without evidential foundation." Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 13, 78. On the other hand, René Girard does credit Freud with coming close to the discovery of mimetic desire through his reflection on the

cognitive theorists or evolutionary psychologists, Freud argued that religion is a byproduct, the malfunction of the human psychology.

D. Durkheim and Functionalism

Durkheim proposed a third major approach that tries to explain religious phenomena by discovering what they do in society (which is not equivalent to discovering how they arose). Taken from biology, this approach relies on teleology, namely, looking for the goals at which actions aim. Though Herbert Spencer formulated functionalism,[33] Durkheim borrowed and popularized it. In *The Elementary Forms of Religion* the latter argued that religion bridges the gap between the known and unknown, thereby infusing meaning into daily life. Religion, therefore, is an epistemic solution to the problem of human existence.[34] Though Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices in sacred things," he never defined what he meant by "sacred things."[35] Indeed, "sacred things" do not play a significant role in his theory.

The study of religion should be reduced to the study of rituals – not of the gods or God – insofar as these human activities provide a satisfying explanation for human existence that underwrites the moral cohesion of any human group.[36] With alarm, therefore, Durkheim observed, that modern science increasingly

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Oedipus myth, which underlies Freud's theory of the patricidal and incestuous origins of religion. Girard criticizes Freud for never getting the mimetic rivalry between father and son over the mother correctly because Freud wanted to make *sexual* desire, not desire as such, the cause of this conflict. "Freud never succeeded in establishing the precise relationship of the model, the disciple and their common object." Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 185.

[33] *The Principles of Sociology*.

[34] Rappaport's Cybernetics of the Holy, in particular the role of the sacred in establishing the truthfulness of language, shows itself to be within this tradition of seeking an epistemic solution to human existence.

[35] Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," 101. Stark argues the Durkheim erred in his definition because he wished to define religion in such a way to include Buddhism, of which he only knew the godless elite variety and not the popular form that is suffused with deities, Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," 108.

[36] Stark, "SSSR Presidential Address, 2004: Putting an End to Ancestor Worship," 468. "What Durkheim proposed is that the hidden truth about religion is that *all religious rites constitute society worshipping itself in order to sustain society. And the most primitive form of this collective self-worship is Totemism.*" Stark, *Discovering God*, 33.

threatened this religion-generated meaning, and therewith, social cohesion.[37] Stark notes that Durkheim's claim that "religion functions to sustain the moral order" was widely accepted as "the closest thing to a 'law' that the social scientific study of religion possesses."[38] In the 1930's, Talcott Parsons introduced an additional level of analysis with "structural functionalism" that "regarded societies as highly integrated social systems" and sought "to explain the presence of any major social structure or idea of culture on the basis of its contribution (function) to the effective maintenance of the social system (structure)."[39] Increasingly untenable by the 1970s,[40] it has, however, enjoyed a revival of late as Wilson has proposed an articulated multi-level group selection, which rehabilitates functionalism.[41] "In evolutionary terms, Durkheim interpreted religion as an *adaptation* that enables human groups to function as harmonious and coordinated units. I take this to be the central thesis of functionalism in the social sciences as it relate to religion."[42]

Wilson is only one of many scholars pursuing evolutionary explanations for religion, many of which treat religion as a byproduct of human psychology's evolution, rather than an adaptation.[43] In each of these approaches – Marxist,

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[37] "He [Durkheim] proposed, however, that what is ultimately unknown to us is our collective being in society. We find it very difficult to grasp how our actions arise from belonging to others; and it is this property of collective life which is highlighted in the chief mechanism of religion, ritual. Through ritual, Durkheim argues, we worship our unrealized powers of shared existence, society, and call it God…in general, scientific knowledge and method undermine the coherence and stability of culture" K. HART, "Foreword", *Religion and Ritual in the Making of Humanity*, XV-XVI.

[38] Stark, "Gods, Rituals, and the Moral Order" 619.

[39] Stark, *The One True God*, 244-245.

[40] For example, after having begun his career by employing functionalism in his study on the Maring, a tribe in Papua-New Guinea in the 1960s, Rappaport later developed formalism. In Aristotelian terms, functionalism refers to final causation whereas formalism refers to formal causation. Rappaport contends that final causation cannot explain origins of phenomena and that often the term "function" conflates final and formal causations. Formal causation, on the other hand, refers to "the entailment of operations of particular sorts by the formal characteristics of structures." Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning and Religion*, 75. Rappaport shifts his research from explaining for example what role rituals play in the maintenance of Maring society (functionalism) to explaining how the specific characteristics of the ritual form cause a variety of cultural artifacts, such as the creation of different sense of time, the Logos, social conventions, right and wrong, and so forth.

[41] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 47-85.

[42] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 54.

[43] S. Atran, *In God's We Trust*; Boyer, *Religion Explained*; R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*; D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*.

psychological (Freudian), functionalist and evolutionary – religion is treated purely as a natural phenomenon, assuming from the start that God or the divine does not really exist and that beliefs, no matter the evidence, argumentation or even social utility, remain irrational insofar as they ascribe existence to non-existent beings or forces.

Nevertheless, some researchers explain the persistence and ubiquity of religion despite its irrationality due to its contribution to the survival of human groups. Functionalism, Girard's scapegoat mechanism, Wilson's group theory and Rappaport's formalism suggest that religion offers possible solutions to the fundamental question of social existence: how can selfish creatures be induced to live in peace and harmony?[44] This is a question that touches on all life forms inasmuch as living organisms must coordinate their activities to achieve their goals. In human terms, additional complications enter insofar as human behavior is not genetically or instinctually determined.

Humans possess a range of choices that other species do not. On the positive side, these choices allow humans to reject and even change some of the brutal and cruel aspects of evolution in favor of presumably more humane possibilities. Based on the use of reason and imagination, human beings are able to change themselves and their environment in creative ways. On the negative side, no longer biologically or genetically constrained, human choice can result in profoundly destructive activities that threaten human existence – if not life itself. Thus, any society must balance the requirements of reason, imagination and choice with the need to prevent or at least curtail violence.

E. Peace or Pluralism

Rappaport agrees with functionalists like Durkheim, and evolutionary theorists like Wilson, that religion furnishes society with moral cohesion through a religious unity. Girard also has written extensively on the role of religion in stabilizing human societies against unfettered desire and the violence it causes. The social science pedigree of this viewpoint stretches back to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who in the *Leviathan* (1651) espoused strong state oversight over religion in a state church until such time when the human race finally grew out of religion, and to David Hume (1711-1776), who in his *History of England* advocated a monopolistic state church and the suppression of all dissent.[45] The historical context, in particular the fear of religious violence, and a romantic nostalgia for the putative unity of the pre-reformation church, may have

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[44] Stark, *The One True God*, 219.
[45] Stark, *The One True God*, 219-220.

accentuated these thinkers' support for the state control of religion and belief that religious unity leads to social peace.[46]

Given the premise that one religion or one version of a religion is the best way to promote social unity and to avoid violence, it follows, then, that the opposite, religious pluralism, would be potentially dangerous. Further, pluralism must threaten not only the social cohesion as it introduces competing bodies that represent different beliefs about the nature of God and reality, but also salvation itself, insofar as competing truth claims might tend over time to engender a climate of skepticism to such an extent that "all are refuted by all" according to Jean Bodin (1530-1596).[47]

This anti-pluralist perspective impressed mid-Twentieth Century social scientists. For example, Peter Berger[48] predicted that in "the 21st Century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture."[49] This claim relied on his analysis in *Sacred Canopy* (1967), in which he argued that pluralism causes the inevitable decline of religion in competitive environments like the United States.[50] The sacred canopy "gives meaning, plausibility and legitimacy to the norms and social

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[46] Hobbes and Hume did not innovate a new church-state policy. In the Edict of Milan (313), Emperor Constantine (272-337) legalized Christianity and permitted freedom of worship and subsequently conferred privileges, exemptions and funds on the Catholic Church. After a tumultuous period of civil war and religious strife, Emperor Theodosius (347-395) decreed that Catholic Christianity would replace traditional Roman paganism as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The *Codex Theodosianus* (429), which compiles the legislation of the first century of Christian Roman emperors and was commissioned by Emperor Theodosius II, son of Theodosius I, includes copies of the laws that Theodosius I promulgated on February 27, 380 concerning the establishment of Catholic Christianity as the official religion (XVI.1.2par. and 1.2.1). Later, the same emperor outlawed all other religions and heretical movements. Like Hobbes and Hume, the emperor sought to secure peace and a stable social order through a policy of religious unity. Unlike Hobbes and Hume, he also desired to safeguard Christian orthodoxy so as to ensure access to salvation.

[47] Stark, *Discovering God*, 1-2.

[48] Born in 1929, Berger is an Austrian-American Lutheran theologian and sociologist, professor Emeritus of Religion, Sociology and Theology and Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University.

[49] "A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion," *New York Times* (April 25 1968), 3. By the 1990s, however, in the light of accumulating evidence to the contrary, Berger reversed his opinion: "This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled 'secularization theory' is entirely mistaken" (Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World*, 2).

[50] Stark, *The One True God*, 246.

arrangements within the society 'beneath' its shelter."[51] Berger concludes that pluralism – the heart of which is individual choice – lacerates the sacred canopy, leaving it in tatters, unable to fulfill its vital society function.[52] Choice ultimately aids secularization.

Adverting to possible motives – social peace and/or salvation – for religious unity, usually through a state church, introduces the fourth element in the old paradigm, namely, secularization, inasmuch the search for social peace without reference to salvation orients human existence to a worldly human flourishing, rather than aiming for its fulfillment in the life-to-come after death. This pursuit of a worldly fulfillment evokes a different set of ethical and practical choices than a set that ascribes human fulfillment to the hereafter. The pressing question, therefore, becomes, not how does one get to "heaven," but rather what is the most effective way to achieve human flourishing here and now: "heaven on earth."

F. Secularization Thesis

Emerging from the exigencies of human existence that elicit the desire to control nature and events in order to minimize harm and maximize benefits, human beings employ different strategies that sociologists divide into science, magic and religion.[53] The pursuit of a mundane human flourishing prefers science and its applications in technology. Insofar as science and technology modify the human understanding of the world and correspondingly expand its power over it, then the competing claims of religion as a mode of explanation or magic as a means of control lose their appeal. Thus, the secularization thesis, put very simply, holds that as science advances, religion (and magic) retreat. Stark summarizes the salient features of the secularization thesis: (1) a long, gradual, relatively constant process entailed by modernization (2) that is irreversible (3) and global in scope, (4) predicting the decline of personal piety and belief in addition to the institutional decline of churches (5) and construing religion and science as intractably hostile.[54]

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[51] Stark, *The One True God*, 245; "That is, 'the classic task of religion' is to construct 'a common world within which all of social life receive ultimate meaning binding on everyone'" (Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 133-134).

[52] N.J. Demerath, III, "Rational Paradigms, A-Rational Religion, and the Debate Over Secularization," 107.

[53] Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," *Review of Religious Research*, 43:2 (2001) 104.

[54] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 59-61.

Accordingly, modernization necessitates secularization inasmuch as this social transformation requires a pluralism that makes conditions for the practice of science possible, namely, by supporting unlimited critical inquiry in all aspects of life and the world and the free exchange of ideas and practices. So understood, modernization significantly accelerates the decline of religious explanations for human existence and consequently religious belief.[55] Further, pluralism taken as referring to the free flow of goods, services and people contributes to an economic rationality, which promises to alleviate human need and satisfy human desire through the limitless production of improvements, and conceptualizes human beings as autonomous, individual consumers, rather than socially interconnected persons within a global ecosystem.[56] Lastly, under modernity, religion itself has become a commodity available for consumption on the terms of the buyer,[57] thus rendering religion incapable of participating in the public sphere inasmuch as it is a matter of private preference, rather than public rationality.[58]

As will be seen shortly, a major point of disagreement between exponents of the old, e.g., Bruce, and new paradigms, e.g., Stark, is the meaning of choice. According to Bruce, the very possibility that individuals should be able to choose

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[55] Rappaport on the other hand draws different conclusions since he seems to believe that pluralism may be one of the greatest dangers for human sociality insofar as pluralism as a species of alternatives constantly threatens the legitimacy of any given moral order by presenting alternatives, whether real or imagined by which the current order may be found wanting.

[56] Cf. A.J. Conyers, *The Long Truce: How Tolerance Made the World Safe for Profit* (Dallas, TX: Spence, 2001) that traces transformation of tolerance from its Christian to its liberal significance by which it became a tool for generating a social contract in which peace reigns so that trade may occupy human existence as its principal activity.

[57] "Although it involves a crude simplification, one way of describing modernization is as the gradual removal of cultural limitations on economizing as more and more activities and their products are treated as commodities…. Berger is undoubtedly right that the cultural pluralism of the modern world requires even those who wish to believe to do so in a manner markedly different from the common in traditional societies" (Bruce, "Religion and Rational Choice," 204).

[58] "Religion has shifted to the family and the leisure sphere, not because the enlightenment has told us that is the proper scope of religion but because that is the practical solution to the problem that large numbers of us cannot agree about the gods" (Bruce, "The Truth about Religion in Britain," 428). "The cultural diversity created by, among other things, structural and social differentiation pushed religious identity (and with it all but the blandest religious ideas) out of the public arena and into the private sphere" (ibid, 28).

their religion and practice it in peace is rare in the historical record,[59] and by its very nature somehow inimical to the nature of religion as an organic communal whole, namely, a church. Modernization brings about secularization, understood as a privatization of belief, since it is a practical solution to divergent opinions about the meaning of God and existence. Denominations and sects replace a church insofar as religion becomes a matter of choice, rather than socialization.

Bruce contends that this process commenced with the Protestant reformation, which served as the first agent of the demystification of ritual and sacrament and of the rationalization of ethics that has lead to the current condition in which human beings find it less easy to believe in God than then previous generations.[60] Wrought by industrialization – fragmentation of the lifeworld, the decline of community, the rise of bureaucracy, technological consciousness – this social transformation more than any policy causes secularization, the essence of which is the power of choice.[61] This sense of secularization as an entailment of modernization corresponds to Rappaport's diagnosis of the threats facing the human race in terms of fragmentation through the various lies that disrupt religion as the "cybernetics of the Holy". In his theory, the term "cybernetics of the Holy" refers to an information system which religion constitutes and sustains human ecology. The holy integrates different aspects of human existence into a whole to furnish meaning and purpose in a universe, which is both devoid of meaning and governed by natural laws.[62] The cybernetics of the Holy informs human groups to live in equanimity and moderation with their environment and each other. Accepting the secularization thesis as accurate, Rappaport proposed to redress the negative effects of modernity by proposing a new postmodern science and a nature religion capable of mending the broken relationship between humanity and the earth[63].

Around the time that Rappaport was proposing his response to the crisis attributed to secularization, Stark declared it dead even while acknowledging the

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[59] Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice*, 3.

[60] "Rather the fundamental assumptions that underlie them [science and technology], which we can summarily describe as 'rationality'—the material world as an amoral series of invariant relationships of cause and effect, the componentiality of object, the reproducibility of actions, the expectation of constant change in our exploitation of the material world, the insistence on innovation—make us less likely than our forebears to entertain the notion of the divine" (Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice*, 17).

[61] Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice*, 28.

[62] Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 1.

[63] Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 456-461.

reality of the conditions, which the secularization thesis purports to explain.[64] Stark and even those who still support the general thrust of the secularization thesis recognize that this proposal no longer possesses a universal jurisdiction or an historical inevitability as a law of human progress as was once supposed. As far as Stark is concerned, moreover, the new paradigm offers better explanations for the same data. Anemic state churches and regulated religious economies rather than modernization account for the low levels of participation in many European countries. Indeed, the contrary evidence manifest especially in the paradox of American secularity and religious vitality as well as the general rise of the salience of religion through many non-European regions has led proponents to more narrow claims that restrict the thesis' plausibility to specific times and places.[65] The lesson implied, therefore, is that contextualization illuminates the parameters of any theory. The old paradigm – as a theoretical proposal – arose principally out of the European experience of state church monopolies and post-Reformation religious conflict and adhered to an Enlightenment metanarrative depicting a struggle to emancipate reason from tradition and authority, both of which often exhibited an ecclesiastical form, in order to permit the search for natural explanations for God and humanity, religion and faith and promote an earthly human flourishing. As will be seen presently, the new paradigm is drawn from a different time and place, from the religious experience in the United States of America.

III.   The New Paradigm

"The new paradigm not only rejects the elements of the old paradigm (as outlined above), it proposes the precise opposite of each," namely: (1) religion promotes psychological health (against Freud); (2) religions often fuel social protests and political movements in which class and religion do not correlate (against Marx, the Deprivation theory, etc.); (3) no consistent correlation between religious participation and modernization has been demonstrated (against the secularization thesis, Berger, Bruce); (4) the proper study of religion should focus foremost on beliefs about God and the supernatural, not rituals (against Durkheim, functionalism, Rappaport); and finally (5) religion should be treated as a social phenomenon insofar as it cannot not be adequately explained by psychological reductionism (against Durkheim, Bruce).[66]

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[64] Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P. – Rest in Peace", 249-273.

[65] Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice*, 8.

[66] Stark – Finke, *Act of Faith*, 31-35.

Stark and Bainbridge produced the first theoretical formulation of the new paradigm in their 1987 book, *A Theory of Religion*, which brought together twenty years of research. Simpson characterizes it as (1) ecumenical, insofar as it unites the fragmented study of religion into a common framework; (2) modern, inasmuch as it reduces religion to a natural explanation, namely, sociology, and (3) American,[67] insofar as it conceptualizes human beings as autonomous, pragmatic actors who use and adjust to every situation to achieve their goals.[68]

Even though their theory attempts to explain religion historically and cross-culturally, Warner observes that "the analytic key to the new paradigm is the disestablishment of the churches and the rise of an open market for religion, the process that intervened between colonial lethargy and antebellum fervor."[69] Envisioning a policy of governmental non-preference, which permits an open religious market where new providers compete with older ones on equal grounds at least as far as the state goes, "the new paradigm is not *defined* by economic imagery, however, but that the idea of disestablishment is the norm."[70] This and other factors contributed to the emergence of a "constitutive pluralism" in the United States by which Warner means that the metafunction of American

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[67] After having made the claim that Stark is "a stereotypical US sociologist of religion," Gregory Alles, a fellow American sociologist, adds "Stark is not only American but strikingly Reaganesque. His theorizing rests upon a foundation of free-market, supply-side economics that is both dismissive of liberalism… and triumphlistically Christian" (Alles, "Religious Economics and Rational Choice," 83). These juxtaposed claims seem contradictory insofar as a U.S. sociologist of religion who fits the description of "Reaganesque," "dismissive of liberalism" and "triumphlistically Christian" is hardly stereotypical for that discipline or the American academic milieu. For example, a recent study reported that only 5.5% of U.S. sociologists identified themselves in terms of party affiliations as Republicans, that is, the party of President Reagan, free market economics and sceptical of American liberalism (which corresponds in the main with social democracy), N. Gross – M. Simmons, "The Social and Political Views of American Professors," 34.

[68] J. Simpson, "The Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Religion," 370-371.

[69] Warner, "Work in Progress towards a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," 1050. The period from ca. 1750 (British colonies) to 1820 (Jacksonian Revolution) witnessed the constitutional protection of religious liberty and the non-establishment of federal state church in the first amendment in the U.S. Bill of Rights (1791) as well as the progressive disestablishment of the state churches concluding with Connecticut, which disestablished the Congregational Church in 1818 when a new state constitution was approved.

[70] Warner, "Work in Progress towards a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," 1053. Disestablishment in the United States of America did not evince anti-clerical or anti-religious prejudice, but rather suited religious minorities.

religion is to create the social space for cultural pluralism in which religion – but not necessarily any particular religious organization – has flourished.[71] American "non-secularization" falsified one of the key predictions of the secularization thesis that correlates inversely modernity and religious vitality, inasmuch as church participation as measured by congregational membership dramatically grew from a paltry 10% in 1776 to 60% of that populace in 1990.[72] The American experience suggests, therefore, that factors other than modernization account for secularization in Europe, and moreover a vigorous religious environment should arise when the state adopts a policy of non-preference vis-à-vis specific denominations. Though Warner lists many scholars working on the new paradigm, none has been more influential than Stark.

IV. Stark's Sociological Theory of Religion

The following summary synthesizes the strands and developments of Stark's theory of religion over the last three decades,[73] whose key texts are *A Theory of Religion* (1987) with Bainbridge, and *Acts of Faith* (2000) with Finke. The sociologist Jeffrey Hadden approvingly noted, "*A Theory of Religion* is of immense importance both because it provides scholars of religion with the first general theory of religion ever developed and because it furnishes an exemplary model of theory construction for all the social sciences."[74] After working with a team of other researchers in sociology and economics, Stark and Bainbridge proposed a deductive logical-empirical theory of religion, which he has continued to refine in his subsequent writings.[75]

A deductive theory starts with axiomatic statements from which propositions (deductions) are logically derived. These in turn must be empirically tested because propositions make predictions or prohibitions that

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[71] Warner, "Work in Progress towards a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," 1058.

[72] Warner, "Work in Progress towards a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," 1048.

[73] Taking this status report as the starting point: Stark – Bainbridge, "Towards a Theory of Religion: Religious Commitment," 114-128.

[74] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 5.

[75] In 2000 Stark and Finke revised the theory to clarify cognitive elements, added emotional and expressive elements and attempted to account for religious activities, e.g. prayer and sacrifice: (1) replacement of the term "compensator" with "otherworldly rewards," (2) an expanded definition of religion, (3) a sharper definition of magic, and (4) a new more sociological formulation of rational action (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 83-85).

may be falsified as Karl Popper's framework advises.[76]   The purpose of a deductive theory, therefore, is to transfer "middle ranged" generalizations from assertions, namely, that something is simply so, to explanations, namely, how and why it is so. For example, it is often asserted that poor are more religious than the rich. In light of this theory of religion, however, this prediction is falsified, namely, the theory explains how and why this assertion is not so.

This theory is reductionist inasmuch as it attempts to explain religion by reducing religious behavior to more general human action, the core of which is a theory of religious commitment.[77]   Implied therein also is an emphatic naturalistic methodology that assumes that religion is a purely human phenomenon, whose causes can be found entirely within the natural world and is incompatible with faith in revelation or miracles.[78]   Stark and Bainbridge postulate seven axioms about human existence, taken to be true insofar as they are observed in the world and compel belief.[79]   From these axioms, they deduce numerous propositions and make definitions, which link the abstract axioms and propositions to the concrete reality of the world, thereupon permitting empirical testing.   These definitions are concepts whose purpose is to distinguish phenomena from one another. Thus, their utility depends on their clarity and fruitfulness in a given theory. Since no theory can offer a full account of any particular empirical array, one must assume "all other things being equal" to test predictions or prohibitions.[80]   Stark and Bainbridge's theory has two essential components: (1) a micro-level assumption about human behavior, namely, rational choice, and (2) a macro-level mechanism that organizes human choices, namely, the religious economy.

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[76] Stark and Bainbridge summarize the essence of Popper's approach from the *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959) and *Conjectures and Refutations* (1962): "A theory is a set of statements about relationships among a set of abstract concepts. These statements say how and why the concepts are interrelated. Furthermore, these statements must give rise to implications that potentially are falsifiable empirically. That is, it must be possible to deduce from a theory some statements about empirical events that could, in principle, turn out to be incorrect" (Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 13).

[77] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 26.

[78] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 22-23. In his later writings, however, Stark entertains the possibility of revelation insofar as he treats it as the way in which psychologically normal people talk to God: "In this essay I greatly revise and extend that work into a general model of revelation" (Stark, "A Theory of Revelation," 287-308. Also, Stark, *Discovering God*, 50-51). Thus Stark's approach to this matter evinces an evolution in his methodological naturalism that moves from atheistic in *A Theory of Religion* to agnostic in subsequent writings.

[79] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 26.

[80] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 19-20.

A. Rational Choice – Micro-Level Assumption

Rational choice, "fundamental to any social scientific theory,"[81] attractively makes possible deductive theory in sociology, a discipline dominated by inductive empirical research.[82]   Nobel laureate Gary Becker (1930-) formulated this major theoretical framework in economics.   It assumes: (1) maximizing behavior; (2) market equilibrium; and (3) stable preferences;[83] all of which come into play when the macro level mechanism, that is, the religious economy, joins the rational choice assumption. Broadly speaking, rational choice simplifies human rationality to cost-benefit analysis to obtain rewards at the lowest possible price.[84] As long humans make their choices out of cost-benefit calculations, then their decisions are rational, no matter whether the object of these choices is religious or secular. Thus, rational choice promises to deliver the social science study of religion from earlier proposals that held religious choices to be *per se* irrational.

Bruce criticizes the use of rational choice because in religion there are often massive constraints on choice and furthermore information is often insufficient to make a rational choice at all.[85] In response, Alles notes that these observations are irrelevant for rational choice theory insofar as constraints simply reduce the number of options, but leave choice as such intact, and inadequate information simply means a less informed decision.[86]   Stark recognizes, however, that cost-benefit calculations – the heart of rational choice –

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[81] Stark, "Bringing Theory Back In," chapter 1 in Young, L.A., ed., *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment*, at 6.

[82] Iannaccone, "Voodoo Economics? A Review of the Rational Choice Approach to Religion," 78.

[83] Iannaccone, "Voodoo Economics? A Review of the Rational Choice Approach to Religion," 77.

[84] Perhaps responding to rational choice critics, such as Wallis, Bruce, et.al., Stark's use of the term evolved. In *Acts of Faith*, Finke and he put aside the definition of rational choice theory as "too precise," formulating instead a thick model that acknowledges that human beings pursue simultaneously a variety of goals at various costs within limits on information and understanding, restrictions on available options and guided by tastes and preferences. Humans "satisfice" – to use Nobel laureate Herbert Simon's neologism – rather than maximize; namely, they make choices that suffice or satisfy, but do not maximize. Again, following Simon, humans exhibit "subjective rationality" insofar as "all human actions are based on what appear to be "good reasons," reasons being "good" to the extent which they "rest upon plausible conjectures" (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 36-38).

[85] Bruce, "All Too Human," 36-37.

[86] Alles, "Religious Economics and Rational Choice," 96.

do not adequately capture the whole picture of human decision making.[87] Nevertheless he adopts the rational choice axiom despite the perils of its simplifying assumptions because it permits the construction of a deductive theory that can be tested empirically.

1. Rewards / Compensators

The rational choice axiom does not evaluate the object of the choice, but rather the manner, i.e., cost-benefit calculation, in which human beings arrive at such choices. The object of these choices, however, forms a second key part of the theory, namely, rewards, divided between those that are tangible, immediate and verifiable, and those that Stark and Bainbridge once termed "compensators."[88] Defining the latter as "postulates of rewards according to explanations that are not readily susceptible to unambiguous evaluations," compensators are substitutes for absent rewards for which one pays in the present for a promised, but unverifiable, future benefit. Instead of the reward itself, compensators provide "explanations," which in Bainbridge and Stark's theory refer to "statements about how and why rewards may be obtained and costs incurred."[89] Explanations, therefore, reveal the terms of exchange. While humans prefer tangible rewards to compensators, certain rewards are by their nature unavailable either due to scarcity, restricted access or absence. Thus, throughout his corpus, Stark and his colleagues distinguish between worldly, but deferred compensators, whose attainment lies off in the future, e.g., the promise of a good job in exchange for hard work, study, networking, etc., to otherworldly compensators, whose fulfillment lies in a non-empirical, often posthumous, context, e.g., the promise of immortality on whatever terms are stipulated.[90]

Varying in generality and value, compensators are either general or specific. General compensators, like Rappaport's ultimate sacred postulates, refer to philosophies of life, worldviews, theologies, all of which furnish explanations for human existence that cannot be tested empirically.[91] Specific

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[87] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 41.

[88] Dissatisfied and having determined that the term had unwanted negative connotations, (Stark, "Bringing Theory Back In," in Young, L.A., ed., *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment*, at 7), Stark dropped the term "compensator" in favor of an adequate understanding of the term "otherworldly rewards" (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 84).

[89] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 30.

[90] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 88-89.

[91] Stark and Rappaport both cite Paul Tillich for this claim: Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 37; Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 283-284.

compensators, such as a promise of a good job, by contrast, refer to a single reward. In either case, compensators are deferred to the future or in some other non-verifiable context. Moreover, they must be taken on faith, which implies that whoever makes the promise has the power and the good will to fulfill it.

Science, magic and religion compete in proposing solutions to life's problems. Simply put science consists of (1) theorizing and (2) observations,[92] both of which are necessary to constitute it and neither of which alone is sufficient. Science differs from magic and religion inasmuch as it only makes statements about natural and material reality – about things that are observable – whereas the other two make statements about the supernatural, literally, "forces or entities beyond or outside nature which can suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces."[93] Though they both assume the supernatural, magic differs from religion insofar as it only offers specific compensators, lacking reference to God, the gods or general explanations about existence.[94] In addition, magic tends to retreat as long as scientific understanding diffuses since the latter can subject the former's claims about the material world to falsification. On the other hand, religion and science both offer attractive possible explanations but differ on (1) their views about the supernatural and God; (2) the promise of otherworldly rewards; (3) their ability to generate morality (more below); (4) the possibility of falsification – by definition the supernatural lies outside the domain of science; and (5) their scopes of explanation.[95] Starks agrees with Rappaport that science cannot assess religion's supernatural assumptions inasmuch as they are neither falsifiable nor verifiable because they are, *super-natural*, namely, above and beyond the domain of science.

Further, since general compensators are a universal feature of human existence, Stark and Bainbridge conclude that religious organization, namely, "social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain, and exchange supernaturally based general compensators,"[96] will tend to emerge because they have unparalleled possibilities to offer future-deferred compensators (or otherworldly rewards) as well as some presently available rewards.[97] These social enterprises offer worldly rewards, such as belonging, fellowship,

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[92] "Science is a method utilized in organized efforts to explain nature, always subject to modification and corrections through systematic observations", Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science", 105.

[93] Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," 108.

[94] Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," 111.

[95] Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," 115.

[96] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 42.

[97] Stark – Bainbridge, "Towards a Theory of Religion: Religious Commitment," 125.

leadership positions, etc. as well as otherworldly rewards, namely, "religions consists of *explanations of existence* (or *ultimate meaning*) based on *supernatural assumptions* and including statements about the nature of the *supernatural*, which may specify *methods* and *procedures* for *exchanging* with the supernatural."[98]

2. Ideas

Against the main thrust of the social science study of religion,[99] beliefs as ideas – not rituals[100] – are central, "religion is first and foremost, an intellectual project and hence I propose that ideas are its truly fundamental aspect."[101] This position diverges from the dominant materialist tendency in the social science explanation for religion, whether Marxist (economic materialist) Freudian (psychology based on biological materialism), functionalist (structural materialism) or evolutionary (biological materialism). Normatively, therefore, the study of religion should center on beliefs about the supernatural. Stark implies that belief consists not only of trust (fiduciary faith), but more significantly, declarations of truth about the supernatural (intellectual faith).[102] Consequently, what people believe about God directs and motivates behaviors that profoundly shape the world.[103] He maintains, moreover, that the correlation

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[98] Stark, *Discovering God*, 46. This mature definition expands from earlier versions: (1) "Religion consists of explanations of existence based on supernatural assumptions" ("Towards a Theory of Religion" [1980] 123, *A Theory of Religion* [1987/1997] 39); (2) "Religion consists of very general explanations of existence, including terms of exchange with a god or gods" (*Acts of Faith* [2000] 91); (3) "Religion consists of explanations of existence based on supernatural assumptions and including statements about the nature of the supernatural and about ultimately meaning" ("Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," [2001] 111).

[99] "Over the past century and a quarter, there has been a general shift of emphasis to ritual. The shift began with William Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religions of the Semites* (1889)…. Since his time theorists of religion have come ever more to deem ritual the core of *all* religions" (R. Segal, "Ritual as Religion," 66).

[100] In the 2007 definition, Stark writes that rites and rituals are included in the methods and procedures of exchange (Stark, *Discovering God*, 46).

[101] Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," 112.

[102] "When and why did, then, did social scientists get it so wrong? The error began with Durkheim and the other earlier functionalists (including Robertson Smith and Malinkowski) dismissed gods as unimportant window dressing, stressing instead that rites and rituals are the fundamental stuff of religion" (Stark, "Gods, Rituals and the Moral Order," 620).

[103] Stark offers historical case studies, such as the cause of the Crusades, as evidence to refute materialist explanations and propose in their stead the power of religious ideas to motivate human choices: "The crusades…were not the first round of European colonization …conducted for land, loot, or converts. The crusaders were not

between beliefs and morality is much greater than any that exists between ritual and morality, while not denying an auxiliary role for ritual as an encouragement and reinforcement for the morality that results from beliefs.

A number of lines of inquiry converge on this point. Stark contends that certain doctrines of God are powerfully influential in forming human choices, namely, morality, and in sustaining cultural evolution. Further, depending on their explanation of the supernatural, religions will be powerful or weak in terms of social organization. This analysis rests in part on the nature of the otherworldly rewards that humans seek. Since the acceptance of any compensator entails risk, anything that provides confidence and assurances will be attractive. Religious organizations recommend means of allaying this risk-taking induced anxiety through prayer, rituals, mysticism, miracles and so forth, all of whose effectiveness ultimately depend on the doctrine of God.[104] Consequently, the most powerful motive for the credibility of any reward depends on the religious organization's doctrine of God.

3. Theology

Religious organizations compose their doctrines of God in theologies, which involve "*formal reasoning about God*. The emphasis is on *discovering* God's nature, intentions, and demands, and on understanding how these define the relationship between human beings and God."[105] A theology's content, therefore, determines its attractiveness, influence and authority in the world. Given the terms of exchange, human beings will prefer divinities that are reliable, trustworthy, benevolent, responsive and powerful, to unreliable, undependable, malevolent, aloof or impotent. Thus, Stark predicts and hence tests these

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barbarians who victimized the cultivated Muslims. They sincerely believed that they served in God's battalions" (Stark, *God's Battalions*, 248).

[104] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 107. Elsewhere (Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 370-371), Stark cites J. Barrett's study, "Smart Gods, Dumb Gods and the Role of Social Cognition in Structuring Religions Intuitions," to illustrate this point. Barrett's article reports an inverse correlation between ritual precision and concepts of powerful, attentive, "smart" Gods. In cases where people pray or perform rituals to communicate with a smart God, punctilious ritual performance or precise prayer formulations were less important than the suppliant's intention inasmuch God knows the person's intention, even if the performance or recitation errs. By contrast, precision in prayer or ritual implied "dumb" gods, typical of polytheism or magic who did not know the intention of the suppliant.

[105] Stark, *Discovering God*, 5. Earlier, he provides a more formal definition of theology as "explanations that justify and specify the terms of exchange with Gods, based on reasoning and revelation" (Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," 111).

propositions with respect to the actual history of religions. For example, history demonstrates that godless religions, such as elite Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism, cannot compete with godly religions, such as popular Buddhism or Hinduism, because they do not offer an attractive image of the gods who are willing and able to provide rewards for their suppliants.

4. Religious Commitment

Further, Stark measures the potency of different images of God in terms of religious commitment, "the degree to which humans promptly meet the terms of exchange with a god or gods as specified by the explanations of a given religious organization."[106] Corresponding to Rappaport's distinction between acceptance and belief[107], commitment consists of (1) objective religious commitment, namely, faithful public conduct, e.g., ritual participation; and (2) subjective religious commitment, namely, the interior, intellectual-emotional, private sphere of convictions and feelings which differs from secular experience only insofar as it is directed to a religious object.[108] Unlike Rappaport, however, certain images or concepts of God (the "divine" in Rappaport's parlance) – not ritual performance *per se* – not only cause religion commitment but even generate exclusive life-long commitments that are proper to monotheism and lastly, are the true source of the sanctification of the moral order.[109]

5. Monotheism

It follows therefore that monotheisms will usually out compete other non-monotheistic religions because they more effectively offer rewards and religious explanation. Monotheistic theologies present a God who is: (1) conscious as opposed to an unconscious force; (2) rational as opposed to arbitrary; (3) responsive and interested as opposed to indifferent or aloof; (4) dependable and trustworthy as opposed to capricious and mendacious; and (5) infinite in scope, namely, omnipotent, omniscient, etc.[110] Consequently, monotheistic concepts of God appeal to human beings because they can offer a plethora of worldly and especially otherworldly goods, in particular immortality. These images engender strong, abiding religious commitment because "belief in the One True God maximizes the capacity to mobilize human actions on behalf of religion,"

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[106] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 103.

[107] Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 119-124,

[108] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 104. This claims follows from the rational choice axiom, whether a thin or thick version thereof.

[109] Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science", 113

[110] Stark, *One True God*, 19-22.

e.g., missionizing, or persisting as a minority in a Diaspora.[111] Whether in the face of persecution and exile, or the wear and tear of daily existence, monotheist religions are more likely to persist inasmuch as they possess a stronger capacity to motivate human choices over the long term. This conclusion reinforces the claim that certain images of God sustain the moral order of groups or societies. It also alludes to the life cycles of a given religion, a question treated below.

If monotheism represents progress in cultural evolution, it entails, like all such advances, new challenges. For example, monotheist theologies, unlike polytheist or godless theologies, must provide an adequate account for the problem of evil, namely, a theodicy, insofar as the presence of evil and suffering contradicts the image of an all-powerful, all-good, loving God. In Stark's scheme, he refers to religions that recognize an evil being opposed to God such as Satan as dualistic monotheisms.[112] This solution seeks to disassociate God from evil in the world and further underscores that God supports the moral order inasmuch as it reflects his goodness and justice and rejects the evil that opposes his will. The corresponding emergence of concepts of sin and salvation in the evolution of religion likewise marks a significant turning point that accelerated the expansion of monotheistic religions in India, Persia and Israel and the civilizations they fostered (see below).

B. Religious Economy – Macro-Level Mechanism

In this account, Stark detects a progression in human belief about God that appears to move towards monotheism. Understanding his argumentation requires the introduction of another critical element of his theory: the religious economy,[113] namely, the environment wherein religious organizations compete to survive and thrive. A major change in perspective from the old to new paradigm is the shift from demand-side analysis, which tends towards a psychological explanation, to a supply side analysis, which tends towards a social explanation. Namely, the study of religion must explain individual religious choices within a social context wherein availability of religious options rather than demand for religion drives religious vitality. The concept of the religious economy, borrowed from economics and inspired by Adam Smith, introduces a framework

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[111] Stark, *One True God*, 176,

[112] Stark, *One True God*, 19-25.

[113] "…a religious market consists of *all the activities going on in a society: a "market" of current and potential adherents, a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract and maintain adherents, and the religious culture offered by the organization(s)*" (Stark, *Discovering God*, 116; emphasis original).

for making predictions about rates of religious participation as well as the life cycles of religions and religious organizations.[114]

Assuming market equilibrium and stable religious preferences (Gary Becker's second and third assumptions), Stark and Finke assume that any religious economy should segment into niches of tension vis-à-vis society according to a bell-shaped curve standard deviation that clusters around the center of the distribution (moderate/conservative)[115]. Though Stark and Finke employ the term "liberal," the sense of the term as implied by its juxtaposition with "strict," suggests for clarity's sake, the term, "permissive." Drawn from the work of Weber and Troeltsch, "tension" appears to reflect a certain Protestant self-understanding, namely, the need to see oneself as a righteous community set apart from a sinful world.[116] Stark and Finke maintain that pluralism represents the natural state of the religious economy (market equilibrium) inasmuch as it permits multiple religious organizations to satisfy each market niche.[117] Conceptually, religious organizations consist of: (1) low-tension, accommodated large churches that accept the social order; and (2) high-tension, alienated small sects that reject the social order.[118] Stark and Finke predict that religious commitment positively correlates to a religious organization's oppositional stance vis-à-vis society. On average, therefore, sects possess many highly committed members but are few in number, whereas churches have in general fewer highly committed members but are many in number.

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[114] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 36.

[115] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 195-198. See figure 6, "Hypothetical Distribution of Tension across Religious Niches" from very low to very high: Ultra-liberal/Liberal/ Moderate/Conservative/Strict/Ultra-Strict, 197.

[116] As such, its applicability to other religious environments, such as India, or religious organizations, like the Catholic Church, has been questioned (Alles, "Religious Economics and Rational Choice," 91). Stark has addressed aspects of these cases: India (*Discovering God*, 210-244) and the Catholic Church (*Acts of Faith,* 218-259; see also *The One True God*, *For the Glory of God*, *The Victory of Reason*).

[117] "Niches are market segments of potential adherents sharing particular religious preferences (needs, tastes, and expectations)" (Stark, *Acts of Faith*, 195; Stark, *Discovering God*, 119). Critics argue that one religious organization rather than competing religious organizations might also be able to reach different market niches simultaneously, M. Carroll, "Stark Realities and Eurocentric/Androcentric Bias in the Sociology of Religion," 232-235.

[118] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 143-144. The German Protestant theologian and philosopher, Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), defined the concepts of "church" and "sect" as they are used in sociology (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 154).

1. Competition

While pluralism refers to the presence of numerous religious organizations, it does not necessarily lead to another key feature of religious economy, namely, competition.[119] Pluralistic religious economies may be highly regulated, though they may still produce high religious commitment when they serve as primary organizational vehicles in social conflicts[120]. On the other hand, an unregulated religious economy features vigorous competition to satisfy each niche's demand. In an unregulated competitive religious economy, Stark and Finke predict higher overall levels of religious vitality, namely, more people join religious organizations because more religious options are available to meet different preferences[121]. This prediction, that competitive pluralism and participation positively correlate, directly opposes the old paradigm, which predicts a negative correlation[122]. Competition for religious adherents, moreover,

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[119]"Competition is one of those concepts that is very difficult to measure, except indirectly" (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 218). Studies determine the degree of competition as an inference from the application of Herfindahl Index, an economic measurement of market concentration, to a religious market. This index assigns a value between zero (one religious organization) and a little less than one (when there are many religious organizations of the same size). This measure better represents actual choices than the raw number of religious organizations. In a religious economy dominated by one or two large religious organizations, actual choice (competition) is much lower than the total number of religious organizations.

[120] For example, in post-reformation Europe, Catholics and Protestants often lived in the same places; hence, theirs was a pluralistic religious economy. Yet, in many such cases, they employed formal and informal restrictions to prevent conversion that effectively suppressed competition. Moreover, religious organizations enjoyed higher commitments in these polarized environments than in monopolistic situations. Cf. B. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religion Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe.*

[121] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 201. Norwegian biologist, Bjørn Grinde, draws a similar conclusion: "For society as a whole, however, there are advantages in having a plethora of congregations. Individuals differ in how they relate to spirituality, so in order to offer as many people as possible a constructive relationship with the Divine, a variety of creeds is preferable" (Grinde, "Can Science Promote Religion for the Benefit of Society?" 287).

[122] In 2002, D. Voas, D. Olsen and A. Crockett declared that most of the empirical research on the correlation between participation and pluralism – whether in favor of the secularization thesis or the religious economy model – must be reevaluated because "we find no compelling methodologically unproblematic research that shows a genuine relationship between pluralism and participation" (Voas – Olson. – Crockett, "Religious Pluralism: Whey Previous Research is Wrong," 230). They draw this conclusion because "We find that nonzero correlations will occur for mathematical reasons that depend only on the size distributions of the denominations in a data set across geographical units"

causes innovative and effective religious organizations to arise and others to disappear.[123]   The composition of a religious economy changes as religious organizations pass through different phases of their life cycles.[124]

2. Life Cycle of a Religious Organization

Every religious organization begins as a sect that responds to a neglected niche at the stricter end of the distribution.   These stricter niches become available as earlier sects transform into churches.   Sects may begin as reform movements within a church, such as the Methodists within the Church of England, or new religions – either from abroad or within a society, such

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(215). They urge caution about this key aspect of Stark's theory, but not the whole body of evidence: "Before proceeding, it is important to clarify that we are not claiming that all research relating to religious economies model is subject to the problem we describe— only the work related to pluralism. Finke and Stark have used other independent variables that are not subject to these problems (e.g., the religious market share of a denomination and measures of state regulation of religion). Nevertheless, pluralism has played a central role in their work" (214). Citing this article as support, Alles incorrectly claims, "More consequential was a mathematical error in the analysis of a large dataset, undiscovered for ten years, that allowed Stark and his colleagues to insist that these data provided evidence for a positive correlation between religious plurality and religious participation; the correlation was actually inverse" (Alles, "Religious Economic and Rational Choice," 82). Alles' claim of "an inverse correlation," however, is not supported by Voas, Olsen and Crockett: "Although the evidence is highly circumstantial, a case can therefore be made that pluralism actually has little or no effect on participation…the onus is now on proponents of the rival theories to demonstrate that pluralism actually has an effect on religious involvement" (230). They doubt *any* correlation between pluralism and participation.

[123] Stark, *Discovering God*, 120.

[124] For example, the Congregationalists, namely, English Separatist Calvinists, migrated from the ultra-strict niche, which they held upon their arrival in the American colonies, to liberal/ultra-liberal niche as the United Church of Christ (a 1957 merger of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reform Church, itself a merger of two earlier denominations in 1934). In 1776, Congregationalists accounted for 20.4% of the American Christians, dropping to 4.0% in 1850 (Stark – Finke, *The Churching of America 1776-1990,* 54-55). According to UCC 2008 annual report, they number 1.1 million members: http://www.ucc.org/about-us/2008-annual-report.html. In 2008, they accounted for 0.46% of U.S. Christians. Calculations based on the survey of Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life that 78% of Americans were Christians: http://www.america.gov/st/diversityenglish/2008/March/20080317160257zjsredna0.8236 048.html. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2008 the U.S. population was 304,059,724: http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html. Thus, the number of Christians was 237,166,585. For a thorough exposition of the life cycles of various religious organizations in U.S. history, see Stark – Finke, *The Churching of America 1776-1990.* [All links accessed August 2012.]

Christians in ancient Rome or Mormons in the United States of America. Sects attract adherents insofar as the have high membership costs (thereby avoiding the free rider problem of churches) as well as a plethora of worldly and otherworldly rewards, both of which contribute to high religious commitment.[125]

Successful sects, however, usually evolve into churches. American Protestant theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962), proposed in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, that sects become churches by migrating from the small ultra-strict/strict standard distributions (15.0%) to the richer conservative/moderate standard deviations (68.0%).[126] Recall that the distribution of the religious economy more or less follows a standard division, meaning that the two middle niches, moderate/conservative, account for 68%, the next two, liberal/strict, 27.2%, and the extreme ends, ultra-liberal/ultra-strict a mere 4.8% of the total market. Stark and Bainbridge call this process "secularization" because a sect accommodates to the world by lowering its tension.[127] Accordingly, growth entails secularization since only by reducing tension with society (the world) can a sect access the much larger niches. Furthermore, even if a sect does wishes to grow – and many do not and consequently never become churches[128] – its prospects are not good inasmuch as competition will be especially fierce because the largest niches (moderate/conservative tension = 68%) in an unregulated religious economy will tend to be over-supplied by existing religious organizations. Most sects will never be able to become churches due to a lack of opportunity. From this perspective, sects must grow or risk irrelevance or even extinction.

At the same time, however, growth costs because there is a reciprocal inverse relationship between commitment and growth. As a body grows membership commitment diminishes on average. As a sect moves away from high tension with society, some members may depart for stricter denominations, leaving the growing sect on average more numerous, but with fewer highly

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[125] In rational choice theory, "free riding" refers to a strategy by which one pays the minimum costs possible to obtain the benefits of membership. Especially a problem for churches, sects more effectively exclude free riding members because of the high costs for membership.

[126] "H. Richard Niebuhr wrote *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* in order to explain the "evils of denominationalism" (1929, 21). In recognizing the existence of a cyclical process by which sects are born transformed, and born again, he made an important (if grudging and often vituperative) contribution to social theory" (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 217).

[127] Stark –Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, 1-2.

[128] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 207-208.

committed members,[129] thereupon introducing free riding.   Additionally, fundamental physical constraints – time, space and quantity – impose further costs by weakening the density of the sect's social network of the membership,[130] as well as causing the emergence and professionalization of an administration class to govern the burgeoning religious organization.[131]   Increasing ties to society due to secularization (increasing permissiveness/ diminution of tension) creates a feedback loop that intensifies pressure to reduce the costs of membership due to lingering high-tension/strictness.

Once the very source of the growth, secularization eventually causes the church to decline as it migrates to the low-tension, highly accommodated, smaller liberal and ultra-liberal niches. Once such low-tension churches in an unregulated religious economy cease to grow and thereafter shrink, they tend to disappear through merger.[132] Decline and extinction, however, are not inevitable because a church's leadership may adopt a policy of "de-secularization," that brings them back to the larger niches at the middle of distribution, i.e., moderate and conservative.[133] If this fails to occur, revival movements often separate from the church to form new high-tension sects, which occasionally succeed in forming entirely new religions.[134] Assessing these life cycle claims, Alles gives a nuanced judgment, noting that this life cycle theory fits well the history of Methodism in the United States, but may not have much relevance to Hinduism.[135]

It should be clear that in the light of this approach churches rise and fall according to the life cycle of any religious organization. Consequently, the new paradigm offers an alternative to the secularization thesis, which explains the same phenomenon as an entailment of a particular phase of human cultural evolution, i.e., modernization. Stark and Bainbridge contend that the decline of religious organizations reflects nothing other than the normal life cycle of such a

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[129] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 154.

[130] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 157-162.

[131] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 162-168.

[132] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 206.

[133] Stark cites the example of the victory of the "church of piety" over the "church of laxity" or the "church of power," equivalent to high and low tension respectively, during the Catholic/Counter-Reformation, which incurred benefits as well as costs for the Catholic Church (Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 117-119; Stark, *One True God*, 159-160).

[134] Stark, – Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion,* 3.

[135] Alles, "Religious Economics and Rational Choice," 93.

social enterprise, and that even though individual religious organizations disappear, religion as a human response to the exigencies of existence will not.[136]

Free, unregulated religious economies, however, are historically rare,[137] insofar as monopolies, whether polytheistic temple religions or monotheisms, have been the usual state of affairs.[138] Since a monopoly cannot adequately respond to the normal distribution of religious preferences, from ultra-liberal (ultra-permissive) to ultra-strict, it can only maintain its singular position through coercion, whatever form this takes: restrictions on or suppression of other religious organizations, official establishment, financial support, legal privileges, etc. Furthermore, it is predicted that no religious monopoly can satisfy the preferences of all niches since demands varies from ultra-strict to ultra-liberal.[139]

Once a religious organization achieves a monopoly, a process of "sacralization" occurs in which the symbols, rituals and rhetoric of a church pervade the entire society, "a social phenomenon so often mistaken for universal piety."[140] As history amply attests, many will, however, choose to participate in the official religion only minimally.[141] Therefore, the extent of regulation of a religious economy negatively correlates with religious vitality, namely, highly regulated monopolistic economies produce low vitality and vice versa.[142] Additionally, low religious vitality correlates with ineffectual religious socialization that leads to the proliferation of idiosyncratic and heterodox religiosity.[143]

Since the natural state of the religious economy is pluralism, if a state church monopoly ends and the religious economy is deregulated, "de-

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[136] "Religion, namely, the gods, will exist as long as human beings desire good that only god provide…or human must become gods themselves" (Stark, – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion,* 23).

[137] Stark cites ancient Rome and ancient India (*Discovering God*, 155, 248), and in the modern world, the United States of America.

[138] Stark, *Discovering God*, 120-121.

[139] "The importance of niches for the overall religious economy lies in the fact that they make it impossible for one religious organization to satisfy demand" (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 198).

[140] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 199,

[141] Rappaport observed that this is the fundamental question for any liturgical order: to participate, namely, what he calls acceptance, because this is a public, visible, certain act, unlike private, interior belief, which can only be accessed by inference through actions or choices or by interpretation of statements, both of which may be vague, ambiguous and thus, uncertain.

[142] Stark, *Discovering God*, 121.

[143] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 203.

sacralization" of the society will take place, resulting in "a general increase in individual religious commitment as more firms (and more motivated firms) gain free access to the market."[144] The transition through de-sacralization to a free religious market may be very slow for a variety of reasons, including apparent rather then genuine religious freedom, cultural inertia and the development of social networks. Characteristic of this lag is the appearance of a decline in piety – an atheistic secularization – rather then the correct diagnosis of lingering apathy from the earlier monopolistic conditions, where choice was reduced to participation or non-participation in one religious body. In the end, Stark and Bainbridge predict that the "Final separation of church and state will be healthy for religion, for what it loses in coercive power it will gain in spiritual virtue."[145] They mean of course healthy for religion in general, but not necessarily for specific religious organizations, especially the former monopoly church.

Reviewing the historical record of European (and Latin American) monopolistic state churches and the evidence of low religious vitality, Stark finds another reason to argue against the secularization-as-consequence-of-modernization thesis. Against the myth of a religious past, Stark argues that much of northern and western Europe was never really Christianized (and hence most likely to have the lower rates of participation in a religious organization), most laypeople had little contact with the church beyond occasional visits for baptisms, weddings and funerals, and the clergy were often untrained, ignorant and unmotivated.[146] Low rates of attendance, do not, in Stark's reckoning, equate with atheism or a lack of religiosity. Recall that Stark measures religiosity by beliefs, not practices; a society qualifies as "religious" if the majority of people profess belief in God, the supernatural, etc., even if they are not participating members of religious organizations.[147]

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[144] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 200.

[145] Stark, – Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, 529.

[146] The American Catholic sociologist, Andrew Greeley, concurs, "There could be no de-Christianization of Europe…because there never was any Christianization in the first place. Christian Europe never existed" (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 68).

[147] Stark states, "the claim that Europe is irreligious is based on low levels of church attendance. But, as I have long argued, lack of attendance reflects ineffective churches rather than a lack of faith, since religious belief remains high across the continent…. Consider that after more than 70 years of intense atheist indoctrination in the Soviet Union combined with discrimination against religious people), only 4 percent of Russians today say they are atheists (compared with 3 percent of Italians and 4 percent of American" (M. Introvigne, "A Christmas Conversation with Rodney Stark," December 25, 2007).

British sociologist, Grace Davies, introduce the phrase "believing but not belonging" to describe the data of empty churches, yet on-going religious interest and belief in contemporary Britain.[148] Observing the same phenomenon, Stark maintains that European subjective religiosity on average has not only remained constant during the twentieth century,[149] it is higher than it was during the "age of faith" of medieval Europe,[150] and is moreover consistent with the levels predicted for desacralized societies that still lack competitive unregulated religious economies.[151] In sum, Stark and his colleagues hold that secularization

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[148] G. Davies, "Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?" 455-467.

[149] Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 68.

[150] Stark, *Discovering God*, 329.

[151] The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's 2009 survey, *Global Restrictions on Religion*, reports that Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Latvia, Slovakia and Ukraine moderately regulate religion and Belarus, Bulgaria, Greece, Moldova, Russia, Serbia and Turkey highly regulate religion.

Perhaps surprisingly, given its many laws and conventions promoting the protection of human rights, Europe has a median score (1.9) that is slightly higher than sub-Saharan Africa's (1.4) and the Americas' (1.0). The relatively high government restrictions score for Europe's 45 countries is due in part to former Communist countries…. But a number of countries in Western Europe also have scores above the region's median. They include Germany, France and Austria, which have laws aimed at protecting citizens from what the government considers dangerous cults or sects (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Global Restrictions on Religion*, 15).

The study's metric seems to lead to questionable conclusions about religious liberty, however, when, for example, the suppression of an individual's expression of religious faith is interpreted as a sign of low regulation:

Countries with low government restrictions generally have moderate restrictions on few or none of the measures [20 measurements to determine religious regulation]. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the head of state is also the head of the Church of England, yet the government does not always favor the officially established church. For example, during the period covered by this study, a British court allowed employers to require Christians to hide their religious symbols in the workplace while not requiring the same of other Faiths (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Global Restrictions on Religion*, 10).

Evidently countries qualified as exhibiting low regulation in the Pew study may nonetheless discriminate. Stark cites the 2006 Grim-Finke that distinguishes between: (1) governmental regulation of religion index (GRI); (2) government favoritism index (GFI) (to a single, often official, religion); and (3) social regulation index. In terms of the GFI, the United States, Taiwan, and Australia scored zero, meaning no government favoritism towards a specific religion (namely, authentic non-discriminatory neutrality), whereas many continental European countries, which scored low on the GRI, nevertheless score higher on the GFI, indicating partiality for a specific church (Grim – Finke, "International Religious Indexes"). Accordingly, many western European countries remain far from an

is the normal feature of the life cycle of any religious organization that first promotes growth and leads to its decline. When a secularizing sect becomes an official church, it will intensify this process insofar as the state tends to suppress competition. Given the frustrating lack of religious options, religious vitality will decline and participation and socialization will be correspondingly weak. Desacralization and restoration of the natural state of competitive pluralism will in time restore religious participation to its equilibrium, about 65% of a given population.[152]

V. Criticisms

Given the new paradigm's provocations, criticisms from constructive to dismissive ensued.[153] Carroll characterizes the theory as biased inasmuch as it is American (competitive pluralism), male (rationality), and Stark's view of religiosity is "Protestant...with its emphasis on 'intensity' and 'day-to-day' experience."[154] Anticipating accusations of bias, Stark and Bainbridge assert "once a theory has been developed and published, it must stand on its own merits – its clarity, its parsimony, its scope, and its ability to continue to survive collisions with appropriate facts."[155] Beyond bias, Carroll claims that Stark's theory collides with the facts about the Catholic Church because Stark wrongly conceptualizes it as a monolithic body. Rather, Carroll contends, the Catholic Church exhibits great internal pluralism in Catholic countries, whereas it tends

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unregulated, competitive religious market and thus exhibit low rates of participations in religious organizations (Stark, *Discovering God*, 331).

[152] "The proportion of Americans who actually belong to a specific church congregation (as opposed to naming a religious preference when asked) has hovered around 65 percent for many decades—showing no tendency to respond even to major economic cycles. Perhaps that is about the ceiling under conditions of modern living. In any event, it is vital to keep in mind how long it too for the free play of pluralism in America to produce this result" (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 257).

[153] Before the publication of the theory in *The Future of Religion* (1985) and *A Theory of Religion* (1987), and after having reviewed the work in progress, R. Wallis and S. Bruce declared in 1984 that: "We should frankly state at the outset that we regard the exercise as entirely misconceived. Nonetheless the attempt has been a noble one and deserves the highest standards of critical appraisal" (Wallis – Bruce, "The Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Religion: A Critical Analysis and Counter Proposals," 11).

[154] M. P. Carroll, "Stark Realities and Eurocentric/Androcentric Bias in the Sociology of Religion," 227-231.

[155] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 23-24.

to exhibit greater internal unity in pluralistic environments where it is a denomination among others.[156]

Carroll's claim of "androcentrism" introduces a set of criticism that concern Stark's use of rational choice theory and its meaning for religion. Chaves doubts the universal scope of the maximizing assumption of behavior, thus, he concludes, depriving the theory of its predictive capability.[157] Demerath wonders if the understanding of rationality is adequate insofar as there are competing and overlapping understandings of rationality that consist of: (1) a micro-level cost-benefit analysis; and (2) macro-level systematic calculability that is corporately routinized and culturally embedded, which simply put, means that many choices are not choices at all but really the results of patterns and organizational procedures[158] (this is a type of a latent functionalist explanation). Ellison advises the need to account for how cultural embeddedness and social pressures affect preferences and thereby limit choice.[159] In *Acts of Faith*, Stark and Finke respond, noting differences between on the one hand a theory and its predictions, and on the other hand how various factors influence outcomes in the real world. Further, though rationality remains the fundamental postulate for human activity, they have adopted a "thick" sociological understanding that qualifies rational choice.

The interpretation of choice vis-à-vis religion is at the heart of the third objection as seen above. This dispute addresses the meaning of secularization and its connection to modernization. Originating in economic theory, rational choice theory conceptualizes human beings as rational insofar as they use a cost-benefit analysis to maximize rewards and minimize costs.[160] Religious preferences like secular ones are stable, but options depend on the market conditions (unregulated, regulated, monopoly). Stark, therefore, predicts that religious vitality increases in an environment of pluralistic competition. Choice invigorates religious participation and religious organizations (even as it also leads to the extinction of others). Greater religious liberty means a wide spectrum of choice.

By contrast, functionalists focus on religion's binding function to create social cohesion and protect society from the corrosive effects of human desire run

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[156] Stark develops a more nuanced view of the Catholic Church – as evinced by his taxonomy of the church of piety and the church of power within.

[157] M. Chaves, "On the Rational Choice Approach to Religion," 99.

[158] Demerath, III, "Rational Paradigms, A-Rational Religion, and the Debate Over Secularization," 107.

[159] C. G. Ellison, "Rational Choice Explanations of Individual Religious Behavior: Notes on the Problems of Social Embeddedness."

[160] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 48.

wild. Choice, therefore, opposes the pacifying function of religion insofar as it elevates individual self-interest over the group. Since historically human beings are socialized into a religion rather than electing to join one, choosing to profess a religion seems to be contrary to the very sense of the word insofar as it dissolves its power to bind people together regardless of their desires and wishes. In this construal, choice and religion are contradictory. While socialization does play a major role in passing on religion from one generation to the next (hence the attractiveness of the practice of infant baptism from a purely natural point of view), some religions, such as Christianity or Islam, value highly the notion of choice inasmuch as it expresses the free decision to enter into relationship with God.

Further, rational choice appears to favor economization, namely, the application of cost-benefit analysis to a phenomenon. Thus, Bruce (and probably Rappaport) would expect this form of rationality to undermine religion, which has traditionally served as the most important constraint of unfettered economization (or monetization in Rappaport's thought). Modernization relegates religion to the private-leisure sphere of life, unleashing universal economization (which in Rappaport's view positively threatens life on earth). If modernization entails the elimination of traditional religious or cultural limits on economization so that more and more activities and their products are converted into commodities, then, Bruce concludes that rational choice is itself evidence for the secularization thesis,[161] and that religious markets and pluralism by their very existence signify the decline of religion, not the natural state of affairs.[162] Demerath concludes similarly.[163]

Implicit in the foregoing criticism is the Durkheimian functionalist view in which religion plays the essential role of fostering social cohesion. Ritual integrates individuals with their particular desires and preferences, subordinating them to the good of the whole. Consequently, the exaltation of rational choice seemingly subverts religion's anti-selfish, pro-group function

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[161] Bruce, "Religion and Rational Choice: A Critique of Economic Explanations for Religious Behavior," 204.

[162] "I am hardly the first to point out that only one hell-bent on having it both ways can argue both that secularization has been proved wrong and that religion has become a matter of individual rational choice within a religious market" (Demerath, III, "Rational Paradigms, A-Rational Religion, and the Debate Over Secularization," 108).

[163] "The real possibility of treating religion as a matter of choice suggests a rending of the old "religious" canopies. Of course, this is precisely Berger's point regarding the rise of religious markets as evidence of secularization, not a rebuttal of it" (Demerath, III, "Rational Paradigms, A-Rational Religion, and the Debate over Secularization," 107-108).

because it is both a sign of and support for the tearing asunder of social bonds. As has been seen, however, Stark does not uphold a strict concept of rational choice as cost-benefit analysis.   Rather, in proposing his thick, sociological understanding of rational choice, he aims: (1) to protect the claim that religion is as reasonable as any secular activity; and (2) to postulate an axiom from which he can derive propositions, make definitions, and predict or prohibit outcomes to be verified or falsified empirically.

A related critique comes from Wilson, whose evolutionary approach, that bears a kinship to functionalism, maintains the rationality of religion without resorting to rational choice axioms.   Proposing instead that religions are "adaptive units,"[164] whose properties produce secular utility for their groups, namely, adaptations, Wilson argues that Stark's theory by contrast leads to the conclusion that religions are non-adaptive evolutionary byproducts.[165] (Dawkins and many other also ascribes to a byproduct explanation for religion.[166])   He makes this judgment based on Stark's definition of religion[167] and its interaction with three rational choice axioms,[168] which imply in evolutionary terms that religion is a non-adaptive psychological malfunction.[169] As such, religion persists only because human beings cannot manage their desires well.   For example, following the logic of the argument, if they could limit their desires to obtainable

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[164] Human groups bound together in moral communities, whose unity stems from religion (rather than from genetics as kinship theory maintains) as a unifying system (Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 20-25).

[165] A byproduct is a non-adaptive, non-functional, secondary outcome of evolution, literally, useless. "Gould and Lewontin…said that many biological structures are like a spandrel, which is the area created by two adjoining arches. Arches are clearly functional in the design of a building but spandrels are merely the byproducts of arches…. Similarly, noses hold up our glasses, but this "function" of noses is clearly secondary to breathing and smelling" (Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 44).

[166] "I am one of an increasing number of biologists who see religion as a by-product of something else" (Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 200).

[167] "Religion consists of very general explanations that justify and specify the terms of exchange with a god or gods" (Stark, "Micro Foundations of Religion: A Revised Theory," 270). A year later, Stark and Finke revised the definition to: "Religion consists of the very general explanation of existence, including the terms of exchange with a god or gods." In the new revision, (1) they eliminate the plural on explanation; (2) leave space for elements beyond the terms of exchange; and (3) drop out the verbs "justify" and "specify." Nevertheless, they keep the thrust of the definition on ideas and concepts rather than action or rituals because they want to investigate the causal link from ideas to actions (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 91-96).

[168] (1) Human beings try to make rational choice; (2) they attempt to make explanations; and (3) they evaluate these on the basis of the results.

[169] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 49.

goods, then religion would disappear.   Stark and Bainbridge, however, are agnostic about this outcome: "If we find a solution to all existential problems – if we become eternal beings, living in a world without worry or want – then too religion might vanish. Or would it?"[170]   As their theory has progressed, they have recognized that religion is more than a provider of otherworldly goods and Stark has written extensively in the last decade about the worldly consequences of religion. Still, Wilson's charge remains unchallenged.   It does appear at least according to the original version of their theory that religion is a byproduct of human desires and choices. Of course, Stark has taken the theory in new directions by applying it to the history of monotheism, especially Christianity, wherein he has found a role for divine revelation (see below).

Wilson also criticizes Stark for missing religion's answer to the fundamental question of social life, namely, how to coordinate selfish individuals.[171] Wilson equates functionalism with purpose. Stark also believes that religion has a purpose: "to overcome genetic limitations on human power by recourse to the supernatural; a function that does not, however, explain its origin."[172] Stark clearly holds that religion has mundane functions as his more recent writings on the relationship between belief and morality,[173] the evolution of religion to monotheism,[174] and the role of Christianity in producing prosperity, freedom and science[175], amply demonstrate. In respect, Wilson and Stark do not really disagree: both acknowledge the religions' importance to human existence.

Stark, however, finds that functionalism cannot explain the origin of religion even if it might explain what is does. Further, he objects to functionalist claims to reveal the real, hidden reason for religious belief and behavior, often dismissing out of hand the manifest or intentional reason.[176] He finds inadequate

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[170] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion,* 324.

[171] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 49. In 2001, Stark appears to reply directly to this observation in his treatment of pluralism and civility in the first volume of his study on monotheism: "it is useful to begin with *the* social question: how can a fundamentally selfish creature be induced to live in harmony?" (Stark, *One True God*, 219).

[172] Stark, *Discovering God*, 45.

[173] Stark, "Gods, Rituals and the Moral Order."

[174] Stark, *The One True God* and *For the Glory of God.*

[175] "There are many reasons people embrace Christianity, including its capacity to sustain a deeply emotional and existentially satisfying faith. But another significant factor is its appeal to reason and the fact that it is so inseparably liked to the rise of Western Civilization. For many non-Europeans, becoming Christian is intrinsic to becoming modern. Thus it is quite plausible that Christianity remains an essential element in the globalization of modernity" (Stark, *The Victory of Reason*, 235).

[176] "Durkheim had not wavered in his conviction that the Gods are peripheral to religion, noting the apparent purpose of rituals is 'strengthening the ties between the

Durkheim's fuzzy definition of religion[177] – a virtue to Wilson[178] – because it fails to define "sacred things" other than that they are "set apart and forbidden," and mistakenly excludes any supernatural agents on account of its atheistic presuppositions. For Stark, the supernatural is decisive inasmuch as it provides a key to distinguishing conceptually between magic, science and religion,[179] and further, because the supernatural explanations which religions offer provide meaning and purpose for human existence. Thus, for example, specific images of God (supernatural explanations), not rituals in themselves or genetically coded psychological traits,[180] most greatly influence human behavior. Even when imperfectly executed, Stark maintains that beliefs about the supernatural cause social coordination and cooperation, cultural evolution and innovation. Thus, he adamantly affirms reason's centrality in human behavior, despite biological, psychological, sociological and cultural limitations. Human beings are intentional agents, not merely objects of irrational forces.

Although Stark and Wilson disagree about the proper definition of religion and functionalism as an explanatory principle, both agree that religion is essential in generating morality and secular utility.[181] With Rappaport and functionalism, Stark and Wilson seek to explain religion in terms of its secular utility (an adaptation), rather than a malfunction, (a byproduct).[182] Wilson acknowledges that human beings require both explanations and meaning, namely, ("discovered" and "conventional truth" in Rappaport's schema) and "factual" and "practical truth" in his: "Much religious belief does not represent a form of mental weakness bur rather the healthy functioning of the biologically and culturally well-adapted human mind."[183] Wilson and Rappaport agree that the usefulness and adaptive potential of religion fits well the way evolution advances by trade-offs. Religion may misrepresent factual/discovered truth

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faithful and their god…the god being only a figurative representation of the society.' Thus began a new social-science orthodoxy: Religion consists of participation in rites and rituals—only" (Stark, *Discovering God*, 14).

[177] "A religion is a unified system of belief and practices to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 44).

[178] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 222.

[179] Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 40.

[180] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 223.

[181] Despite Wilson's criticisms of rational choice, J. Bulbulia and M. Frean judge rational choice and group selection compatible (Bulbulia – Frean, "Religion as Superorganism – On David Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral* (2002)," 187).

[182] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 82.

[183] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 228.

about history or nature, while simultaneously sustaining the practical /conventional truth necessary for morality and sociality. Unlike the New Atheists, Rappaport and Wilson assess religion positively, whether in the "cybernetics of the Holy" (Rappaport) or a "unifying system" (Wilson). Rappaport, Wilson and Stark affirm that religion is vital for human flourishing.[184]

VI. Assessment

A. The Question of God

As his theory developed, Stark has become increasingly convinced that methodological naturalism entails, not atheism, but openness to transcendence, the possibility of revelations[185] and even the discovery of God.[186] After revising his theory of religion (1980-2000), Stark shifted his attention to the expressions of belief—religious doctrines and their sources, i.e., revelations, meditation, wisdom. Neither functionalists nor Rappaport focus on the content of beliefs (Rappaport's "divine"), because they believed that they do not reveal anything important about the world. While they may be appealing or fascinating, studied as literature, and contribute to the understanding of the history of ideas or a culture, their role is nevertheless secondary, subordinated to ritual, in the search for a social scientific explanation of religion.

In contrast, Stark asserts that religion concerns the supernatural because it alone responds to the human longing to understand the purpose of life, a quest that ineluctably arrives at the question of God.[187] In *Discovering God*, in which he surveys the evolution of human images or concepts of God and the human capacity to understand God in order to give an account of the origins – not just

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[184] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 219-233.

[185] "The dominating scholarly perspective regards all revelations as purely psychological events and assume that the answer to where God was prior to Abraham's generation is that Yahweh hadn't been invented yet. That certainly was my view earlier in the 1980s when I wrote a chapter on the "Evolution of the Gods" (Stark, *Discovering God*, 3).

[186] "I fully agree with Hood (1985, 1997) that while methodological agnosticism represents good science, methodological atheism or theism is unscientific" (Stark, "A Theory of Revelation," 288).

[187] "To seek the purpose of life is to demand that it have one. The word purpose is not compatible with blind chance, but assumes the existence of intentions and motives. These assume a consciousness. For the universe to have a purpose, it must be directed by a conscious agent or agents, for the capacity to form plans or to have intentions is to be conscious…" (Stark – Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 39).

function – of religion,[188] he assesses whether beliefs have anything important and true to report about God and if so, what this might be. In investigating the origins of the major world religions, Starks presents the alternative between (1) religion as purely human invention and (2) religion as a result at least in part of divine revelation. He rejects altogether biological evolutionary scenarios as "unnecessary" insofar as they burden explanation with superfluous inventions, such as memes, ascribe to byproduct theories about obsolete malfunctioning psychology, and fail to recognize that cultural evolution is the product of human intelligence rather than evolution by natural selection.[189] Humans may invent God. They may also discover him. Stark maintains, nevertheless, that a proper scientific inquiry demands full consideration of all possibilities, excluding none due to an atheistic or a theistic premise, and a willingness to discriminate between religions that are true and those that are not.[190]

Adopting a Judeo-Christian principle of divine accommodation — "God's revelations are always limited to the current capacity of human to comprehend"[191] — Stark therefore searches for evidence of divine revelation in the history. He predicts that as religions evolve they should propose more comprehensive doctrines of God and morality than preceding ones. He names this "progressive complexity." Religious progress implies a concept of cultural evolution. An analogue to its biological kin, both explain change in time by means of struggle for existence, namely, the survival of the fittest, from which emerge better-adapted organisms – biological and cultural – that surpass their competitors, spread and increase. It is worth recalling that the phrase "survival of the fittest" appeared in the Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* before Darwin applied it to biological evolution.[192]

Biological evolution is governed principally by natural selection and genetic mutation, though historical contingencies such as natural disasters and artificial selection such as domestication and breeding of animals – both of which lie outside the governing biological mechanisms – contribute as well. Cultural evolution, understood as change but not necessarily progress, occurs predominantly through the tendency to accumulate those traits that appear more

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[188] Stark, *Discovering God*, 8.

[189] Stark, *Discovering God*, 43.

[190] "It is not illogical to argue that revelation do not occur and that *all* religions are of human origins, but is seems to me well beyond credibility to argue that *all* religions are to any significant true", *Discovering God*, 8.

[191] Stark, *Discovering God*, 5.

[192] The contextualization of their theories in 19th Century Britain does pose interesting questions about what other explanations or at least formulations for cultural or biological evolution might have been forthcoming in other societies.

rewarding and discard those that do not (a qualified restatement of rational choice that allows for poor evaluations; hence, "appears")[193]. While diverse factors constrain choice, human creativity and freedom nonetheless drive cultural evolution more than any natural law or process. Additionally, biological and cultural evolution differ in the accuracy of their modes of transmission of information, namely, high fidelity genetic replication, and low fidelity socialization of children. While errors do happen in genetic replication – random mutations – they are presumably more common in socialization.

Applying this basic model of cultural evolution to religion, Stark proposes *"humans will tend to adopt and retain images of God(s) that appear to provide greater satisfactions, both subjective and material…humans will prefer Gods to unconscious divine essences."*[194] In conformity with his theory, Stark concludes that religions that profess impersonal gods will not be able to compete with personal gods. He further predicts that human images of God will tend to progress from those having limited scope to greater scope, finally reaching infinite scope in monotheism. As has been seen already, monotheistic gods of infinite scope – loving, responsive, rational, powerful and active – are the most attractive images. At the same time, these images create new challenges, such as the problem of evil, which require the application of reasoning to propose possible answers, such as dualistic monotheisms.

The evolution of the images of God, however, does not reveal the origin of religion directly. While Dawkins and Hitchens espouse evolutionary byproduct theories of religious origins, and Rappaport that it emerges from the enactment of the ritual form, Stark maintains that if one follows the trail, one finds mystics, sages or prophets who are, at least, the human originators of religion. The differences in approach are startling since byproduct theories of religion seek explanations in the malfunction of various natural processes such as human psychology. Likewise, Rappaport gives a reductionist account on the basis of the ritual form. On the other hand, Stark argues that religions, like other cultural products, are the outcome of the creative response of an individual or a small group to the universal human predicament.[195] Better responses to life's meaning not only provide more satisfying answers, but also confer significant competitive advantages for a group, "adaptations," inasmuch as they motivate human beings to undertake new enterprises through intellectual insights and moral ordering. For example, Christianity's adherence to the reasonableness of God, the orderliness of His providence, the goodness and lawfulness of creation,

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[193] Stark, *Discovering God*, 9.
[194] Stark, *Discovering God*, 10.
[195] Stark, *Discovering God*, 43-44.

presented a theologically-influenced philosophical framework uniquely able to launch science as a method of discovery through reason and observation, insofar as creation is intelligible and its investigation praiseworthy.[196]

Religious innovators – individuals or small groups – provide new religious explanations. These may originate in meditation, mystical experiences or revelations. Buddha, Lao-Tzu, Confucius and the founders of Hinduism and Jainism seem to fall in the first category insofar as they did not claim to receive communications from God, but rather achieved new insights or enlightenment by meditation, wisdom or asceticism.[197] On the other hand, other religious innovators claimed to be recipients of revelations, "a communication believed to come from a supernatural source, usually from God, or to be divinely inspired knowledge.[198] On account of its atheistic assumptions, social scientists have generally denied revelations, instead concluding that recipients must be either frauds or insane. In the course of his research Stark abandoned this position, offering instead a theory of revelation that attempts to account for the fact that most religious innovators do not display mental illness and their self-sacrifices make fraud unlikely.

In Stark's analysis, revelations are commonplace events in which most people experience a word, a phrase or a thought as a divine communication. Most of these confirm existent religious truth. Occasionally, a recipient may perceive a new insight. Its source may either be human creativity as in the case of artistic genius, or it may be from beyond. The consequence may be reform or a new religious culture. Thus, the source of the latter are "certain rare individuals [who] have the capacity to perceive revelations, whether this be an openness or sensitivity to real communications from the supernatural or consists of unusual creativity enabling them to create profound new religious truths and then to externalize the source of this material."[199] New religious cultures, Stark observes, are most likely to emerge in times of crisis. The first task of the religious innovator begins with persuading others, usually family and relatives,

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[196] Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," 107.

[197] The same cannot be said for the subsequent evolution of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism since they become increasing godly overtime through a number of possible means including: (1) the inclusion of traditional folk religion; (2) subsequent revelations: and (3) contact with other religions (Stark, *Discovering God*, 391-92).

[198] Stark, *Discovering God*, 48.

[199] Stark, *Discovering God*, 50-51.

of the validity of the revelation, a pattern evident in the lives of many founders.[200]

Having developed a theoretical framework in which revelations might happen through religious innovators, Stark begins his inquiry with speculations about the earliest beliefs of human beings, who left no history and are much older the most ancient archaeological sites.[201] Reconstructing the earliest religious beliefs depends therefore on theories and modeling. Based on axioms, propositions and definitions, a deductive theory, whose validity depends on its internal logic and its utility on testable predictions, might illuminate the past. Stark's cultural explanation of the origin of religion rests in part on his rational choice assumptions about human behavior as well as the universal human desire to possess unobtainable goods, e.g., immortality. A model, on the other hand, induces from current examples of presumably similar phenomena, such as the religious beliefs of Australian aborigines, to devise an inductive theory that may illuminate the past, e.g. Durkheim's totemism.

Unimpressed by the classic 19th Century-early 20th Century social science explanations for early religious beliefs from Max Müller (naturalism), Edward Burnett Taylor (animism), Herbert Spencer (ghost theory) and Emile Durkheim (totemism), Stark recovers the insights of Andrew Lang (1844-1912) and Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954). He adopts Lang's proposal that earliest humans worshiped a morally demanding high god and agrees that religious beliefs posited in the foregoing classic explanations evince a regression rather than progress in the concept of God. From Schmidt, Stark finds massive ethnological support to corroborate Lang and considers Schmidt's hypothesis of a primeval universal revelation plausible. In *Discovering God*, Stark sketches a monotheist narrative that extends from these earlier beliefs in a high god, to decadence under temple polytheism, and its reemergence and articulation through religious innovators, principally, Akhenaton, Zoroaster, the prophets of Israel, Jesus and Muhammad.[202] Besides this monotheist narrative, he contrasts major Asian religions in which revelations do not play a significant role, at least as far the founders were concerned.

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[200] Stark's claim about Jesus' family—namely, the late invention of the perpetual virginity of Mary and the reassignment of his brothers and sisters to the status of relatives—is, however, unconvincing insofar as it is brief (a mere two pages, *Discovering God*, 305-306), and does not consider counter-arguments (such as the word "brothers" does not denote siblings, but rather relations).

[201] Currently, the oldest man-made site of worship (ca. 10,000 B.C.) is the temple at Göbekli Tepe, in southeastern Turkey (Sandra Scham, "The World's Oldest Temple," http://www.archaeology.org/0811/abstracts/turkey.html, [accessed on August, 2012]).

[202] Stark, *Discovering God*, 54-63.

Whether revealed or not, the emergence of so many pivotal religious innovators in the Sixth Century B.C. (Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tzu, New Hinduism, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, deutero-Isaiah, the Deuteronomist school) begs the question. Borrowing the term, "Axial Age," from *The Origin and Goal of History* by Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), this period did not so much revolutionize theology as it witnessed the infusion of ethics to religion and philosophy, which are only anachronistically distinguishable. New ethical religions (sometimes called philosophies due to non-revelatory claims of their founders, namely, Confucius, Lao-Tzu, Buddha, Pythagoras) established morality insofar as the concepts of sin and salvation, personal responsibility and postmortem judgment gained salience. Leaving aside the question of their origins, these ethical religions conferred on adherents and their societies highly effective means of governing social affairs. Ethical religions addressed the social stress caused by the growth in size and scope of ancient civilizations through urbanization and political instability (China, India, Persia, Israel, Greece). Civilizations where these conditions were absent, namely, Egypt and Sumer, did not innovate ethical religion and therefore, did not acquire its advantages. Taking the position that the invention of ethical religion diffused from centers in India, Persia and Israel, these ethical religions may have influenced the evolution of originally elite godless religions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, into popular godly religions. The lag in this transition may account for the fact New Hinduism expunged elite godless Buddhism from India, its place of origin, but did not make great advances in China because by then these religions had evolved into godly religions.

Stark proposes three criteria, revelation, consistency, and progressive complexity, to determine whether religious innovations result from divine inspiration or human creativity. The first criterion distinguishes between revealed and non-revealed religions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, and Confucianism did not claim a divine warrant at their founding but discovery of the truth through meditation, wisdom or asceticism. Even conceding that Hinduism and Buddhism evolved, whether on account of diffusion from without or revelations from within, Stark nevertheless maintains that none of these major Asian religions contributed anything novel to human knowledge about God. The second criterion, consistency, contrasts doctrinal claims among religions, seeking to determine whether a coherent set of beliefs can be found across different religions and if so, whether this points to a fundamental unity. As promised, Stark contends that contradictory claims cannot both be true. Therefore, certain concepts of God and related ideas exclude others. A religion that professes the resurrection of the body for example cannot affirm the truth of reincarnation or the Platonic conception of the soul's relation to the body.

Doctrines of creation, salvation and eschatology as well as theology make different claims. The criterion of consistency seeks to find a body of doctrines common across revealed religions. Finally, progressive complexity sets this search within a historical horizon that predicts that concepts about God and related beliefs should develop. Having proposed criteria, Stark assesses the possibility of a divinely inspired core of revealed religions that stretch from a putative universal revelation reflected in the high god religions through Jewish and Zoroastrian prophecy and reaching its conclusion in Christ. According to his reckoning, Islam fails to qualify insofar as its conception of God regresses from Christianity.

At the conclusion of his study, Stark puts forward the rational (non-revealed) grounds for the belief in the existence of God. First, he appeals to the discovery of the historicity as opposed to the eternity of the universe, implying that this not only supports the intelligent designer who made the universe, but moreover made it possible for human beings to know this fact. Summarizing arguments developed elsewhere,[203] Stark describes features of the theological-philosophical framework necessary for the emergence of natural science, in particular the confident belief in the rationality and regularity of the universe, thereby making it intelligible to human beings. Drawing support from cosmology and biology, Stark contends that as science advances, the very existence of the universe and life become even more miraculous, driving him to the conclusion that the natural sciences are another kind of (non-revealed) theology that furnish knowledge about God.

B. Evolution and Theology

Stark is a bold thinker, unafraid to advocate unfashionable positions and to abandon the scholarly consensus to seek better explanations. The new paradigm, for all its faults and limitations, represents a genuine advance in the social scientific study of religion insofar as it eliminates atheistic prejudices, treats religion as a human activity as rational as any other, and delineates complementary domains for religion and science. Against the contemporary ethos of multiculturalism and relativism, Stark firmly argues that some religions are better than others in terms of their worldly effects. Regarding the former, he has demonstrated that Christianity has played an irreplaceable role in the rise of the natural sciences, the expansion of human freedom and the creation of prosperity. He even contends that some religions are true and others are not insofar as he has proposed a criteriology to discern the presence of divine

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[203] Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 121-201; Stark, *The Victory of Reason.*

revelation. In his opinion, Christianity presents the most advanced conception of God and is the most successful sect in human history. When necessary, Stark has redressed anti-religious, anti-Christian and anti-Catholic biases of other scholars. In so doing, he has rendered a great service to the social sciences in term of their scholarly integrity as well as to those wrongly accused of hindering human flourishing, advocating irrationality and promoting violence.

Evolutionary theory and Darwinism have also received Stark's attention. Indeed, in recent years, there is a marked change in tone and care from *For the Glory of God*,[204] in which he presents a nuanced, critical argument at length, to "Fact, Fable, and Darwin," which covers the same ground but comes to a decisive and dismissive conclusion, to *Discovering God*, where at the end of the book he suddenly adopts Intelligent Design.[205] In *For the Glory of God,* he admirably draws attention to the swift conscription of Darwin's theory of evolution in the atheist war against religion ("the Darwinian Crusade") by Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) in Britain and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) in Germany that continues to this day. There he aims to demonstrate that atheism, not science, nor even evolutionary theory, opposes religion. He argues, moreover, that the neo-Darwinian synthesis fails to explain the origin of species. Stark, however, makes no alternative proposal – he need not – but rather adverts to a survey, published in *Nature*, that 45% of biologists believe that God guides evolution.[206]

Two years later Stark starts right off asserting that there is no plausible theory of the origin of species and concludes this digest of the text from *For the Glory of God*:

> I believe that one day there will be a plausible theory of the origin of species. But, if and when that occurs, there will be nothing in any such theory that makes it impossible to propose that the principles involved were not part of God's great design any more than such a theory will demonstrate the existence of God. But while we wait, why not lift the requirement that high schools texts enshrine Darwin's failed attempt as an eternal truth.[207]

Finally, in 2007 after having briefly recounted the cosmological and biological arguments, he implies his agreement with Intelligent Design when he

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[204] Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 176-192.
[205] Stark, *Discovering God*, 397-399.
[206] Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 192.
[207] Stark, "Fact, Fable and Darwin," 44.

rejects the claim that the universe and life are ultimately the result of good fortune.[208]

Stark therefore stakes out a claim: evolutionary theory as it now stands is wrong and Intelligent Design appears to be a better alternative explanation. In this, he abandons his prudential counsel that one can rightly criticize a theory without proposing an alternative, for the putative inadequacies of the neo-Darwinian synthesis do not necessarily lead to Intelligent Design. Indeed, at its best Intelligent Design draws attention to gaps in evolutionary theory rather than presenting a useful alternative theory.[209] While Stark certainly has good reason to wonder about evolutionary theory and to challenges its status as a public truth, his hasty conclusion at the end of *Discovering God* may negatively affect his otherwise considered arguments.[210]

The citation above indicates a more constructive task. Rather than rejecting evolutionary theory whole cloth, Stark could have engaged thinkers, such as Wilson and Rappaport, who explain religion as adaptations necessary for human existence.[211] Had Stark looked more deeply into the matter, he would have discovered a diversity of views within evolutionary thinking that would confirm his earlier, less strident conclusion — namely, that many biologists are in effect "evolutionary creationists."[212] Rather than drawing dogmatic conclusions from evolutionary theory as atheists do and thereby becoming their mimetic double, Stark could have simply elucidated the widely recognized insufficiencies of evolutionary theory without simultaneously adopting the contrary position, Intelligent Design. In this important respect, an opportunity has been forfeited.

He also appears to contradict himself since often he writes that methodological naturalism must be agnostic about the question of God, neither atheist nor theist. Therefore, he seems to make an unwarranted leap from the presumably scientific evaluation of the merits of two theories to the statement that the universe is the ultimate revelation of God and "science *is* theology" –

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[208] Stark, *Discovering God*, 398-399.

[209] R. Ulanowicz, *A Third Window*, 160.

[210] For example, Alles calls these views of Stark on biological evolution, "decidedly fringe" (Alles, "Religious Economics and Rational Choice," 84).

[211] Stark and Finke were evidently aware of Rappaport's field work as a passing comment makes clear: "pig sacrifices among the Tsembaga in New Guinea" (Stark – Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 84). The Tsembaga were a sub clan of the Maring on whom Rappaport had done his fieldwork as a young anthropologist. Yet, there is no evidence to demonstrate their engagement with Rappaport's final work, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, published in 1999. Nor is there evidence that Stark treated Wilson's work, *Darwin's Cathedral*, in which Stark's theory is specifically reviewed and assessed, in 2002.

[212] Stark, *For the Glory of God* 192.

namely, another way to discover God. But how can science in a strict sense be another way to discover God? Stark would have better served his purpose if he had made it clear that at best science can glory in the wonders of life and the universe and humbly confess its incompetence in those matters that lay outside of its domain. Once scientists, like Dawkins or Stark, make claims about God, they leave science and enter into another realm, one in which all human beings have competence insofar as every human being needs to know the meaning of his or her life. As Rappaport has shown, religion, not science, furnishes meaning for human existence.

Furthermore, though design theology has a long, venerable, pre-Christian pedigree, it has grave difficulties once placed within a monotheistic context. Endemic to monotheisms in general, a design theology cannot manage the problem of suffering or evil. Theodicy through a design theology scandalized Darwin and probably sustains the emotional core of atheism. Design arguments cannot solve the problem of suffering and evil. Ironically, therefore, while Intelligent Design might coincide with belief in God, one may only wonder what kind of God this must be.[213] On their own, natural (i.e., non-revealed) design theologies may contribute to demonstrating the reasonableness of faith, but they cannot, however, console the suffering, alleviate pain, inspire hope or motivate love.

Stark knows this. No major religion proposes a concept of God who is merely distant or uninterested. In monotheism, God is interested, terribly concerned about human affairs. Although God might also be an intelligent designer, the monotheistic concepts of God based on divine revelation can make much bolder, sometimes entirely astonishing claims than those of natural theology. Indeed, in the case of Christianity, it makes the stunning claim that God is a communion of eternal persons, one of whom entered human existence, died on the cross, rose from the dead and thereupon through his risen body opened the way to God meant to embrace not only the whole human race, but indeed the entire creation.

C. Contributions to Theological Research

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[213] "So did Darwin conclude that the designer was not beneficent? Maybe not omnipotent? No. He decided—based on *squeamishness*—that no designer existed. Because it is horrific, it was not designed—a better example of the fallacy of *non sequitur* would be hard to find. Revulsion is not a scientific argument…Maybe the designer isn't all that beneficent or omnipotent. Science can't answer questions like that. But denying design simply because it can cause terrible pain is a failure of nerve, a failure to look the universe fully in the face" (Behe, *The Edge of Evolution*, 238-239).

The new paradigm for the sociology of religion as well as his Starks' numerous books on religion and Christianity have opened fresh perspectives on the role and meaning of religion in human existence. They redress errors and distortions in the old paradigm as well as leave many possibilities for further theological investigation. Several can be listed in brief: (1) ideas have consequences, or why doctrine and theology matter very much in this world; (2) unity of the Church, or clarifying the problem of the one and many in an ecclesial context; 3) ecumenism, or why corporate union may actually hinder the spread of the Gospel; (4) interreligious and intercultural relations, or how the new paradigm can deepen the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the Church as the Sacrament of Salvation (LG 1,ff); (5) church-state relations or why the Catholic Church should prefer religious liberty to state religion. In conclusion, Stark's literary corpus bears compelling witness to the importance of theology, because through its ideas, it has the power to shape the world, today's and the one to come. His works, therefore, can not only be read with great profit, but also at times with a hearty laugh.

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