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Religious pluralism, cultural continuity and the expansion of early Christianity: Stark revisited

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ABSTRACT

Stark's (1996) quantitative analysis of early Christianity's urban expansion argued that churches were established earlier in cities that were less influenced by Rome and had a synagogue. Since Stark maintains that religious pluralism stimulates religious involvement, Christianity should emerge first in cities characterized by a more diverse religious economy. An index of religious pluralism and two measures of cultural continuity (Jewish influence and contact with Paul) are included to test Christianity's early urban expansion. Logistic regression analysis identifies religious pluralism as the strongest correlate of early Christian expansion. Christianity grew through a system of urban networks within a deregulated religious market that was not saturated.

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1. Introduction

While the Jesus movement may have originated in the rural communities of Palestine (Theissen, 1978), it was already becoming an urban-based missionary movement moving beyond Judea, Samaria, and Galilee by the middle of the first century CE (Meeks, 1983). Significant social networks were established throughout the Greco-Roman world as Christian communities emerged in Judea, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, and Egypt. Thus, the development of early Christianity must incorporate discussions Jewish Christianity, Syrian Christianity, Catholic (Roman) Christianity and Egyptian Christianity (Cameron & Miller, 2004; Jenkins, 2008; Wilken, 2012).

Throughout the first two centuries CE, Roman emperors generally supported the development of urban centers which provided a network of political and economic structures and employment opportunities (Koester, 1982a).

However, the gap between the rich and the poor was pronounced as there was no true middle class in Roman society (Bauckham, 2006; Crossan, 1998). While affluent persons were part of the early Christian movement, a significant number of early Christians were drawn from the ranks of the lower social stratum (Koester, 1982a; Malherbe, 1983; Meeks, 1983). Extensive travel routes and the high degree of mobility among artisans and tradespersons created opportunities for the diffusion of numerous religious groups throughout the Roman Empire (Meeks, 1983). From 38–58 CE, Paul was engaged in urban-based missionary activities throughout the Greco-Roman world (Koester, 1982b) as he apparently visited cities throughout Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Crete, Sicily, and Italy (Bruce, 1977). Undoubtedly, Paul provided one important foundation for the urban transformation of the Jesus movement.

In *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (1996) Rodney Stark applies insights from urban sociology and social network theory to explain how Christianity emerged earlier in some cities throughout the Greco-Roman world and later in other cities. The cur-

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rent study critically evaluates Stark's quantitative analysis of early Christianity's urban expansion and assesses the impact of city size, religious pluralism, Jewish influence, and contact with Paul on the early presence of Christianity in a particular urban area.

2. Stark's "Christianizing the Urban Empire"

In his groundbreaking work, Stark (1996) includes a chapter on early Christianity's urban expansion. A data set is assembled for twenty-two Greco-Roman cities. Three cities are from North Africa, five are in Palestine or Syria, one from Cyprus, along with three from Asia Minor, and two from Macedonia. The city of Rome is included as well as two cities from Spain and Gaul and a city from Britain and Crete. Acknowledging the growth of Jewish Christianity, Syrian Christianity, Catholic Christianity and Egyptian Christianity throughout the Greco-Roman world during the first two centuries CE, one sees that the cities Stark selected are representative of the major culture areas Koester and others have identified.

Stark's data set includes the following information on each of the twenty-two cities: time period in which a church is established (Christianization), city size at 100 CE, distance from Jerusalem, distance from Rome, presence of a synagogue and presence of a Gnostic group. Stark also creates a Roman influence variable (Romanized) by looking at the ratio of the distance from Jerusalem and the distance from Rome. The Christianization variable measures the urban diffusion of Christianity over the first two centuries CE. Drawing on Fischer's (1975) sub-cultural theory of urbanism, Stark notes that city size and deviance vary directly. Thus, Christianity, a deviant sub-culture, should emerge earlier in larger cities. The three distance-based measures are indicators of cultural contact and the development of social networks. Consequently, churches should emerge earlier in urban locations that are closer to Jerusalem and later in cities that are subject to stronger Roman influence. The synagogue variable is introduced as an additional measure of cultural continuity, and churches should emerge earlier in cities where synagogues were present. Finally, Stark includes a "Gnostic presence" variable. Since the existence of a "Gnostic" religion has been questioned, the "Gnosticism" variable is employed as a construct describing various religious movements and schools based on the acquisition of special, secret knowledge (King, 2003). While the association among Judaism, Christianity and "Gnosticism" is also subject to question and debate (King, 2003; Koester, 1982a, 1982b), some scholars maintain that the diffusion of Christianity and "Gnosticism" is intertwined (Rudolph [1980] 1987; Wortham, 2006a). Additionally, the "Gnosticism" variable could be viewed as a measure of religious pluralism. To the extent that culturally pluralistic environments stimulate religious activity, one would expect churches to be present earlier in locations where various different "Gnostic" groups were also present.

Treating Christianization as the dependent variable and the remaining variables as independent variables, Stark (1996) subjects the data set to correlation and linear regression analysis. Statistically significant bivariate correlations

are observed between Christianization and each of the independent variables except city size. The two strongest bivariate associations are with distance from Jerusalem ($r = -.74$; $p < .01$) and Roman influence ($r = .71$; $p < .01$). The correlation analysis suggests that churches were established earlier in cities that were closer to Jerusalem and less subject to Roman influence. Selecting Christianization, presence of a synagogue and Romanized (Roman influence) for linear regression analysis, Stark notes that synagogue and Romanized remain statistically significant and explain two-thirds of the variation in Christianization. Here again cultural continuity and social networks matter. The church emerges earlier in cities that were not subject to strong Roman influence ($t = -3.317$; $p < .001$) and maintained close contact with Judaism ($t = 3.099$; $p < .001$).

When *The Rise of Christianity* was published, critical reviews from various disciplines were provided (Bryant, 1997; Langlois, 1999; McCutcheon, Braun, Mack, & Collins, 1999; Smith, 1997). Some reviewers ignored the chapter on "Christianizing the Urban Empire" while a few made general, passing comments. However, Bryant (1997) offered several important observations related to this specific chapter. These points are now summarized, and several of Bryant's concerns are addressed in the reanalysis of the Stark data.

First, Bryant argues that Stark treats Christianization, an ordinal variable (2 = church established by 100 CE and 0 = church not established by 200 CE), as if it were an interval-level variable without justifying the transformation. What Bryant does not note is that the ordinal scale for Christianization is trying to specify differences in time. Since more exact dates for the founding of the churches in these cities are not available, the approximate time frames represent the next best option. Perhaps the concern is using the ordinal data with correlation and least squares (linear) regression analysis. Researchers routinely use dummy variables in linear regression analysis, but the use of logistic regression or discriminant analysis in cases like this may be less problematic (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Next, the city size variable is questioned. Bryant maintains that Stark's data set fails to include mid-sized and smaller cities even though Christianity did flourish in these communities as Theissen (1978) notes. Yet Bryant does not provide a standard for what would constitute mid-sized and small urban centers, and he seems to ignore the fact that the data set includes several cities of substantially different size. For instance, six of the cities are estimated to have had a population between 120,000–650,000, eight cities were in the 75,000–100,000 range and the remaining eight cities were in the 30,000–45,000 range. Thus, Stark's city size variable could be recoded to distinguish large, mid-sized and smaller cities. Admittedly, rural villages and small towns with populations well under 30,000 are omitted since the focus of the study is the expansion of Christianity through major urban networks.

Bryant's last objection deals with the distance variables. Bryant argues that the distance measures do not adequately measure cultural presence and are difficult to interpret. On the other hand, the twenty-two city data set includes locations that reflect the development of Palestinian, Syrian and, Egyptian Christianity as well as the spread of Christian-

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