

# The power of one God

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

*One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism.* By Rodney Stark. Princeton University, 338 pp., \$24.95.

Religiously motivated violence dominates the world's agenda in a way that it has not done for centuries. Rarely in recent times have the political, social and military ramifications of a particular interpretation of a monotheistic tradition so dramatically commanded attention. But monotheisms have always been powerful. From ancient times to the present, various forms of monotheistic faith have repeatedly unleashed tremendous energies for both good and ill. Indeed, as Rodney Stark suggests, monotheism may well be the most influential innovation in human history.

Stark, professor of sociology and comparative religion at the University of Washington, brings the tools of social science to the study of the history and social consequences of monotheism. In his earlier work, Stark developed a theory about the growth of new religious movements, based on his studies of Mormons, Moonies and others. In *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (1996), he applied his theory to the early centuries of Christian history.

At the core of Stark's approach is rational-choice theory, which focuses on the perceived costs and benefits of decisions. Religious groups attract new adherents "when, other things being equal, people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to nonmembers," he writes. Growth takes place through social networks based on direct, personal contact. As these networks spread, relationships multiply exponentially as more and more people develop firsthand contacts. Even martyrdom can be analyzed in terms of a rational choice, based on attention and support in this world and the hope of everlasting bliss in the next.

In *One True God*, Stark ranges widely over various forms of monotheism, from those of the ancient world to the present. For him, the central distinction in the history of religions lies between theistic religions, whose adherents believe in one or more supernatural divine beings, and "Godless" religions, based upon belief in a

supernatural but impersonal essence, such as the Dharma in early Buddhism or the Tao in philosophical Taoism. Stark sharply distinguishes the wisdom of Godless religions, which are based on introspection and meditation, from theistic theologies that derive from divine revelation. Impersonal essences are incapable of relationships of exchange, and thus less attractive to large populations seeking benefits from religious activities. When traditions shift from a personal image of God to an impersonal conception, religious practice declines.

In accordance with rational-choice theory, Stark finds that most people prefer personal divine beings who behave rationally, responsively and dependably. Godless religions appeal to educated elites, but they do not attract large populations. Buddhism, which in its elite forms continues to be a "Godless religion," became a religion of the masses by absorbing numerous divine beings and bodhisattvas, who offer personal relationships and blessings. Similarly, philosophical Taoism appeals to a small elite group, while popular Taoism thrives on miraculous legends of the immortals who heal people.

Monotheisms repeatedly mobilize tremendous amounts of energy because of their strong claims, but they also call forth conflict and religious intolerance. Stark argues that it is intrinsic to a monotheistic faith, which claims to know the one true God, to also claim to be the only true religion, to engage in missionary activity and to reject other gods.

Monotheisms, however, repeatedly splinter into many true religions which fight with each other. Having a large number of competing religions encourages civil behavior, as in the U.S., but when there are only a few competitors they will, Stark predicts, fight to suppress each other. Intensity of piety leads to intensity of conflict. Nonetheless, Stark finds a social-scientific basis for hope in a neglected aspect of the work of economist Adam Smith: in a pluralistic environment, the "marketplace" of religions forces competition and encourages civil behavior. The selfish interest of each religious tradition will induce it to behave with civility toward its competitors.

Some of Stark's examples are as interesting as his theories. He takes aim at a number of generalizations--that Jews did not try to convert others to Judaism or that Muslims in Spain always allowed Jews to flourish while Christians oppressed them. Stark documents that Jews in antiquity were vigorous proselytizers; according to Josephus, Jewish armies led by the Maccabees even forced conversions on their defeated foes. The Muslims in Spain were not always the tolerant protectors of

Jewish life that they have claimed to be. Moses Maimonides fled from Moorish persecution, his family pretended to convert to Islam in fear for their lives, and some Jews in the 12th century fled from Muslim persecution in the south to the then relative safety of Christian kingdoms in the north.

Stark's discussion is lively, pointed and frequently illuminating. Rational-choice theory, however, may filter out some of the sense of depth and mystery in each of the monotheistic traditions and thereby lead to a truncated image of each.

Augustine warned his congregation, "If you have comprehended, what you have comprehended is not God." Christian theologians have seen God both as personal and as an essence beyond any finite notion of personality. Anselm, when considering what the word "*persona*" signifies in the Trinity, responded: "three I-don't-know-whats." Like any social-scientific study of religion, Stark's approach sees religious faith and practice from a certain angle, which becomes reductionistic if taken as a total explanation. Nonetheless, this is an informative, provocative and timely contribution to the study of religion.