

Religion Today
February 12-18, 1999
THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY
Richard Machalek

How did Christianity blossom from its origins as a small, upstart social movement to become the modern world's largest religion with a population of almost 2 billion people? In his recent book, "The Rise of Christianity" (Princeton 1996), sociologist Rodney Stark offers fascinating new insights about this human drama.

The problem Stark addresses is that historical evidence concerning Christianity's first three centuries is fragmented and spotty, and so it is difficult to determine the exact nature and causes of Christianity's early growth. Stark, however, suggests a new approach to the problem. Why not take what we have learned about the successes or failures of recent, well-documented new religious movements and use this information to reconstruct the "most probable course of Christianity's early development"? Let's look at examples of what this approach reveals.

How many Christians were there in antiquity? Contemporary studies of new religious movements establish that their memberships can increase by as much as 40 percent every decade. At this rate, the Christian population of the ancient world could have exceeded 33 million people by 350 A.D., a figure that fits with the independent estimates of other scholars.

Where would early Christians have found their converts? Recent sociological research shows that most converts to new faiths are recruited through existing social networks of friendship and kinship, not from large public gatherings or airport concourses. While such public forums seem effective in drawing attention to a new religion, most new believers

are brought "into the fold" by friends and family members. Thus, it is likely that this is how Christianity expanded during its early years.

To whom would Christianity have appealed? Generally, new religious movements seem more attractive to middle and upper-middle class people than to members of lower classes, and Stark argues convincingly that this was the case for early Christianity.

Would early Christianity have appealed more to men or to women? Sociological researchers find consistently that women are more likely to be drawn to new faiths than are men. The historical evidence on the early Christians is consistent with this pattern.

Although sociological research on today's new religious "upstarts" by no means provides final answers about the details of early Christian history, it suggests creative new ways for us to learn about the past by studying the present.