

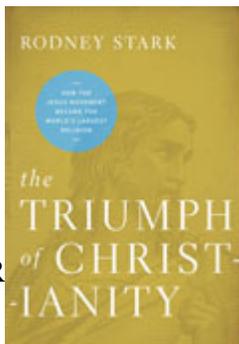
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October 10, 2012 at 8:00am

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## How an obscure sect triumphed

by Diane Scharper



THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY: HOW THE JESUS MOVEMENT BECAME

THE WORLD'S LARGEST RELIGION

By Rodney Stark

Published by HarperOne, \$27.99

As Rodney Stark sees it in *The Triumph of Christianity*, several factors enabled an obscure Jewish sect to become the world's largest religion. Here are some: Jesus Christ admonished his followers to preach the Gospel to all nations, and they did. He commanded them to practice works of mercy, which they also did. Christian commitment to mercy mitigated suffering and attracted converts. As Stark explains it, Christianity was an island of security in the midst of the squalor, misery and illness of ancient cities.

Stark writes for the general reader based on his belief that "if I can't say it in plain English, it must be because I don't understand what I am writing about."

Writing from a sociological and historical angle, he also refutes what he calls misconceptions concerning early Christianity. He argues that Jesus Christ may not have been poor, that his parents were sufficiently well-off to travel to Jerusalem on Passover.

He contends that the early disciples were not necessarily uneducated males. The language of the New Testament was that used by educated people -- most coming from upper-class families. Many among them were women who played a dominant role in the founding Christianity.

A distinguished professor of social sciences and codirector of the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, Stark is known for his iconoclastic style. Although some of Stark's theories are more convincing than others, his book is, if nothing else, compellingly readable.

[Diane Scharper is the author of *Radiant, Prayer Poems*. She teaches English at Towson University in Maryland.]

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