Efforts to Christianize Europe, 400–2000

RODNEY STARK

ABSTRACT In previous work I have demonstrated that, claims by the secularization faithful to the contrary, religious participation in most of Europe did not decline in modern times, having never been very high. In this essay I attempt to explain why. Why did earlier efforts to Christianize Europe fail? In conclusion I assess present American missionary efforts to convert Europe.

Introduction

Contrary to the received wisdom, belief in secularization is not supported by declining religious participation in Europe because, while there have been variations by time and place, no consistent, significant declines have occurred (Stark, 1999; Stark & Iannaccone, 1994). Granted that current levels of participation are low, the fact is that in most of Europe, the average person has always been absent from the pews come Sunday. Or, as Andrew Greeley has put it so well, “There could be no de-Christianization of Europe… because there never was any Christianization in the first place” (Greeley, 1995: 63).

Although many historians now agree that the ‘Age of Faith’ is unfounded nostalgia, they have failed to explain why the medieval world was so little Christianized and why the Church was so peripheral to everyday life (Bossy, 1985; Coulton, 1938; Duffy, 1992; Morris, 1993; Murray, 1972; Obelkevich, 1979; Sommerville, 1992; Thomas, 1971). An even more basic question is, why did the rapidly growing Christian movement suddenly stall in the fifth century, leaving most of Europe to remain unconverted except in the most superficial ways? To provide an answer, I assess many centuries of failed Christian missions. Then I assess the rapidly growing contemporary efforts by American evangelicals to create finally a truly Christianized Europe.

To begin, let me define missions as sustained, collective efforts to convert others to an exclusive religion. The term ‘mission’ is especially appropriate for conversion efforts directed across significant socio-cultural boundaries, such as those between societies, ethnic groups, regions, or social classes. By restricting the definition to exclusive religions, I acknowledge Arthur Darby Nock’s (1933: 12–15) caution that the modern notion of conversion does not reflect the phenomenology involved in the acceptance of new, non-exclusive, gods in a polytheistic culture, such as the Greco-Roman pantheon. As Nock put it, non-exclusive gods are “supplements rather than alternatives”. When members of polytheistic cultures encounter a new god, they have the option of adding it to their current set without any need to discontinue their reliance on other gods. The spread of such gods is casual and undisturbing, in contrast to the spread of gods requiring exclusive commitment.
I reserve the term ‘conversion’ for the formation of a new and exclusive religious commitment. The term thus applies to a shift from non-exclusive religions to exclusive ones, as from ancient Egyptian polytheism to Judaism, or from one exclusive religion to another, as from Christianity to Islam. It does not apply to shifts in patronage from one non-exclusive god to another. Nor does it apply to shifts of affiliation within a particular exclusive religious tradition, such as between Islamic sects.

As is well-known, conversion is not primarily a response to religious teachings. People may be quite willing to try another god because it is said to have certain interesting powers, but this is not how they decide to commit their fate exclusively into the hands of One God. Conversions are based on social networks, on bonds of trust and intimacy between those who believe and those who come to accept their beliefs. Converts are made through direct, person-to-person influences—people adopt a new faith as a matter of aligning their religiousness with that of their friends, relatives, and associates, who have preceded them into the faith (Loftand & Stark, 1965; Snow & Phillips, 1980; Stark, 1996a; Stark & Bainbridge, 1980, 1985, [1987] 1996; Stark & Finke, 2000).

It follows that successful missions are not primarily the work of a few, specialized missionaries. Rather, conversion of the masses will occur only when the rank-and-file of an exclusive religion undertake to spread their faith. This does not mean that such groups will not employ full-time missionaries or that the initial efforts to convert a group or society will not be made by missionaries. Often, the initial contacts must be made by missionaries. However, their efforts to convert a lay following will require that they first develop close interpersonal relationships with some members of the group to be missionized and through them gain access to local social networks. Moreover, once these initial attachments have been made, the primary ‘carriers’ of the new faith are no longer missionaries, but the initial converts, with missionaries now limited to playing roles as advisors, educators, or supervisors. For example, Mormonism arrived in Latin America via American missionaries. It took a generation for the missionaries to gather slowly a local nucleus, after which conversion began to spread rapidly through local social networks (Stark, 1998).

However, missions can also succeed without any involvement by ‘professional’ missionaries. As Max Weber wrote in the first sentence of the section on “Proselytism in the Diaspora” of his classic Ancient Judaism ([1917–1919] 1952: 418), “Jewish [proselytism], like early Christian of post-apostolic times, advanced through voluntary and private endeavor, not through official authorities”. An example can be found in Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews XX.2: 3) who reported that “a certain Jewish merchant, whose name was Ananias, got amongst the women that belonged to the king [of Adiabene], and taught them to worship God according to the Jewish religion”, which led to the conversion of the king and the entire royal family. This account notes that, in addition to Ananias, two other Jews were involved in proselytizing the royal family, and there is no hint that either of them was a professional missionary. Rather, the appropriate modern parallel is with efforts by individual evangelical Protestants to witness to those around them.

Since conversion is a network phenomenon, faiths often cease to spread when networks attenuate, as often occurs at the boundaries of very distinctive
sub-groups within a society—ethnic groups or castes, for example—and as is typical at the boundaries between societies. Sometimes, these boundaries are overcome, if conditions of trade or resettlement bring ardent amateur missionizers into a position to form network bonds to members of the group to be missionized—as the success of Jewish proselytism in the diaspora illustrates. However, when such special conditions do not exist, it is necessary to launch a mission via professionals. Even so, the key to success lies with the ability of the initial converts to missionize others, by spreading the faith through their networks. The ultimate outcome of a mission depends in part on those with whom the missionaries form their initial social bonds—whether with the general public, with a special sub-group or caste or with a social élite. In the first case, the missionaries build bonds to rank-and-file members of the target society (or group), so that when these people begin to spread the new faith through their own social networks, the result is the conversion of the masses. Yet, at least initially, mass conversion does not occur, when missionizing is restricted to a particular sub-group or caste. In the third case, when the missionaries focus on social élites in the target society, subsequent conversion of the masses is quite problematic.

As will be seen, soon after the conversion of Constantine, Christianity shifted from a movement which was spread by rank-and-file members through their social networks to a movement which was based on professional missionaries who were, for the most part, content to baptize kings.

The Collapse of Christian Missions

For far too long, historians have accepted the claim that the conversion of the Emperor Constantine caused the triumph of Christianity. In fact, Constantine’s conversion was, in part, the response of a politically astute man to what was soon to be an accomplished fact—the exponential wave of Christian growth had gathered immense height and weight by the early fourth century, when Constantine contended for the throne (Drake, 1999; Stark, 1996a). However, despite a century of ill-founded skepticism (cf. Burckhardt, [1860] 1949), there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of his conversion (Drake, 1999; Fletcher, 1997). To the contrary, in so far as Christianity was concerned, it may have been far better served, had Constantine’s faith been pretended. For, in doing his best to serve Christianity, Constantine destroyed its most vital aspect: its dependence on mass volunteerism.

Although there is nothing factually revisionist in what follows, many contours are novel. Therefore, it will be useful to begin with an overview.

From a popular mass movement, supported by member donations and run by amateurs and poorly-paid clergy, under Constantine, Christianity was transformed into an élite organization, lavishly funded by the state and thus able to bestow wealth and power on the clergy. Thereupon, church offices became highly sought by well-connected men, whose appointments greatly reduced the average Christian leader’s level of dedication. Subsequently, the task of completing the Christianization of the empire shifted from persuasion to coercion: laws against pagan practice, confiscation of pagan temples and property, and the use of the rapidly expanding monastic Christianity to provide shock troops to stamp out the last vestiges of non-conformity—including a
variety of Christian heresies. As for taking the Good News to the ‘barbarians’ beyond the borders of the Empire, the new leadership sneered at the mere idea of attempting to do so; meanwhile, the means to do so—the missionizing spirit of the rank-and-file—had been allowed to decay. After the fall of Rome, there was renewed interest in spreading Christianity—especially to the powerful new ‘barbarian’ kingdoms. This task was delegated to Christian monks who journeyed into non-Christian territories as professional missionaries and devoted their attention almost entirely to the nobility. Having baptized a king and his court, and having become the official church, the Christian missionaries paid little attention to converting the public. In the end, it is doubtful that the masses in northwestern Europe, and especially in Scandinavia, were ever truly converted. Now for the details.

The Christian Establishment

It was Constantine’s successors who actually made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and who banned paganism. Constantine’s ‘favor’ consisted of his decision to divert to Christianity the massive state-funding on which the pagan temples had always depended. Overnight, Christianity became “the most-favoured recipient of the near-limitless resources of imperial favour” (Fletcher, 1997: 19). A faith that had been meeting in humble structures was suddenly housed in magnificent public buildings—the new church of St. Peter built by Constantine in Rome was modelled on the basilican form used for imperial throne halls. A clergy recruited from the people and modestly sustained by member contributions suddenly gained immense power, status, and wealth as part of the imperial civil service. Consequently, in the words of Richard Fletcher, the “privileges and exemptions granted the Christian clergy precipitated a stampede into the priesthood” (Fletcher, 1997: 38). As Christian offices had become another form of imperial preferment, it was the sons of the aristocracy who usually won the race. Many contemporary accounts mention an extensive traffic in bishoprics, including payment of huge bribes. As early as the Council of Sardica (341), church leaders promulgated rules against ordaining men into the priesthood upon their appointment to bishop, requiring that bishops have previous service in lower clerical office. These rules were mainly ignored or circumvented by rushing a candidate through ordination and a series of lower clerical ranks in a week or two prior to his becoming a bishop (Johnson, 1976). This did not always result in the elevation of an impious opportunist—St. Ambrose went from baptism, through ordination and the clerical ranks, and was then consecrated a bishop, all in eight days! However, the overall result was a very worldly, political, and luxury-loving church hierarchy.

Constantine’s lavish support of Christianity came at the expense of paganism. Unlike Christianity, the pagan temples were ‘top-down’ rather than ‘bottom-up’ organizations in that they were constructed and sustained by state funding and by gifts from a few very rich benefactors. While Christianity had done very well without state support, paganism collapsed rapidly without it (Bagnall, 1993; Dodds, 1970; MacMullen, 1984; Stark, 1996a). Nevertheless, throughout the fourth century, many temples did survive and Christianity co-existed with many other faiths. Had the church been weaker, and especially had it not gained such a potent role in secular politics, the result might have been a relatively stable
pluralism, expanded periodically by the formation of new brands of Christianity (see Drake, 1999). Instead, with the exception of Judaism, all other religions, including all new or less powerful brands of Christianity, were soon rooted out (or at least driven into hiding).

By the fifth century, it had been firmly and fiercely established by law and custom that everyone would worship the One True God in precisely the prescribed manner. But not really everyone. The non-conformity of the Jews was generally tolerated, if highly circumscribed, and some others were ignored as beneath salvation.

Initially, Christians had considerable doubts about converting the rural peasantry—the word pagan is, in fact, simply a form of the Latin word for ‘rustic’ or ‘country person’ (paganus). Sharing the prevalent view of city-dwelling Romans (early Christianity was an urban movement), the Christians regarded country people as sub-human brutes. Thus, “the countryside simply did not exist as a zone for missionary enterprise. After all, there was nothing in the New Testament about spreading the Word to the beasts of the field” (Fletcher, 1997: 16).

Soon, however, the proximity of country folk prompted efforts to force them out of paganism, and the landed aristocrats were given the duty to do this. As Maximus, Bishop of Turin, put it in a sermon:

You should remove all pollution of idols from your properties and cast out the whole error of paganism from your fields... Whoever knows that sacrilege takes place on his estate and does not forbid it, in a sense orders it. (Maximus, reprinted in Hillgarth, 1986: 55).

However, barbarians—everyone living beyond the frontiers of the empire—were another matter. Educated Romans regarded them as incapable of even grasping, let alone adhering to, Christianity. St. Jerome dismissed Germans as cannibals. Even St. Augustine could not see any point in missions beyond the empire. Consequently, according to E. A. Thompson,

Throughout the whole period of the Roman empire not a single example is known of a man who was appointed bishop with the specific task of going beyond the frontier to a wholly pagan region in order to convert the barbarians living there. (Thompson, 1966: xvii)

Nevertheless, in the fourth century, the ‘center of the world’ began to shift northward in response to the increasing pressures imposed on the empire by the same barbarians. Indeed, Rome had been abandoned by the emperors long before it was sacked by the Vandals: “No emperor lived in Rome after the early fourth century A.D.; indeed after the reign of Constantine (306–337) there were only two imperial visits to the city in the course of the fourth century” (Beard, North & Price, 1998: 364). However, even though the emperors moved north to defend their frontiers, it was to no avail. As Germans overwhelmed the empire, Rome was reduced to the status of a provincial city—distant from the Germanic power centers to the north and from the new imperial capital of Constantinople to the east.

The fall of Rome opened the eyes of churchmen to the need to convert the wider world or to once again become just another faith among many (Fletcher, 1997; Robinson, 1917). At first, these efforts were directed entirely to those barbarians who took over and settled major areas within the empire—
Burgundians, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, and then the Sueves and the Vandals. Obviously, the barbarian invaders did not arrive totally ignorant of Christianity. Prior to this time, there had, of course, been significant diffusion or what Fletcher calls “seepage” of Christianity across the frontiers (Fletcher, 1997: 229). Moreover, the barbarian invaders were as impressed by the religion of Rome as they were by its buildings and other cultural achievements, and were rather easy to convert, although that often merely involved agreement by leaders to observe the Christian monopoly on public practice, and it is not at all clear when Christianization extended beyond the élites or if it ever did so completely.

Soon, however, power shifted from immigrant barbarian groups to the new barbarian kingdoms to the north. To make Christianity secure in these circles, more than ‘seepage’ was needed. Thus monks were sent forth as professional missionaries.

Missionary Monks and Barbarians

By the fourth century, Christian monasticism was widespread throughout the empire and tens of thousands of people were involved in an extensive and expanding network of monasteries, each housing dedicated and deployable servants of the faith. Initially, the monks were often deployed to attack pagans and heretics. However, as the need arose, they also were available to go forth to missionize in barbarian lands. Given that by this time Christianity was also a ‘top-down’ organization, controlled and sustained by élites, the focus of these missions was the conversion of élites—as Ian Hannah acknowledged, the monks addressed “themselves in the first place to kings” (Hannah, 1924: 178).

From the start, Christian monks had many advantages in their missions to the barbarians. Foremost was the fact that most of them were sincere ascetics. Unlike most bishops and many regular clergy, they had not entered the church in pursuit of power and glory, but in order to serve God. Their obvious sincerity and their austere life-style led many people to believe that Christian monks possessed magical and curative powers—even after death (Mayr-Harting, 1993).

Another advantage was that missionary monks began with ‘advanced bases’ within the barbarian hinterlands. Some of these consisted of scattered Roman communities which had been established during the imperial era and had already been substantially Christianized—some even had bishops. More important were the networks of monasteries that had been extended into pagan territories. As early as the fourth century, monastic communities had been established in Gaul, including a major complex at Tours. That same century, St. Athanasius crossed the Rhine to establish a monastic community at Trier, in a solidly Germanic pagan region. Athanasius was soon followed by other monastics, and by the eighth century, major monasteries flourished in pagan surroundings at Fulda, Eichstätt, Utrecht, Echternach, Würzburg, Constance, Salzburg, Freising, and St. Gall. Meanwhile, British Christian missionaries were active on the Frisian Coast (many European monasteries were founded by monks from Britain and Ireland). The monasteries were closely linked and monks travelled back and forth frequently. Moreover, most Christian monastics in the West were not recluses devoted to seeking their own enlightenment, but remarkably action-oriented.
In dealing with élites, the missionary monks had the advantage of being educated men. Unlike orthodox Christian monastics in the East, monastics in the West were required to be literate and were thus recruited from the privileged classes (Hickey, 1987; Johnson, 1976; Knowles, 1969; Mayr-Harting, 1993). Consequently, they possessed what their barbarian hosts recognized to be superior culture, enabling them to provide all manner of sound advice and instruction, thereby gaining credibility for their religious convictions. Moreover, they represented a religion that was known to command the allegiance of the nobility in many other nearby kingdoms. However, I believe that the greatest advantage which the missionary monks possessed was that they presented a far more plausible and valuable image of divinity. Theirs was no god or goddess of here or there, or of this or that, but theirs was the awesome, omnipotent Jehovah. Barbarian élites found this image of god very much to their liking—a King of Kings. Still, the conversion even of Europe’s barbarian élites took many centuries.

The initial target of missionary monks was the expanding and powerful kingdom of the Franks who occupied most of Gaul. In the later part of the fifth century, the great Frankish King Clovis converted to Christianity, undergoing public baptism in his capital city of Rheims. The story of his conversion has come down to us in an account by St. Gregory of Tours in his History of the Franks (II. 20–22). Having been written nearly a century after the event, Gregory’s report was probably mainly based on the Life of St. Remigius, who was the bishop who supervised Clovis’s conversion, and on oral traditions (James, 1988). Moreover, as told by Gregory, several of the most significant aspects resemble the conversion of Constantine and, in its general contours, the story greatly resembles many subsequent accounts of the conversion of medieval kings. Historians usually suggest that similarities such as these discredit all of the accounts as ‘fictionalized’ according to a literary formula or topos. However, I see historical truth in these similarities—they are similar because the behavior they report conforms to well-established principles and precedents. Before identifying these, it will be useful to recount the conversion of Clovis.

It was through his wife Clotilde that Clovis was linked to Christianity. The origin of her conversion was not reported, but there was already an island of Christians in Rheims and we must assume that the monks had been busy instructing noblewomen. As the story begins, Clotilde is pushing Clovis to convert, but “the king’s mind was nowise moved toward belief”. Yet, she keeps at it—“the queen without ceasing urged the king to confess the true God, and forsake his idols; but in no wise could she move him to this belief, until at length he made war upon a time against the Alamanni”. During the battle everything goes wrong and Clovis finds himself “being swept to utter ruin”. As a last resort, Clovis prays to the Christian God for aid, promises to be baptized, and goes on to victory. Now he has proof that this Christian God is the real thing. Even so, once secure in his victory, Clovis procrastinates. Clotilde, however, will have none of it and arranges for the local bishop to instruct him. This is done in secrecy, because Clovis is fearful that the Frankish nobility will turn against him, if he forsakes the ancestral gods—“the people that followeth me will not suffer it that I forsake their gods”. Yet, this is not the case. When Clovis announces his decision to be baptized, many members of the court proclaim that they will do so, too. Immediately upon the public baptism of King Clovis, 3,000 of his
armed followers are also baptized. However, not a word is said about the Christianization of the several million ordinary Franks.

Gregory’s account includes six basic elements that occur again and again in medieval accounts of missions to pagan societies. Each is consistent with social science as well as good sense. Firstly, professional missionaries establish a local base. Someone must bring the faith. Secondly, the initial converts are female members of the élite. The men are reached through their wives, mistresses, sisters, mothers, and daughters, who proselytize and arrange for missionaries to instruct the men. There is a solid social scientific literature on the extreme over-representation of women in new religious movements (Stark, 1996a, 1996b; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985, 1997; Walter & Davie, 1998). Thirdly, the men tend to resist, often fearing negative responses from their peers and followers. Even kings are reluctant to risk offending their aristocratic allies and supporters. Fourthly, their resistance is overcome when a perceived ‘miracle’ convinces them that Christianity is true. This is entirely consistent with the tradition of ‘foxhole’ conversions. Keep in mind, too, that any king whose emergency prayers for victory went unanswered is unlikely to have survived to leave a record of the failure. Since medieval kings engaged in chronic warfare, the spread of Christianity among them could easily have required ‘miraculous’ victories. Fifthly, upon the baptism of the head of an élite household, the rest of the household usually converts, too (or appears to do so), and, in the case of the conversion of the king, most of the court follows suit. Keep in mind that preferment depended upon the king’s ‘pleasure’. Sixthly, nothing is done to missionize the general public. Why? Perhaps because it was assumed that they would have no choice, but to follow the example set by the élite. Yet, it also seems to have been the case that once the Church was securely established by royal favor, the actual faith of the masses seemed rather unimportant. As Edward James recognized, “churchmen [in this era] do not seem to have thought in terms of [religious] instruction for the laymen. As far as they were concerned, so it seems, conversion meant acceptance of baptism and outward observance of Christian forms ... rather than of any inner change in the soul” (James, 1988: 127). Thus, Gregory (II.10) noted, without expressing much dismay, that a century after the conversion of Clovis “the people seem always to have followed idolatrous practices, for they did not recognize the true God”.

The primary variation from these six elements in other accounts of medieval missions involves a prince having been converted while living in a Christian society, often having been sent off for schooling, and then returning home to take the throne whereupon he introduces Christianity. These instances were often very bloody, as the local aristocrats, lacking strong bonds to their new king, did resist—sometimes quite successfully. The ‘Christianization’ of Norway is illustrative. Olaf Tryggvason, an English-educated, Christian convert, seized the throne of Norway in 995 whereupon he attempted to convert the nobility by force, killing some who resisted and burning their estates. These and other repressive measures aroused sufficient opposition to defeat him in the Battle of Svolder (about the year 1000) during which he was killed. 15 years later, Olaf Haraldsson, who had been baptized in France, conquered Norway and he, too, used fire and sword in an effort to compel Christianization. He, too, provoked widespread hatred which led to rebellion, and he was driven into exile. When he attempted to return leading a new army raised in Kiev, he was
defeated and killed at the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030. Despite this, he was soon canonized as St. Olaf and is credited with the Christianization of Norway, which seems to have consisted primarily of the reimposition of official policies of intolerance (Sawyer, 1982; Jones, 1968).

In neither variant of the conversion of barbarian élites is the conversion of the masses given significant attention or effort—apart from the sporadic application of violent coercion. This neglect reflects the commitment of missionizing monks to what Richard Fletcher (1997: 236) has correctly characterized as the “trickle down” theory of conversion. As already mentioned, having become dependent on state subsidies and being governed by a privileged establishment, Christianity was by this time a ‘top-down’ organization, and nothing could have seemed more obvious to the monastic missionaries than to devote all their efforts to converting the élite. There were several additional reasons for this, safety being perhaps the most important. Successful conversion of a group of commoners would provide the missionary monks with no protection, either from the nobility who may have feared that the group posed a religious challenge to their authority, or from other commoners offended by denunciation of their traditional gods—often enough, monks evangelizing in barbarian areas were murdered by the locals. In contrast, successful inroads into the élite—even if just among the wives—offered substantial protection. An additional reason was perceived efficiency. The missions had limited personnel and this “compelled them to be selective in their approach” (De Rue, 1998: 17). It thus seemed to make more sense to focus on the élite and wait for their example to eventually ‘trickle down’ the ranks until the peasants were good Christians, too—and if not, there remained fire and sword.

As a variation on this theme, the Frankish heirs of Clovis soon attempted to Christianize their neighbors by conquest. These efforts reached a zenith during the long rule of Charlemagne, who so extended the Frankish empire that he was crowned in Rome by the pope as the ‘Holy Roman Emperor’. Under the guidance of churchmen, such as Alcuin of York, Charlemagne was determined to make his empire a truly holy empire. Therefore, as he incorporated new territories, he demanded the immediate Christianization of their inhabitants. His merciless campaign against Saxony (772–775) set new standards in religious brutality. Each victory was followed by forced mass baptisms, and thousands of captives who showed reluctance were beheaded.

Charlemagne’s excesses eventually caused Alcuin to write a letter condemning forced conversions (Gaskoin, [1904] 1966). In particular, he argued that it was useless to baptize people who had no idea what Christianity meant and that conversions were worthless unless they were the result of persuasion, thereby being sincere. The truth of Alcuin’s point lives on in the failure to actually Christianize the masses in many parts of Europe, but it was apparently an unacceptable truth to those whose zeal was matched by their power. Charlemagne’s successors continued to rely on forced Christianization, just as the Church continued to rely on the baptism of kings. This approach continued during the so-called ‘Northern Crusades’ of late medieval times, during which Christian rulers gradually conquered and subdued the remaining pagan peoples in the far North of Europe: Norse, Slavs, Balts, and Finns (Christiansen, 1980). These conquests either imposed baptism on the defeated rulers or replaced them with Christians.
As for the common people, they soon found that it was sufficient to add Jesus and various saints to the pantheon of gods and spirits which they used for their peace and protection. To some extent this was in keeping with Church policy. In a letter dated 601 and preserved by the Venerable Bede (Ecclesiastical History I.30), Pope Gregory the Great advised Abbot Mellitus, who was setting out to missionize in Britain:

[I] have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols among that people should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there... In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God. And since they have a custom of sacrificing many oxen to demons, let some other solemnity be substituted in its place such as a day of Dedication or the Festivals of the holy martyrs whose relics are enshrined there... If the people are allowed some worldly pleasures in this way, they will more readily come to desire the joys of the spirit. For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke ...

The question arises whether ‘obstinate minds’ were ever changed by such an approach. As the great Danish historian Johannes Brøndsted noted, it was quite easy for Christianity to become the “public” faith in Scandinavia, “but far more difficult to overcome the complex culture beneath that religion” (Brøndsted, 1965: 312). He quoted an Anglo-Danish monk who wrote in the twelfth century that “As long as things go well and everything is fine, the Sviar and Gautar seem willing to acknowledge Christ and honor him, though as a pure formality; but when things go wrong” they turn against Christianity and revert to paganism (ibid). Or, as was written in the Icelandic Landnánabók, Helgi the Lean “was very mixed in his faith; he believed in Christ, but invoked Thor in matters of seafaring and dire necessity” (Brøndsted, 1965: 306). Finally, Brøndsted suggested that to the extent that it can be said to have taken place at all, the conversion of Scandinavia occurred “only ... when Christianity took over old [pagan] superstitions and usages and allowed them to live under a new guise” (Brøndsted, 1965: 307).

This illustrates the principle of cultural continuity, which I developed to help explain variations in the success of new religious movements: that they are more likely to succeed to the extent that they retain familiar elements of the religious culture of the group being missionized (Stark, 1987, 1996b; Stark & Finke, 2000). In effect, the more familiar a new religion, the less ‘costly’ it is for people to adopt it—the less they must learn and the less they must discard. By thinly overlaying pagan festivals and sacred places with Christian interpretations, the missionaries made it easy to become a Christian—so easy that actual conversion seldom occurred. Instead, in customary pagan fashion, the people treated Christianity as an ‘add-on religion’ and the popular Christianity that eventually emerged in northwestern Europe was a strange amalgam, including a great deal in the way of pagan celebrations and beliefs, some of them thinly Christianized, but many of them not Christianized at all (Davies, 1996; Jolly, 1996; Milis, 1998). Thus, the influential French religious historian Jean Delumeau (1977b) listed
many instances during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Church officials attempted to suppress obviously pagan festivals and celebrations, not only in northwestern Europe, but in Italy and France as well. He noted that among the people there was not only “a profound unfamiliarity with the basics of Christianity”, but also “a persistent pagan mentality” and a persistence of “pre-Christian ceremonial” (Delumeau, 1977b: 176). Indeed, the ‘rediscovery’ of paganism by artists and writers during the Renaissance was nothing of the sort—the Gods and myths of paganism had never been forgotten. As Jean Seznec put it in his classic work on the subject:

Above all, it is now recognized that pagan antiquity, far from experiencing a “rebirth” in fifteenth-century Italy, had remained alive within the culture and art of the Middle Ages. Even the gods were not restored to life, for they had never disappeared from the memory or imagination of man. (Seznec, [1953] 1972: 3)

That elements of paganism survive is one of the remarkable omissions of contemporary perceptions of religion in Europe. For example, polls show that the majority of people in Iceland today (including intellectuals and church leaders) believe in huldufolk (hidden people), such as elves, trolls, gnomes, and fairies (Nickerson, 1999). People planning to build a new house often hire ‘elf-spotters’ to ensure that their site does not encroach on huldufolk settlements and planned highways are sometimes re-routed in order not to disturb various hills and large rocks wherein these pagan entities are thought to dwell (Nickerson, 1999; Swatos & Gissurarson, 1997). Moreover, the popular European Right Wing movements that arose during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries involved “a rejection of Christianity and the affirmation of paganism” (Poewe, 1999: 388; Lixfeld, 1994). Even today, in both Germany and France, paganism “is the heart of fascism and the New Right” (Poewe, 1999: 397). Keep in mind, however, that I reject contemporary wiccan fantasies concerning an active pagan underground stretching back to pre-Christian times. Paganism did not linger as an organized or even as a distinctive faith, but survived only as part of the semi-Christian folk religion of northwestern Europe.

As for the Church in these parts of Europe, upon the conversion of the élite, it became a fully-subsidized state institution, and being entirely independent of popular support, the clergy were (and remain) quite unconcerned about evangelizing the masses. Thus, neither the exclusive commitment to Christianity, nor the high levels of personal piety exhibited by the early Christians ever developed among the majority of people in northwestern Europe. Indeed, the Dutch historian Anton Wessels claimed that at least until the Reformation, popular religion in most of Europe “remained ‘pagan animist’ … and their [Christianity] was an outward veneer” (Wessels, 1994: 4). In similar fashion, Delumeau declared “mediaeval Christendom” to be a fiction (Delumeau, 1977a: 26). Indeed, the most he would allow is that Europe was “superficially [C]hristianized” (Delumeau, 1977b: 161), concluding that the de-Christianization of Europe is but illusion (Delumeau, 1977b: 227). The French sociologist of religion, Gabriel Le Bras agreed that “Dechristianization is a fallacious term” and should be rejected as unhistorical (Le Bras, cited in Delumeau, 1977b: 227).
Admittedly, Delumeau and some other Catholic historians think that significant Christianization was finally achieved as a result of the Reformation, especially by Catholic efforts to evangelize the masses as part of the Counter-Reformation. That is consistent with the fact that current levels of religious participation are higher in southern Europe. It is, however, also consistent with the fact that it was only here that early Christianity spread as a mass movement, thus making it the only ‘Christianized’ part of Europe.

In any event, there is little evidence that significant efforts to Christianize the masses occurred in Protestant areas during the Reformation. Certainly, local rulers mostly seemed able to shift back and forth between Protestantism and Catholicism, without arousing any popular objections. Indeed, religion often seemed of very secondary importance during the ‘religious wars’ associated with the Reformation, as monarchs made alliances across religious boundaries, for example, when Catholic France made common cause with the Protestants of Holland against Catholic Spain.

Today, church attendance is extremely low in the Protestant areas of Europe. Although many have claimed that this represents the final stages of the secularization of these societies, such a conclusion is based on bad history—on the assumption that once-upon-a-time religious participation was high in these societies. The truth seems to be that high levels of religious participation were never achieved, because real, person-to-person Christian missions faltered in the fourth century and never reached these areas. This interpretation is very strongly supported by the fact that current levels of church attendance in European nations are strongly predicted by the date at which they are said to have been Christianized—the later, the lower their current rate of attendance. The date of ‘Christianization’ also powerfully predicts whether or not an area turned Protestant (Stark, 1999; Stark & Finke, 2000).

It is important to see that the doctrinal imperatives of monotheism were sufficient to prompt élites to attempt to impose religious conformity, even to the point of butchery. However, because reliance on professional missionaries to the élites did not convert and mobilize the rank-and-file, it can be said that the first era of real Christian missions ended some time in the fourth century. Ironically, a new era of Christian missions did not begin until religious pluralism had developed within Christianity to the point that the various bodies had to compete with one another in order to prosper, and in doing so once again became ‘bottom-up’, mass movements.

The Rebirth of Missions to Europe

The Age of Exploration confronted Christianity with an immensely expanded opportunity to spread the faith to millions of ‘heathens’ in the New World, Asia, and Africa. However, during the first several centuries, these mission efforts were variations on the previously unsuccessful methods of conversion by conquest, colonization, and the baptism of kings. The results were no better. For example, centuries of illusions to the contrary, Latin America never became a ‘Catholic Continent’. Catholic missions to Latin America merely achieved a Catholic veneer, beneath which ignorance, indifference, and pre-Columbian and African paganism prevailed (Stark & Finke, 2000).
However, other than as a by-product of colonialism, Christian missionizing to the non-Christian world amounted to very little, until the steamboat made travel safe, relatively fast, and affordable. From the start, this new mission era was mainly a Protestant undertaking, and since the end of World War I, the overwhelming majority of missionaries have been Americans. It is very difficult to estimate the actual number of Americans serving today as missionaries. The most recent Mission Handbook (Siewert & Valdez, 1997) lists more than 40,000 who are serving commitments of more than a year. However, it is estimated that nearly that many are abroad from local congregations, who are not reported to a national mission board or who are serving at their own expense—the latter has become quite common among college students as well as retired persons. Moreover, there are more than 28,000 persons fully supported by American funds, who are serving as full-time missionaries in their own country. An additional 1,791 foreign nationals are employed by American agencies as missionaries in countries not their own. Moreover, the 1996 total does not include the 63,995 American Protestants officially serving shorter-term foreign missions of a year or less. Overall, there are probably nearly 200,000 American Protestant missionaries abroad. This total does, of course, not include huge numbers of Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

When the subject of foreign missions is raised, most people think of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In fact, Europe has become a very major American mission field.

At the start of the twentieth century, America mission officials began to discuss whether missions to Europe could be justified. Some argued that the lack of European religiousness was a disgrace and that Europe needed a Great Awakening. Such suggestions aroused considerable antagonism in liberal denominational circles. Episcopalians were insulted by the idea that their Anglican colleagues were incapable of caring for English souls, and Presbyterians bristled at any suggestion that missionaries be sent to Scotland. All such notions were therefore dismissed on the grounds that these nations were fully Christian in their own way, and in no need of outside interference. This view prevailed and Europe was placed ‘off-limits’ by the various mission boards, except for minor efforts directed towards remote Catholic areas—in 1902, there were 36 American missionaries serving in ‘Papal Europe’—no more specific information was provided (Beach, 1903). In the 1920s, there were about two dozen American missionaries in the Balkans (Beach & Fabs, 1925). When the Great Depression caused a serious reduction in American mission efforts, these minor efforts in Europe ceased.

The massive American military effort in Europe during and following World War II soon changed a lot of minds about the need for European missions. As American soldiers returned from service in Europe, especially from service in the post-war European garrison forces, many of them enrolled in evangelical colleges and seminaries where they made it common knowledge that church attendance was extremely low and appreciation of basic Christian culture was largely lacking in much of Europe. Thus was interest in European missions rekindled.

Indicative of this growing concern is that in 1971, in his very influential textbook on Christian missions, J. Herbert Kane quoted Hans Lilje, bishop of the German Evangelical Church and a past president of the World Council of
Churches, as admitting that “The era when Europe was a Christian continent lies behind us” (Kane, 1971). Kane went on to note the very low levels of church attendance in Europe, and stated that on the entire continent, there was only “one Christian radio station” which was founded and supported by Americans, that it was impossible to purchase or obtain radio or television time (except from Radio Luxembourg), and that the state churches supported these government restrictions. According to Kane, this is why “Europe came to be regarded as a mission field” (Kane, 1971).

Of course, the liberal American denominations have been unwilling to accept this position. Their objections are, however, of little importance, since they have become essentially irrelevant to the American foreign mission effort. In 1880, the liberals—Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians—provided more than 9 missionaries out of every 10 sent abroad from the United States (Bainbridge, 1882). By 1935, the liberals supplied fewer than half of the American missionaries (Parker, 1938). In 1996, they sent out fewer than 1 out of 20 of those registered with official mission boards, so that liberals probably make up fewer than 1 in 100 of all current American missionaries (Siewert & Valdez, 1997).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, one after another of the major evangelical mission boards, such as the Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, Seventh-day Adventists, Church of Nazarene, and various smaller pentecostal groups, began to shift resources to European missions. By 1975, there were 2,363 American Protestant, full-time, long-term missionaries in Europe. By 1985, this total had grown to 3,898. Then the Berlin Wall came down and Communist prohibitions of mission activity collapsed and American mission boards reacted. In 1996, there were nearly 5,000 missionaries in Western Europe and another 2,400 in the East. This total does not include many thousands of independents and short-term volunteers, who might number more than 30,000.

These massive efforts are having results. In many parts of northwestern Europe, on the average Sunday far more people attend evangelical and pentecostal congregations than go to services in the state churches. In Catholic nations, a new mission technique involves co-operating with the local parish rather than competing with it. A pentecostal missionary will arrive in a village in southern France, for example, and organize prayer and Bible study groups. However, rather than form participants into a Protestant congregation, with the official ‘blessing’ of the local Catholic pastor, participants are urged to attend mass (Bjork, 1997).

The official Catholic position on Europe as a mission field is perhaps reflected in the fact that in 1996, there were 181 members of American Catholic religious orders serving as missionaries in Europe—37 in Great Britain (Siewert & Valdez, 1997).

What can missionaries from America really hope to accomplish, regardless of how many thousands of them take up the challenge to ‘Christianize Europe’? In time I think they might overcome the primary barrier to high levels of religious participation: socialized religion.

**Free Markets vs Socialized Religion**

The same European observers who marvelled at the vigor of American religion in the nineteenth century also recognized the reason for that vigor: America was
the first modern nation to sustain a highly competitive religious free market. For example, in 1837, Frances Grund, an Austrian journalist, used his observations of American religion to note that establishment makes the clergy “indolent and lazy” because

... a person provided for cannot, by the rules of common sense, be supposed to work as hard as one who has to exert himself for a living... Not only have Americans a greater number of clergymen than, in proportion to the population, can be found either on the Continent or in England; but they have not one idler amongst them; all of them are obliged to exert themselves for the spiritual welfare of their respective congregations. Americans, therefore, enjoy a threefold advantage: they have more preachers; they have more active preachers, and they have cheaper preachers than can be found in any part of Europe. (Grund cited in Powell, 1967: 77–80)

Wittingly or not, Grund echoed Adam Smith’s penetrating analysis of the weaknesses of established churches which inevitably produce a clergy content to repose “themselves upon their benefices [while neglecting] to keep up the fervour of faith and the devotion in the great body of the people; and having given themselves up to indolence, were become altogether incapable of making any vigorous exertion in defence even of their own establishment” (Smith, [1776] 1981: 789).

Although awareness of the invigorating effect of religious competition was lost for much of the twentieth century, it has by now been well-established that just as socialized commercial economies destroy initiative, so does socialized religion (Stark & Finke, 2000). First of all, to an amazing extent the state imposes its religious views upon state churches, sometimes to the point of imposing new ‘demythologized’ translations of scripture as was done in Sweden (Asberg, 1990). Secondly, as Adam Smith warned, if not actually lazy, kept clergy lack enterprise. In Germany and Scandinavia, the clergy are civil servants and their salaries are secure regardless of attendance. Thirdly, kept laity are lazy, too, being trained to regard religion as free. This not only weakens commitment to the state church, but indirectly hinders all unsubsidized faiths as well.

Finally, despite claims of religious freedom, the reality is an unreliable religious toleration—the state often directly interferes with, and otherwise limits, potential competitors of the state churches. In 1984, the European Parliament overwhelmingly passed a resolution allowing member states to curtail the “activity of certain new religious movements”. Since then, there has been an outbreak of religious persecutions all over northern Europe. The Germans have placed both Scientology and the Jehovah’s Witnesses under secret service watch and members of both faiths, along with a variety of evangelical and pentecostal Protestant groups, are prohibited from civil service employment. On June 22, 1998, the French Tax Authority placed a US$50 million lien for back taxes on all property of the Jehovah’s Witnesses on grounds that they were listed as a dangerous cult in an official French Parliament report on “Cults in France”. Also listed in the report are 172 other evangelical Protestant groups—essentially all religious bodies that are not members of the left-leaning World Council of Churches. In 1997, the Belgian Parliament Commission on Cults issued a
600-page report in which 189 religious groups are denounced, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Quakers, Hasidic Jews, the YWCA (but not the YMCA), Seventh-day Adventists, the Assemblies of God, the Amish, the Plymouth Brethren, and Buddhists. And so it goes when socialized industries seek to prevent competition (Introvigne, 1997; United States Department of State, 1999).

Energetic competition for the moribund established churches is precisely what American missionaries see as the Christian hope for Europe. Some early returns suggest that the impact of religious competition will be as effective in Europe as it has been in America (Hamburg & Pettersson, 1994, 1997; Iannaccone, 1991; Pettersson & Hamburg, 1997; Stark & Iannaccone, 1994). It also seems indicative that the immense progress made by evangelical Protestant groups in Latin America has not only substantially increased overall rates of church attendance, but has invigorated Latin American Catholicism sufficiently to cause substantial increases in seminary enrollment and in Catholic evangelizing (Clarke, 1999; Gill, 1999).

Of course, most of my European colleagues will accept none of this, charging that American religiousness is nothing but an atavism caused by the social weakness of American intellectual élites. In contrast, they say, religion has been overcome once and for all in Europe. I find this nothing but whistling in the dark, given surveys that consistently show that overwhelming majorities in all parts of Europe say they are personally religious, that they pray, and that they believe in God (Stark & Finke, 2000). The so-called ‘secularized’ and ‘enlightened’ European is far better described as a “believing non-belonger”, to use Grace Davie’s (1994) felicitous phrase. It is belonging that the American missionaries are trying to bring about in Europe by creating energetic little groups prepared to challenge the lazy socialized churches.

As recently as 15 years ago, while social scientists wrote frequent articles about the rosy future of Liberation Theology in Latin America, not one of them displayed any knowledge of the huge success of evangelical Protestantism that was by then far along. In contrast, since the late 1950s, the millions of American evangelicals who have funded Latin American missions have been reading accurate reports in their denominational periodicals about the success of these efforts. Today, the same sources are excited about the Christianization of Europe. If history is, in fact, repeating itself, then in perhaps another 30 years, social scientists will begin to catch on.

Rodney Stark is Professor of Sociology and Comparative Religion at the University of Washington. Correspondence: University of Washington, Box 353340, Seattle, WA 98195, USA. E-mail: socstark@aol.com

REFERENCES


