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Stark's "Why God?: Explaining religious phenomena" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Stark, R. (2017). *Why God?: Explaining religious phenomena*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press. 293 pp. \$24.95. ISBN 9781599475202

In his latest book, prolific author Rodney Stark, a distinguished professor of social sciences at Baylor University, presents a clear and accessible sociological analysis of religion that seeks to “explain what religion is, what it does, and why it seems to be a universal feature of human societies” (p. 1). Stark also seeks to reset the conversation in the study of religious phenomena. He maintains that thoroughly “ungodly” theories have been allowed to dominate religious studies for well over a century. Emile Durkheim is but one of the many prominent scholars whose theories Stark critically examines and finds to be deeply unsatisfying because these scholars proposed that religions are not fundamentally about belief in supernatural beings at all. Moreover, sociologists like Peter Berger have argued that religious behavior is irrational, an argument Stark himself ardently rejects as “absurd” (pp. 20–21). In opposition to these prevailing theories, Stark counters that religious behavior is in fact rational, and furthermore an accurate definition of religion must include belief in a supernatural being. He provides his own social–scientific analysis of religious behavior via a list of 192 propositions that he explains and defends throughout the book.

Stark covers much ground in a relatively brief space. Consistent with previous books he has written on this subject, Stark employs Rational Choice Theory to the tasks of explaining what religion is, the relationship between religion and morality, the factors that contribute to the rise and fall of religious movements, the varying degrees of tension between different religious groups and their sociocultural environments and the impact this tension has on understanding their growth and decline, the social impact ecclesiastical leaders have on religious movements, and the social causes and consequences of a wide range of religious behaviors, including miraculous experiences, conversions, the formation of sects, and the emergence of religious and irreligious hostility.

Because the author addresses so many topics and debates in one volume, some of his propositions are covered in a tantalizingly brief space, leaving the interested reader wishing for further explanation and additional supporting evidence for

a few of his arguments. Despite this limitation, the author generally succeeds in accomplishing what he set out to do; namely, to argue that religious phenomena are best understood and most adequately explained when sociologists take seriously the role that belief in a divine being plays in motivating religious behavior, and when sociologists allow that the beliefs and practices of religious people can in fact be interpreted as rational behavior. His application of Rational Choice Theory to the study of religious behavior puts him at odds with many prominent colleagues in his field, but he seems completely unfazed in assuming the contrarian role of challenging widely-held assumptions.

This book should be considered essential for libraries supporting seminaries or degree programs in religious studies. Because of its bold thesis, broad coverage of topics, and interaction with a wide range of scholars (as evidenced by an extensive bibliography), Stark's book should be required reading for any student who wishes to explore the major issues in this field.

Reviewer

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