

Early Christianity: Opiate of the Privileged?

Rodney Stark
Baylor University

Tradition has it that Christianity recruited most of its initial supporters from among the very poorest and most miserable groups in the ancient world. Since early times, many ascetic Christians have claimed that poverty was one of the chief virtues of the “primitive” church, and by the nineteenth century this view that was ratified by the radical Left as well. Karl Marx’s collaborator Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) put it thus: “The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome” (Engels, 1964 [1894], p. 316). Working from this assumption, Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), the German editor of Marx’s works, built the case that Jesus may have been one of the first socialists and that the early Christians briefly achieved true communism (Kautsky, 1953 [1908]).

Although many Bible scholars rejected Kautsky’s claims, the view that Christianity originated in lower class bitterness and protest remained the received wisdom all across the theological spectrum. As Yale’s Erwin Goodenough (1893-1965) summed up in a widely adopted college textbook:

Still more obvious an indication of the undesirability of Christianity in Roman eyes was the fact that its converts were drawn in an overwhelming majority from the lowest classes of society. Then as now the governing classes were apprehensive of a movement which brought into a closely knit and secret organization the servants and slaves of society (Goodenough, 1931, p. 37).

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Author’s Note: *Rodney Stark is Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences and Co-Director of the Institute for Studies of Religion, Baylor University. email: rs@rodneystark.com.*

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This view was further elaborated by the German sociologist Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) who claimed that *all* religious movements are the work of the “lower classes” (Troeltsch, 1931 [1912], p. 331). Troeltsch was echoed by the American Protestant theologian-turned-sociologist H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962), who wrote in an extremely influential book, that a new religious movement is always “the child of an outcast minority, taking its rise in the religious revolts of the poor” (Niebuhr, 1929, p. 19). Subsequently, the most popular explanation of why people initiate new religious movements came to be known as *deprivation theory*, which proposes that people adopt supernatural solutions to their material misery when direct action fails or is obviously impossible (Glock, 1964; Stark & Bainbridge, 1987).

Recently, it has become apparent that deprivation theory fails to fit most, if not all, of the well-documented cases of new religious movements—whether Buddhism in the sixth century (Stark, 2007) or the New Age Movement in the twenty-first (Stark, 2008). Contrary to prevailing sociological dogmas, *religious movements typically are launched by the privileged classes*. Why this occurs will be examined later in this essay. First comes a detailed refutation of the claim that early Christianity was a lower class movement, and its replacement with the recognition that, from the very beginning, Christianity was especially attractive to people of privilege—Jesus himself may have come from wealth or at least from a comfortable background.

Privileged Christians

All discussions of the social standing of the first Christians would seem to have been settled by Paul’s “irrefutable” proof text, when he noted of his followers that “not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26).

It is amazing how many generations of sophisticated people failed to see a very obvious implication of this verse. Finally, in 1960, the Australian scholar E.A. Judge began an illustrious career by pointing out that Paul did not say “*none* of you were powerful, *none* of you were of noble birth” (Judge, 1960a, 1960b). Instead, Paul said “not many” were powerful or of noble birth, which means that *some were!* Given what a miniscule fraction of persons in the Roman Empire were of noble birth, it is quite remarkable that *any* of the tiny group of early Christians were of the nobility. This raises the possibility that like the many other religious movements, Christianity also began as a movement of the privileged. In fact, several noted historians had expressed that view long before Judge pointed out the

obvious. The immensely influential German historian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) had remarked the special appeal Christianity held for upper class women (Harnack, 1905, p. 227), and the renowned Scottish classicist W.M. Ramsay (1851-1939) claimed that Christianity “spread at first among the educated more rapidly than among the uneducated; nowhere had it a stronger hold ... than in the household and at the court of the emperor” (Ramsay, 1893, p. 57). So, let us look more closely at the likely social position of Jesus, his disciples, Paul, and the early generations of Christians.

Many Bible scholars have been troubled by 2 Cor. 8:9, wherein Paul remarks “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Could this be true? Was Jesus once a rich man? Some have used this verse to “prove” that Paul knew nothing about the life of Jesus (for a summary see Buchanan, 1964)—an obviously absurd claim. Most others have interpreted it metaphorically—claiming that the reference is to spiritual riches. But this interpretation is greatly compromised by the fact that the verse occurs within a context wherein Paul is asking the Corinthians to contribute money, not prayers, for the poor in Jerusalem. He also cites the example of the Macedonians as setting a standard for giving money, and assures the Corinthians that God’s blessings will accrue to generous givers. To cite the example of Jesus in this context strongly suggests that Paul was talking about Jesus having given up material, not spiritual, riches. A careful examination of Jesus’ biography, as well as the examples favored by Jesus in his teachings, suggests Paul may have known what he was talking about.

First of all, Jesus probably was not a carpenter. Only *Mark* (Mk. 6:3) refers to him as a carpenter, whereas *Matthew* refers to him as the son of a carpenter. Nowhere else in the New Testament is anything more said about the matter. But, throughout the Gospels, Jesus is addressed as rabbi or teacher, the two terms being synonymous and referring to one trained in the Law. That Jesus was a trained rabbi seems certain, not only because of his obvious mastery of the Law, but in the fact that many rabbis were willing to dispute the Law with him, something they surely would have refused to do with a simple carpenter. Indeed, it is worth noting the traditional Jewish practice that a rabbi always learned a trade to fall back on and it is very inviting to suppose that Rabbi Jesus was a carpenter only in that sense. In addition, it appears that his parents “occupied a prominent place in the community” and were sufficiently well-off “to have had property in Capernaum as well as Nazareth” (Frend, 1984, p. 57). They also were

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able to go to Jerusalem every year for Passover (Lk. 2:41), something most families could not afford (Bütz, 2005, p. 53).

In addition, among the immense number of analogies and metaphors used by Jesus in the Gospels, only three times did he make any references to “building” or “construction” and these are so vague as to indicate nothing about his knowledge of carpentry (Buchanan, 1964, p. 203)—one surely need not be a carpenter to know it is better to build a foundation on rock than on sand (Lk. 6:46-49). On the other hand, Jesus constantly used examples involving wealth: land ownership, investment, borrowing, having servants and tenants, inheritance, and the like. These rhetorical tendencies may not reflect that Jesus was a son of privilege, but they surely do suggest a privileged audience. As the respected George Wesley Buchanan noted, many of Jesus’ images and parables

would be pointless if told to people who had not enough wealth to entertain guests, hire servants, be generous with contributions, etc. The audiences, at least, were predominantly wealthy.... A teacher from the lower classes would have been less likely to have found his most attentive listeners among the upper classes than a teacher who, himself, had been reared in upper class conditions (Buchanan, 1964, p. 205).

And, in fact, the Gospels are filled with clues that not only did Jesus address a privileged audience, but that he tended to draw his supporters from among them.

Consider the twelve apostles or disciples. It is widely assumed that they were all men of very humble origins and accomplishments. But is it true? We know almost nothing about some of them other than their names. But what the Gospels tell of others is inconsistent with their humble images. For example, when James and John abandoned their fishing boat to follow Jesus, “they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants” (Mk. 1:20). It is not surprising that they employed servants; fishing was quite profitable and required a substantial investment. Since, according to Lk. 5:10, Peter (Simon) and Andrew were partners of James and John, it can be assumed they too were somewhat affluent. In fact, it is quite possible that Peter owned two houses, one in Bethsaida and another in Capernaum. Mark’s mother owned a house in Jerusalem that was sufficiently large to serve as a house church (Acts 12:12). Moreover, Andrew had previously had the leisure to be a disciple of John the Baptist. And then there was

Matthew (or Levi) the tax collector. Tax collectors were hated, but they were powerful and affluent.

Among the people mentioned in the Gospels as involved with Jesus, a number can be identified as wealthy and even upper class people. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and very rich. He was honored to have Jesus as his guest (Lk. 19:1-10). Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, came to Jesus seeking help for his daughter (Lk. 8:40-56). Joseph of Arimathea was an early convert and very wealthy (Mt. 27:57). Joanna, the wife of Chuza who was steward of Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee, also was an early convert and a generous contributor to the support of Jesus and his disciples (Lk. 8:3). Susanna was another wealthy woman who helped finance Jesus (Lk. 8:3).

In Mt. 26: 6-11, we learn that while Jesus was seated for dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee (Lk. 7:36), “a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment and poured it on his head.” When his disciples became indignant because it could “have been sold for a large sum, and given to the poor,” Jesus responded to them, “Why do you trouble this woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” It should be noted that the value of the ointment was approximately equal to a year’s wages for the average worker at that time (Trebilco, 2004, p. 406).

To quote Buchanan once again, “the majority of Jesus’ teachings were directed toward the upper economic class with whom Jesus associated ... [which] support[s] the possibility that Jesus may also have been reared in an upper class of society” (Buchanan, 1964, p. 209).

Many will object that Jesus often advised that wealth was a barrier to salvation and that one should give one’s wealth to the poor. But rather than interpreting this as a “poor man’s” complaint against the rich, it would seem at least as plausible that these were the statements of someone in a position to say, “Do as I have done.”

We come now to Paul and to the post-crucifixion generation of Christians.

Despite continuing and militant efforts to maintain that Paul was a pretentious nobody, truly a tentmaker (Meggitt, 1998, pp. 75-97), it is certain that Paul was, as the celebrated A.D. Nock (1902-1963) put it, from a family “of wealth and standing” (Nock, 1938, p. 21). He was born a Roman citizen, when that was a very uncommon and meaningful badge of distinction in the East. Not only he, but his father also, was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). Paul left his home in the Greek city of Tarsus and went to

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Jerusalem in order to study under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel and then rapidly became so prominent that he was appointed to impose punishment on Jews who had taken up Christianity. His training as a tentmaker was in keeping with the long-standing tradition that every rabbi learn a trade “by which he could live” (Nock, 1938, p. 21). That Paul later actually pursued this trade from time to time seems to have been a bit of an affectation. As C.H. Dodd (1884-1973) put it, “A man born to manual labour does not speak self-consciously of ‘labouring with my own hands’” (quoted in Nock, 1938, pp. 21-22). In addition, Paul did not preach to the masses, but “to those who, like himself, spoke and read Greek and knew their Septuagint; and he sought to interpret the mystery of God’s purposes, for the relative few who could comprehend such concepts.... He moved easily among the upper reaches of provincial society” (Frend, 1984, p. 93).

It should be no surprise, therefore, that Paul attracted many privileged followers, especially women. According to Gillian Cloke, “What is already evident is that women of the comfortably off and merchant classes of the empire were well-attested in the Christian movement from early on in its spread... [Early Christianity] had substantial purchase amongst the classes of those capable of being patronesses to the apostles and their successors” (Cloke, 2000, p. 427). One of these was Lydia, a wealthy dealer in purple cloth, who was baptized by Paul—along with her family and servants—and who subsequently conducted the congregation in Philippi from her house. Several times she sent funds to Paul to support his mission in Thessalonica (Phil. 4:16). To a considerable extent, “Christianity was a movement sponsored by local patrons to their social dependents” (Judge, 1960b, p. 8). In fact, when Paul arrived in a new city, he usually stayed in a wealthy household and conducted his mission from there (Malherbe, 2003; Judge, 1960a, 1960b). E.A. Judge identified forty persons who sponsored Paul and, not surprisingly, all were “persons of substance, members of a cultivated social elite” (Judge, 1960a, p. 130). Hence Erastus, the city treasurer in Corinth, assisted Paul and may well have been one of his hosts. Another was Gaius who also had “a house ample enough not only to put up Paul, but also to accommodate all the Christian groups in Corinth meeting together ... The same is true of Crispus” who not only had “high prestige in the Jewish community” but probably was “well to do” (Meeks, 1983, p. 57). In addition, there is Theophilus to whom both *Luke* and *Acts* are dedicated and who most likely was a Roman official who probably subsidized Paul—perhaps during his long period of house arrest in Rome (Green, 1997, p. 44).

Remarkable evidence of Paul’s association with the privileged comes from Judge’s calculation that, of ninety-one individuals named in the New

Testament in connection with Paul, a third have names indicating Roman citizenship. Judge called this “a startlingly high proportion, ten times higher than in the case of a control group” based on epigraphic documents (Judge, 2008, pp. 142-143). If this were not enough, there is evidence in Paul’s letters that there already were significant numbers of Christians serving in the imperial household. Paul concluded his letter to the Philippians: “All the saints greet you, especially those in Caesar’s household.” And in his letter to the Romans (Rom. 16:10-11), Paul sends greetings to “those who belong to the family of Aristobulus” and to “the family of Narcissus.” Both Harnack and the equally authoritative J.B. Lightfoot (1828-1889), identified Narcissus as the private secretary of the Emperor Claudius and Aristobulus as an intimate of the emperor (Harnack, 1905, pp. 195-197).

Finally, there is the *First Epistle to Timothy*. Whether or not Paul actually wrote this letter is not very important to the matters at hand. Everyone agrees that it was written no later than soon after Paul’s ministry and that Timothy was engaged in a ministry in Ephesus. Thus it is instructive that the Epistle offered so much advice about what to preach to the rich members: “As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty” (1 Tim. 6:17-19). Timothy was not advised to tell his rich members to cease being wealthy, but “to do good, to be rich in good deeds.” In addition, 1 Tim. 2:9 advises that “women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire.” This advice is silly unless there were significant numbers of rich people in the congregation at Ephesus.

Did early Christianity also attract lower class converts? Of course. Even when a wealthy household was baptized, the majority would have been servants and slaves, and surely some lower status people found their way to the church on their own. The point is that early Christianity substantially *over*-recruited the privileged, not that it only recruited them, or even that most early Christians were well-off. This is entirely consistent with Gerd Theissen’s reconstruction of the congregation in Corinth: it included many from the lower classes as well as a remarkable, if much smaller number, from the upper ranks of the city (Theissen, 1982).

In about 110 CE Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, was arrested by the Romans and then set out on a long, leisurely walk to Rome in the company of ten soldiers. Along the way he wrote a famous series of letters to various congregations. Among those addressed or mentioned were people of high social status, including the wife of a procurator, and Alce, the wife of a police official. But the most telling revelation of the high status of some Christians came in Ignatius’s letter to the congregation in Rome. Ignatius

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had made up his mind to die in the arena—to which he already had been sentenced—and his greatest fear was that well-meaning Christians in Rome would intervene and get him pardoned. So he wrote: “I am afraid that it is your love that will do me wrong.... [Let me] state emphatically to all that I die willingly for God, provided you do not interfere. I beg you, do not show me unseasonable kindness. Suffer me to be the food of wild beasts” (St. Ignatius, *Epistle To the Romans*).¹

Ignatius assumed that some members of the Roman congregation *could* get him pardoned, which required considerable, high-level influence. And there is every reason to believe that Ignatius was properly informed. Many historians now accept that Pomponia Graecina, a woman of the senatorial class, whom Tacitus reported as having been accused of practicing “foreign superstition” in 57 CE, was a Christian. Nor was hers an isolated case. The distinguished Italian historian Marta Sordi noted: “We know from reliable sources that there were Christians among the aristocracy [in Rome] in the second half of the first century (Acilius Glabrio and the Christian Flavians) and that it seems probable that the same can be said for the first half of the century, before Paul’s arrival in Rome” (Sordi, 1986, p. 28).

In 112 CE, Pliny the Younger wrote to the Emperor Trajan for approval of his policies in persecuting Christians. He informed the emperor that the spread of “this wretched cult” involved “many individuals of every age and class” (Pliny, 1963, 10:96).

By the end of the second century, Tertullian claimed that Christians were present at every level in Rome, including the palace and the Senate (Tertullian, *Apology* 37.4). Fifteen years later Tertullian noted in a letter to Scapula that there were many “women and men of the highest rank” known to be Christians (Tertullian, *To Scapula* 4.1-4; 5.1-3). At this same time, the noblewoman Perpetua was martyred at Carthage—Edmond Le Blant noted that a large number of the martyrs were rich (Le Blant, 1880). During the reign of Commodus (180-192), according to Harnack (1905), “in Rome especially a large number of wealthy people went over to this religion together with all their households and families” (p. 180).

For more systematic evidence, in a sample of Romans of the senatorial class from late in the third century, ten percent could be clearly identified as Christians—or at least twice the percentage of Christians in the empire (Salzman, 2002, table 4-3). A study of grave monuments in Phrygia from this same era found fifteen Christian city councilors and the son of a Christian city councilor. A city councilor was necessarily extremely rich since the office was imposed as a civic duty and required the expenditure of considerable personal funds for municipal benefits (McKechnie, 2009).

Clearly then, Paul told the truth when he implied that although not many Christians were powerful or of noble birth, *some* were! Indeed, as compared with the general population, it would seem that *many* were. Obviously, then, the early Christians were not a bunch of miserable underdogs. This always should have been obvious, not only from reading the Gospels, but from asking why and how a bunch of illiterate ignoramuses came to produce sophisticated written scriptures at a time when only the Jews had produced anything comparable—several of the Oriental faiths had brief scriptures, but the dominant Greco-Roman paganism had none.

Christian Literacy

As with all the other “scholarly” attacks on the credibility of the Gospels and the early Church, claims that Jesus was illiterate, that Paul’s Greek was “vulgar,” and that the Gospels are written in a crude, artless style, originated with German professors during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most prominent among them was Adolf Deissmann (1866-1937), who began with the assumption that Christianity was “a movement among the weary and heavy-laden, men without power and position, ‘babes’ as Jesus himself calls them, the poor, the base, the foolish” (Deissmann, 1927, p. 466). Building on this foundation, Deissmann (1927) used the term *Kleinliteratur* (low or small literature) to distinguish Christian writings from those of educated ancient authors who wrote *Hochliteratur* (or high literature). According to Deissmann, early Christian writings used “just the kind of Greek that simple, unlearned folk of the Roman Imperial period were in the habit of using” (p. 62). And the letters of Paul show that “Christianity in its earliest creative period was most closely bound up with the lower classes and had as yet no effective connexion with the small upper class possessed of power and culture” (p. 247). As Deissmann’s colleague Martin Dibelius (1883-1947) summed up, early Christianity “gave no place to the artistic devices and tendencies of literary and polished writing.... [Christians were an] unlettered people [who] ... had neither the capacity nor the inclination for the production of books” (Dibelius, 1934, pp. 1, 9). Unfortunately, for most of the twentieth century even highly committed Christian scholars accepted these claims (see, for example, Latourette, 1937, p. 75).

But, as with all the other attacks on the early Christians by German academics in this era, this was mostly arrogant nonsense. Paul wrote letters, not plays or epic poems. It would have been bizarre had his (or anyone else’s) letters been highly literary—one supposes that even James Joyce’s letters were much less “literary” than his novel *Finnegans Wake*.

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As for Paul's Greek, it now is recognized that it was a "Jewish Greek," much like that used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), and no one denies that Paul was a Jew, not an Athenian. As Nock dismissed Deissmann's claims, "Paul is not writing peasant Greek or soldier Greek; he is writing the Greek of a man who has the Septuagint in his blood" (Nock, 1933b, p. 138). As for the Gospels lacking literary merit, the writing style is like that of the great Greek scientific works (such as Ptolemy's astronomy)—works written primarily to convey information and therefore presented in "straightforward, factual prose" (Gamble, 1995, p. 33). The authors of the Gospels were not writing fiction or art; they had material to convey and their style was in keeping with "the professional prose of the day" (Gamble, 1995, p. 34).

As scholars have finally turned away from the German claims that Christians were an ignorant and illiterate lot, there has been a growing awareness that the history of early Christian writing and texts reveals an unusually sophisticated group of writers and readers. One of the earliest proponents of this "privileged Christian audience" thesis was the distinguished Yale professor Abraham J. Malherbe. After analyzing the language and style of the early church writers he concluded that they were addressing a literate, educated audience (Malherbe, 2003 [1977]). Indeed, who else could they have been writing for? Deissmann seems to have forgotten that in those days the poor, the base, and the foolish could not read (Harris, 1989).

Since Malherbe's book appeared, there have been some superb studies published of early Christian writing and literacy (Bauckham, 2006; Gamble, 1995; Gerhardsson, 2001; Millard, 2000; Stanton, 2004). All of these scholars stress the Jewish origins of Christianity, which not only makes it likely that early Christians shared the unusually high levels of literacy enjoyed by the ancient Jews, but also would have encouraged Christians to regard scripture as essential to their religious life.

Clearly, the early Christians placed immense importance on Jewish scripture. As Harry Y. Gamble (1995) explained: "One of the most urgent tasks of the Christian movement in its infancy was to support its convictions by showing their consistency with Jewish scriptures.... [Hence they] necessarily developed scriptural arguments" (p. 23). To this end, Gamble suggests, they would have assembled "anthologies of proof texts ... extracted from Jewish scriptures" (p. 25). Collections of proof texts were found in the scrolls surviving from the sect at Qumran, and it seems virtually certain that Christians would have assembled similar works. The existence of such collections is further supported by the fact that many of

the quotations from Jewish scriptures that appear in early Christian writing vary from the wording in the Septuagint or from the Masoretic texts, hence they must have been copied from another source. As Gamble put it, “There is, then, at least a strong circumstantial probability that collections of testimonies were current in the early church and should be reckoned among the lost items of the earliest Christian literature” (p. 27).

Alan Millard agrees with Gamble that from earliest days Christianity was a written religion: “This is not to say the Evangelists began to compose the Gospels in Jesus’ lifetime, but that some, possibly much, of their source material was preserved in writing from that period, especially accounts of the distinctive teachings and actions of Jesus” (Millard, 2000, pp. 223-224). Graham N. Stanton thinks it unbelievable that Christians would have waited a generation or two before they began to write things down: “The widely held view that the followers of Jesus were illiterate or deliberately spurned the use of notes and notebooks for recording and transmitting Jesus traditions needs to be abandoned” (Stanton, 2004, p. 189). The use of notebooks in this era has been lucidly examined in detail by Richard Bauckham (2006) who demonstrated that “such notebooks were in quite widespread use in the ancient world (2 Tim 4:13 refers to parchment notebooks Paul carried on his travels). It seems more probable than not that early Christians used them” (p. 288).

Thus the evidence strongly suggests that the Gospels were the end product of a faith that was set down in writing from the very start. It seems nearly certain that at least some of Jesus’ words were written down when they were spoken. It seems even more certain that the early evangelists, including Paul, possessed and often referred to written materials—far more of them than merely the postulated Q—which helps to explain the variations and differences across the Gospels. As for the latter, they were written to be read, not only by the emerging clergy, but by rank-and-file Christians!

Finally comes the persistent claim that Jesus was illiterate. This snide assertion flies in the face of the immense familiarity with Jewish scriptures displayed by Jesus throughout the Gospels (Evans, 2001) and the near certainty that he was a well-trained rabbi. It also ignores statements such as in Lk. 4:16-17: “and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written....” In addition is the frequency with which Jesus prefaces an exchange with the rhetorical question “have you not read” (Evans, 2001). Granted, this evidence comes only from the Gospels, but that is true of *everything* we know about Jesus.

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It seems inescapable that early Christianity was not an exception to the rule that religious innovation is primarily the work of the privileged. This recognition has caused considerable anxiety among many recent historians of the early church. Why, they ask almost incredulously, would privileged people feel driven to form and embrace a new religious movement? This has led to many confused and rigid discussions of various social scientific notions such as status inconsistency and cognitive dissonance (Gager, 1975; Meeks, 1983; Theissen, 1978, 1982). But the reason the privileged turn to religion is neither so complex nor so convoluted.

Privilege and Religious Innovation

To set the stage, consider that Buddha was a prince, that fifty-five of his first sixty converts were from the nobility, and the other five might have been nobles too—we simply do not know their backgrounds (Lester, 1993, p. 867). For another major example, after many years of effort and only two converts, Zoroaster built a successful movement after converting the king, queen, and then the court, of a nearby kingdom. The early Taoists as well as the Confucianists were recruited from among the Chinese elite and, of course, Moses was a prince. Or consider two small sects that appeared in ancient Greece: the Orphics and the Pythagoreans. According to Plato, both movements were based on the upper classes: their priests “come to the doors of the rich ... and offer them a bundle of books” (Burkert, 1985, p. 296).

Nor is it true that most, let alone all, of the Christian sect movements arose from the lower classes. With the possible exception of some Anabaptist Movements, the great Christian religious movements that occurred through the centuries were very obviously based on persons of considerable wealth and power: on the nobility, the clergy, and the well-to-do urbanites (Costen, 1997; Lambert, 1992, 1998; Russell, 1965; Stark, 2003). For example, the Cathars enrolled a very high proportion of nobility (Costen, 1997, p. 70) and so did the early Waldensians (Lambert, 1992). Luther’s Reformation was not supported by the poor, but by princes, merchants, professors, and university students. At the outbreak of the first French War of Religion in 1562, it is estimated that fifty percent of the French nobility had embraced Calvinism (Tracy, 1999), but very few peasants or urban poor rallied to the Huguenots (Ladurie, 1974). Indeed, of 482 medieval ascetic Roman Catholic saints, three-fourths were from the nobility—twenty-two percent of them from royalty (Stark, 2004).

Many sociologists continue to cite the Methodists as a classic proletarian movement (Niebuhr, 1929), seemingly ignorant of the fact that John

Wesley and his colleagues did not depart from the Church of England and found Methodism because they were lower class dissidents seeking a more comforting faith. They were themselves young men of privilege who began to assert their preference for a higher intensity faith while at Oxford. By the same token, the prophets of the Old Testament all belonged “to the landowning nobility” (Lang, 1983) and, contrary to most sociologists, so did most members of the Jewish sect known as the Essenes (Baumgarten, 1997). If they thrive, nearly all religious movements attract many lower class adherents—as, of course, the Methodists did. But like the Methodists, these movements originate in the religious concerns of the privileged, not in lower class dissatisfaction.

Clearly then, based on history the correct generalization ought to be that religious movements are not “revolts of the poor,” but are spiritual ventures of the privileged. But why?

Insufficiencies and Opportunities of Privilege

Having never been rich, let alone born into privilege, most scholars share with the vast majority of persons many unfounded illusions about what it is like to be at the top of the social pyramid. Although popular rhetoric abounds in adages minimizing the importance of wealth and status, most people do not really mean it and their perceptions are clouded by envy as well as by rampant materialism. Oh, to be born a Rockefeller! That Laurence Rockefeller played an active role in founding and funding various New Age groups such as Esalen seems mystifying (Kripal, 2007). But the fact is that wealth and power do not satisfy all human desires. Thus, Abraham Maslow wrote at length about the need for self-actualization (Maslow, 1971), and the Nobel laureate economist Robert William Fogel linked this to privilege: “throughout history ... freed of the need to work in order to satisfy their material needs, [the rich] have sought self-realization” (Fogel, 2000, p. 2).

In earlier times, the route to self-realization quite obviously was a spiritual journey, hence the remarkable propensity of the privileged to found or join religious movements. In modern times this quest has often led the privileged to leftist politics, as in the case of late nineteenth century participants in the British Fabian Society or in the many sons and daughters of privilege who sustained American radical movements during the 1960s (McAdam, 1988; Sherkat & Blocker, 1994). In both cases, however, for many, the worldly, materialist quest proved unsatisfactory, whereupon substantial numbers dropped out and turned to religious movements—many sixties radicals joined intense religious groups (Kent, 2001), many Fabians

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became Spiritualists (Barrow, 1980; MacKenzie & MacKenzie, 1977; Nelson, 1969). What this reflects is that while worldly Utopias inevitably fail to deliver (Stark & Bainbridge, 1996, ch. 9), spiritual salvation does not. Buddha could not find satisfactory purpose and meaning when living in a palace; he found it under a Banyan tree.

Clearly, it is necessary to add a fundamental extension to deprivation theory as it originally was formulated. It is not merely that people will adopt supernatural solutions to their *thwarted material desires*, but *that people will pursue or initiate supernatural solutions to their thwarted existential and moral desires*—a situation to which the privileged are especially prone, since they are not distracted by immediate material needs (Stark, 2003, 2004; Stark & Finke, 2000).

It also must be recognized that the privileged are in a position to act on their spiritual dissatisfactions and desires in a way that the poor are not: they have visibility, influence, experience, and means. That the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel were both born into wealth and the priesthood gave them initial credibility. As he founded the Waldensians, Waldo, a rich merchant of Lyon, had the funds to commission a French translation of the Gospels and the experience needed to administer an ascetic movement that attracted many other rich followers. John Wycliff launched the Lollard movement without stirring from his rooms at Oxford; it was enough that he published an English translation of the Bible and proposed that the church pursue “apostolic poverty”—merchants and members of the nobility took it from there (Dickens, 1991, p. 128). Jan Hus was the personal chaplain of the Queen of Bohemia and thus able to recruit followers from the nobility on a face-to-face basis. Martin Luther was a professor and so prominent in church affairs that he was sent to Rome to make appeals on behalf of the Augustinian Vicar-General. Ulrich Zwingli’s parents bought him a parish. During his youth in Noyon, John Calvin enjoyed the sponsorship of the local nobleman and while a student in Paris he was assigned the income from several ecclesiastical posts (Stark, 2007, 2003). The University of Paris not only trained Calvin as a theologian, but perfected the rhetorical skills that enabled him to achieve political power in Geneva from whence he mounted religious campaigns in many parts of Europe. No matter how otherworldly their outlook, to succeed, religious movements must deal effectively with complex worldly affairs.

Finally, growing up in privilege often generates the conviction that one has the superior wisdom needed to transform the world and the right, perhaps even the duty, to do so.

Conclusion

Karl Marx was merely reflecting the conventional wisdom of the day when he wrote that “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature ... the opium of the people” (Marx, 1964 [1844], p. 42). But he might better have said that “religion often is the opium of the dissatisfied upper classes, the sigh of wealthy creatures depressed by materialism.” Of course, given his relentless intellectual as well as personal materialism, Marx couldn’t conceive of such a thing. Neither can far too many social scientists. Fortunately, most New Testament historians no longer believe that the early Christians were a motley crew of slaves and the down-trodden. Had that really been the case, the rise of Christianity would most certainly have required miracles.

Endnotes

- 1 All references to the Church Fathers can be found online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers>.

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