CHAPTER ONE

Conversion and Christian Growth

FINALLY, all questions concerning the rise of Christianity are one: How was it done? How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman Empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization? Although this is the only question, it requires many answers—no one thing led to the triumph of Christianity.
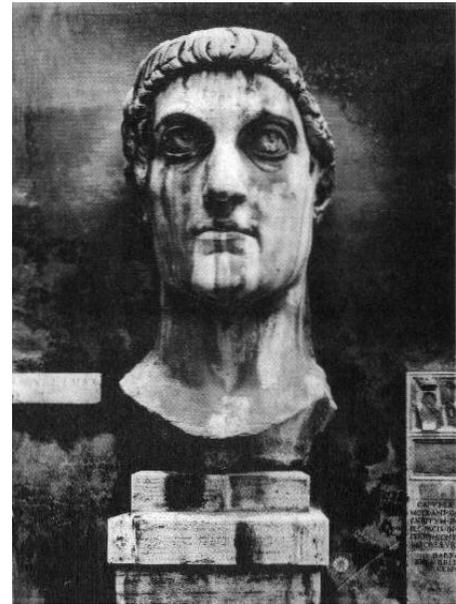
The chapters that follow will attempt to reconstruct the rise of Christianity in order to explain why it happened. But in this chapter I will pose the question in a more precise way than has been done. First, I shall explore the arithmetic of growth to see more clearly the task that had to be accomplished. What is the minimum rate of growth that would permit the Christian movement to become as large as it must have been in the time that history allows? Did Christianity grow so rapidly that mass conversions must have taken place—as Acts attests and every historian from Eusebius to Ramsay MacMullen has believed? Having established a plausible growth curve for the rise of Christianity, I will review sociological knowledge of the process by which people convert to new religions in order to infer certain requirements concerning social relations between Christians and the surrounding Greco-Roman world. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the legitimate uses of social scientific theories to reconstruct history in the absence of adequate information on what actually occurred.

Rather than cause the triumph of Christianity, the emperor Constantine's "Edict of Milan" was an astute response to rapid Christian growth that had already made them a major political force.

Since this book is a work of both history and social science, I have written it for a nonprofessional audience. In this way I can make sure that the social science is fully accessible to historians of the early church, meanwhile preventing social scientists from becoming lost amidst obscure historical and textual references.

Before I proceed, however, it seems appropriate to discuss whether an attempt to explain the rise of Christianity is not somewhat sacrilegious. If, for example, I argue that the rise of Christianity benefited from superior fertility or from an excess of females who made possible high rates of exogamous marriage, am I not, thereby, attributing sacred achievements to profane causes? I think not. Whatever one does or does not believe about the divine, obviously God did not cause the world to become Christian, since that remains to be achieved. Rather, the New Testament recounts human efforts to spread the faith. No sacrilege is entailed in the search to understand human actions in human terms. Moreover, I do not reduce the rise of Christianity to purely "material" or social factors. Doctrine receives its due—an essential factor in the religion's success was what Christians believed.

THE ARITHMETIC OF GROWTH

Studies of the rise of Christianity all stress the movement's rapid growth, but rarely are any figures offered. Perhaps this reflects the prevalence among historians of the notion, recently expressed by Pierre Chuvin, that "ancient history remains wholly refractory to quantitative

evaluations" (1990:12). Granted, we shall never discover "lost" Roman census data giving authoritative statistics on the religious composition of the empire in various periods. Nevertheless, we *must quantify*—at least in terms of exploring the arithmetic of the possible—if we are to grasp the magnitude of the phenomenon that is to be explained. For example, in order for Christianity to have achieved success in the time allowed, must it have grown at rates that seem incredible in the light of modern experience? If so, then we may need to formulate new social scientific propositions about conversion. If not, then we have some well-tested propositions to draw upon. What we need is at least two plausible numbers to provide the basis for extrapolating the probable rate of early Christian growth. Having achieved such a rate and used it to project the number of Christians in various years, we can then test these projections against a variety of historical conclusions and estimates.

For a *starting* number, Acts 1:14-15 suggests that several months after the Crucifixion there were 120 Christians. Later, in Acts 4:4, a total of 5,000 believers is claimed. And, according to Acts 2 1:20, by the sixth decade of the first century there were "many thousands of Jews" in Jerusalem who now believed. These are not statistics. Had there been that many converts in Jerusalem, it would have been the first Christian city, since there probably were no more than twenty thousand inhabitants at this time—J. C. Russell (1958) estimated only ten thousand. As Hans Conzelmann noted, these numbers are only "meant to render impressive the marvel that here the Lord himself is at work" (1973:63). Indeed, as Robert M. Grant pointed out, "one must always remember that figures in antiquity... were part of rhetorical exercises" (1977:7-8) and were not really meant to be taken literally. Nor is this limited to antiquity. In 1984 a Toronto magazine claimed that there were 10,000 Hare Krishna members in that city. But when Irving Hexham, Raymond F. Currie, and Joan B. Townsend (1985) checked on the matter, they found that the correct total was 80.

Origen remarked, "Let it be granted that Christians were few in the beginning" *(Against Celsus* 3.10, 1989 ed.), but how many would that have been? It seems wise to be conservative here, and thus I shall assume that there were 1,000 Christians in the year 40. I shall qualify this assumption at several later points in the chapter.

Now for an *ending* number. As late as the middle of the third century, Origen admitted that Christians made up "just a few" of the population. Yet only six decades later, Christians were so numerous that Constantine found it expedient to embrace the church. This has caused many scholars to think that something really extraordinary, in terms of growth, happened in the latter half of the third century (cf. Gager 1975). This may explain why, of the few numbers that have been offered in the literature, most are for membership in about the year 300.

Edward Gibbon may have been the first to attempt to estimate the Christian population, placing it at no more than "a twentieth part of the subjects of the empire" at the time of Constantine's conversion ([1776-1788] 1960:187). Later writers have rejected Gibbon's figure as far too low. Goodenough (1931) estimated that 10 percent of the empire's population were Christians by the time of Constantine. If we accept 60 million as the total population at that time—which is the most widely accepted estimate (Boak 1955a; Russell 1958; MacMullen 1984; Wilken 1984)—this would mean that there were 6 million Christians at the start of the fourth century. Von Hertling (1934) estimated the maximum number of Christians in the year 300 as 15 million. Grant (1978) rejected this as far too high and even rejected von Hertling's minimum estimate of 7.5 million as high. MacMullen (1984) placed the number of Christians in 300 at 5 million. Fortunately, we do not need greater precision; if we assume that the actual number of

Christians in the year 300 lay within the range of 5-7.5 million, we have an adequate basis for exploring what rate of growth is needed for that range to be reached in 260 years.

Given our starting number, if Christianity grew at the rate of *40 percent per decade,* there would have been 7,530 Christians in the year 100, followed by 217,795 Christians in the year 200 and by 6,299,832 Christians in the year 300. If we cut the rate of growth to 30 percent a decade, by the year 300 there would have been only 917,334 Christians—a figure far below what anyone would accept. On the other hand, if we increase the growth rate to 50 percent a decade, then there would have been 37,876,752 Christians in the year 300—or more than twice von Herding's maximum estimate. Hence 40 percent per decade (or 3.42 percent per year) seems the most plausible estimate of the rate at which Christianity actually grew during the first several centuries.

This is a very encouraging finding since it is exceedingly close to the average growth rate of 43 percent per decade that the Mormon church has maintained over the past century (Stark 1984, 1994). Thus we know that the numerical goals Christianity needed to achieve are entirely in keeping with modern experience, and we are not forced to seek exceptional explanations. Rather, history allows time for the normal processes of conversion, as understood by contemporary social science, to take place.

However, before we take up the topic of conversion, it seems worthwhile to pause and consider the widespread impression that Christian growth speeded rapidly during the last half of the third century. In terms of rate of growth, it probably did not. But because of the rather extraordinary features of exponential curves, this probably was a period of "miraculous-seeming" growth in terms of *absolute numbers.* All of this is clear in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Christian Growth Projected at 40 Percent per Decade		
Year	*Number of Christians*	*Percent of Population*
40	1,000	0.0017
50	1,400	0.0023
100	7,530	0.0126
150	40,496	0.07
200	217,795	0.36
250	1,171,356	1.9
300	6,299,832	10.5
350	33,882,008	56.5
a Based on an estimated population of 60 million.		

Progress must have seemed terribly slow during the first century—the projected total is only 7,530 by 100. There was a greater increase in numbers by the middle of the second century, but still the projection amounts to only slightly more than 40,000 Christians. This projection is in extremely close agreement with Robert L. Wilken's estimate of "less than fifty thousand Christians" at this time—"an infinitesimal number in a society comprising sixty million" (1984:31). Indeed, according to L. Michael White (1990:110), Christians in Rome still met in private homes at this time. Then, early in the third century, the projected size of the Christian population picks up a bit and by 250 reaches 1.9 percent. This estimate is also sustained by a prominent historian's 'feel' for the times. Discussing the process of conversion to Christianity, Robin Lane Fox advised that we keep "the total number of Christians in perspective: their faith was much the most rapidly growing religion in the Mediterranean, but its total membership was still small in absolute terms, perhaps (at a guess) only 2 percent of the Empire's total population by 250" (1987:317). But even more compelling is how the absolute number (as well as the percent Christian) suddenly shoots upward between 250 and 300, just as historians have reported,[1] and recent archaeological findings from Dura-Europos support this view. Excavations of a Christian building show that during the middle of the third century a house church was extensively remodeled into a building "entirely devoted to religious functions," after which "all domestic activities ceased" (White 1990:120). The renovations mainly involved the removal of

partition walls to create an enlarged meeting ball—indicative of the need to accommodate more worshipers. That my reconstruction of Christian growth exhibits the "sudden spurt" long associated with the second half of the third century adds to the plausibility of the figures.

The projections are also extremely consistent with Graydon F. Snyder's (1985) assessment of all known archaeological evidence of Christianity during the first three centuries. Snyder determined that there really isn't any such evidence prior to 180. He interpreted this to indicate that before then it is impossible to distinguish Christian from non-Christian culture in "funerary art, inscriptions, letters, symbols, and perhaps buildings ... [because] it took over a century for the new community of faith to develop a distinctive mode of self-expression" (Snyder 1985:2). That may be, but it must also be noted that the *survival* of Christian archaeological evidence would have been roughly proportionate to how much there *could have been* to start with. The lack of anything surviving from prior to 180 must be assessed on the basis of the tiny number of Christians who could have left such traces. Surely it is not surprising that the 7,535 Christians at the end of the first century left no trace. By 180, when I project that the total Christian population first passed the 100,000 mark, there would finally have been enough Christians so that it is probable that traces of their existence would survive. Thus Snyder's findings are very compatible with my estimates of a very small Christian population in the first two centuries.

As an additional test of these projections, Robert M. Grant has calculated that there were 7,000 Christians in Rome at the end of the second century (1977:6). If we also accept Grant's estimate of 700,000 as the population of Rome for that year, then 1 percent of the population of Rome had been converted by the year 200. If we set the total population of the empire at 60 million in 200, then, based on the projection for that year, Christians constituted 0.36 percent of the empire's population. This seems to be an entirely plausible matchup, since the proportion Christian should have been higher in Rome than in the empire at large. First of all, historians assume that the church in Rome was exceptionally strong—it was well known for sending funds to Christians elsewhere. In about 170, Dionysius of Corinth wrote to the Roman church: "From the start it has been your custom to treat all Christians with unfailing kindness, and to send contributions to many churches in every city, sometimes alleviating the distress of those in need, sometimes providing for your brothers in the mines" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.23.6, 1965 ed.). Second, by 200 the Christian proportion of the population of the city of Rome must have been substantially larger than that in the whole of the empire because Christianity had not yet made much headway in the more westerly provinces. As will be seen in chapter 6, of the twenty-two largest cities in the empire, four probably still lacked a Christian church by the year 200. Although I have estimated the overall number of Christians in the empire, I am fully aware that Christian growth was concentrated in the East—in Asia Minor, Egypt, and North Africa. Moreover, there is general agreement among historians (Harnack 1908; Boak 1955a; Meeks 1983) that the Christian proportion of the population was substantially higher in cities than in the rural areas at this time—hence the term *paganus* or "countryman" came to refer to non-Christians (pagans). In any event, here too the projections closely agree with estimates based on independent sources.

Now, let us peek just a bit further into the future of Christian growth. If growth held at 40 percent per decade for the first half of the fourth century, there would have been 33,882,008 Christians by 350. In an empire having a population of at least 60 million, there might well have been 33 million Christians by 350—for by then some contemporary Christian writers were claiming a majority (Harnack 1908: 2:29). Looking at the rise of a Christian majority as purely a function of a constant rate of growth calls into serious question the emphasis given by Eusebius

and others to the conversion of Constantine as the factor that produced the Christian majority (Grant 1977). So long as nothing changed in the conditions that sustained the 40-percent-a-decade growth rate, Constantine's conversion would better be seen as a response to the massive exponential wave in progress, not as its cause.

This interpretation is entirely in keeping with the thesis developed by Shirley Jackson Case in his 1925 presidential address to the American Society of Church History. Case began by noting that attempts by the emperor Diocletian in 303, and continued by his successor Galerius in 305, to use persecution to force Christians to support the state had failed because 'by the year 300 Christianity had become too widely accepted in Roman society to make possible a successful persecution on the part of the government" (1928:59). As a result, Case continued, by 311 the emperor Galerius switched tactics and excused the Christians from praying to Roman gods, and asked only that they pray to "their own god for our security and that of the state" (Case 1928:61). Thus Constantine's edict of toleration, issued two years later, was simply a continuation of state policy. Case's assessment of Constantine's edict stressed the impact of Christian growth on this policy:

> In this document one perceives very easily the real basis of Constantine's favor for Christianity. First, there is the characteristic attitude of an emperor who is seeking supernatural support for his government, and secondly, there is a recognition of the fact that the Christian element in the population is now so large, and its support for Constantine and Licinius in their conflict with rivals who still opposed Christianity, is so highly esteemed, that the emperors are ready to credit the Christian God with the exercise of a measure of supernatural power on a par with the other gods of the State. (1928:62)

It is reassuring to have the projections of Christian membership in table 1.1 fit so well with several independent estimates, with major historical perceptions such as the rapid increases during the latter part of the third century, and with the record of Mormon growth achieved over the past century. Keep in mind, however, that the numbers are *estimates,* not recorded fact. They seem very plausible, but I would be entirely comfortable with suggestions that reality may have been a bit lumpier. Perhaps growth was somewhat more rapid in the earliest days and my beginning number of 1,000 Christians in 40 is a bit low. But it also seems likely that there were periodic losses in the early days, some of which may have been very substantial for a group still so small. For example, following the execution of James and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem, the Christian community in Palestine seems to have died out (Frend 1965, 1984). And while Tacitus's claim that "an immense multitude" *(Annals* 15.44, 1989 ed.) was butchered by Nero in about 65 is much exaggerated (see chapter 8), even the deaths of several hundred Christians would have been a very serious setback.

I have tried to offset such bumps and lumps in the growth curve by starting with a very conservative number. Moreover, my purpose in generating these numbers was not to discover "facts," but to impose needed discipline on the subject. That is, by resorting to simple arithmetic I believe I have demonstrated adequately that the rise of Christianity required no miraculous rates of conversion.

Several years after I had completed this exploration of the arithmetic of early Christian growth, when this book was nearly finished, my colleague Michael Williams made me aware of Roger S. Bagnall's remarkable reconstruction of the growth of Christianity in Egypt (1982, 1987). Bagnall examined Egyptian papyri to identify the proportion of persons with identifiably Christian names in various years, and from these he reconstructed a curve of the Christianization of Egypt. Here are *real* data, albeit from only one area, against which to test my projections. Two

of Bagnall's data points are much later than the end of my projections. However, a comparison of the six years within my time frame shows a level of agreement that can only be described as extraordinary—as can be seen in table 1.2.

Bagnall's finding no Christians in 239 can be disregarded. Obviously there were Christians in Egypt then, but because their numbers would still have been very small it is not surprising that none turned up in Bagnall's data. But for later years the matchups are striking, and the correlation of 0.86 between the two curves borders on the miraculous. The remarkable fit between these two estimates, arrived at via such

TABLE 1.2 Two Estimates of Christianization Compared		
Year	*Projected Percent Christian in the Greco-Roman World*	*Percent Christian in Egypt*[a]
239	1.4	0
274	4.2	2.4
278	5.0	10.5
280	5.4	13.5
313	16.2	18.0
315	17.4	18.0
		r = 0.86
[a] Bagnall 1982, 1987.		

different means and sources, seems to me a powerful confirmation of both.

Although the projections seem very plausible through 350, the rate of Christian growth eventually must have declined rapidly at some point during the fourth century. If nothing else, the empire would have begun to run out of potential converts. This is evident when we realize that had the 40 percent growth rate held throughout the fourth century, there would have been 182,225,584 Christians in the year 400. Not only is that total impossible, growth rates must always decline when a movement has converted a substantial proportion of the available population—as the pool of potential converts is progressively "fished out." Or, as Bagnall put it, "the curve of conversion becomes asymptotic, and incremental conversion becomes slight after a time" (1982:123). Clearly, then, the projections from my model are invalid after the year 350. However, since my concerns only involve the *rise* of Christianity, it is not necessary to venture beyond this point.

ON CONVERSION

Eusebius tells us that early Christian missionaries were so empowered by the "divine Spirit" that "at the first hearing whole multitudes in a body eagerly embraced in their souls piety towards the Creator of the universe" *(Ecclesiastical History* 3.37.3, 1927 ed.). Not only do many modern historians of the early church accept Eusebius's claims about mass conversions in response to public preaching and miracle working, but they often regard it as a necessary assumption because of the rapidity of Christianity's rise. Thus in his distinguished study, *Christianizing the Roman Empire,* Ramsay MacMullen urged acceptance of the reports of large-scale conversions as necessary

> to explain better the *rate* of change we are observing. In the whole process, very large numbers are obviously involved... [I]t would be hard to picture the necessary scale of conversion if we limited ourselves to . . . evangelizing in private settings... [If this mode of conversion], however, is combined with evidence for successes en masse, the two in combination do seem to me adequate to explain what we know happened. (1984:29)

MacMullen's views reflect those of Adolf Harnack (1908: 2:335-6), who characterized the growth of Christianity in terms such as "inconceivable rapidity" and "astonishing expansion," and who expressed his agreement with Augustine's claim that "Christianity must have reproduced itself by means of miracles, for the greatest miracle of all would have been the extraordinary extension of the religion apart from any miracles" (335n.2).

This is precisely why there is no substitute for arithmetic. The projections reveal that Christianity could easily have reached half the population by the middle of the fourth century

without miracles or conversions en masse. The Mormons have, thus far, traced the same growth curve, and we have no knowledge of their achieving mass conversions. Moreover, the claim that mass conversions to Christianity took place as crowds spontaneously responded to evangelists assumes that doctrinal appeal lies at the heart of the conversion process—that people hear the message, find it attractive, and embrace the faith. But modern social science relegates doctrinal appeal to a very secondary role, claiming that most people do not really become very attached to the doctrines of their new faith until *after* their conversion.

In the early 1960s John Lofland and I were the first social scientists to actually go out and watch people convert to a new religious movement (Lofland and Stark 1965). Up to that time, the most popular social scientific explanation of conversion involved the pairing of deprivation with ideological (or theological) appeal. That is, one examined the ideology of a group to see what kinds of deprivation it addressed and then concluded (*mirabile dictu*) that converts suffered from those deprivations (Clock 1964). As an example of this approach, since Christian Science promised to restore health, its converts must disproportionately be drawn from among those with chronic health problems, or at least those who suffer from hypochondria (Glock 1964). Of course, one could as plausibly argue the reverse, that only people with excellent health could long hold to the Christian Science doctrine that illness was all in the mind.

In any event, Lofland and I were determined to watch people go through the process of conversion and try to discover what really was involved. Moreover, we wanted to watch conversion, not simply activation. That is, we wanted to look at people who were making a major religious shift, as from Christianity to Hinduism, rather than examine how lifelong Christians got themselves born again. The latter is a matter of considerable interest, but it was not our interest at the time.

We also wanted a group that was small enough so that the two of us could provide adequate surveillance, and new enough so that it was in an early and optimistic phase of growth. After sifting through many deviant religious groups in the San Francisco Bay area we came upon precisely what we were looking for—a group of about a dozen young adults who had just moved to San Francisco from Eugene, Oregon. The group was led by Young Oon Kim, a Korean woman who had once been a professor of religion at Ewha University in Seoul. The movement she served was based in Korea, and in January 1959, she arrived in Oregon to launch a mission to America. Miss[2] Kim and her young followers were the very first American members of the Unification Church, widely known today as the Moonies.

As Lofland and I settled back to watch people convert to this group, the first thing we discovered was that all of the current members were united by close ties of friendship predating their contact with Miss Kim. Indeed, the first three converts had been young housewives, next-door neighbors who became friends of Miss Kim after she became a lodger with one of them. Subsequently, several of the husbands joined, followed by several of their friends from work. At the time Lofland and I arrived to study them, the group had never succeeded in attracting a stranger.

Lofland and I also found it interesting that although all the converts were quick to describe how their spiritual lives had been empty and desolate prior to their conversion, many claimed they had not been particularly interested in religion before. One man told me, "If anybody had said I was going to join up and become a missionary I would have laughed my head off. I had no use for church at all."

We also found it instructive that during most of her first year in America, Miss Kim had tried to spread her message directly by talks to various groups and by sending out many press releases.

Later, in San Francisco the group also tried to attract followers through radio spots and by renting a hail in which to hold public meetings. But these methods yielded nothing. As time passed, Lofland and I were able to observe people actually becoming Moonies. The first several converts were old friends or relatives of members who came from Oregon for a visit. Subsequent converts were people who formed close friendships with one or more members of the group.

We soon realized that of all the people the Moonies encountered in their efforts to spread their faith, the only ones who joined were those *whose interpersonal attachments to members overbalanced their attachments to nonmembers*. In effect, conversion is not about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and family members.

This is simply an application of the highly respected control theory of deviant behavior (Toby 1957; Hirschi 1969; Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Rather than asking why people deviate, why they break laws and norms, control theorists ask why anyone ever does conform. Their answer is posed in terms of *stakes in conformity*. People conform when they believe they have more to lose by being detected in deviance than they stand to gain from the deviant act. Some people deviate while others conform because people differ in their stakes in conformity. That is, some people simply have far less to lose than do others. A major stake in conformity lies in our attachments to other people. Most of us conform in order to retain the good opinion of our friends and family. But some people lack attachments. Their rates of deviance are much higher than are those of people with an abundance of attachments.

Becoming a Moonie today is an act of deviance, as was becoming a Christian in the first century. Such conversions violate norms defining legitimate religious affiliations and identities. Lofland and I saw many people who spent some time with the Moonies and expressed considerable interest in their doctrines, but who never joined. In every instance these people had many strong attachments to nonmembers who did not approve of the group. Of persons who did join, many were newcomers to San Francisco whose attachments were all to people far away. As they formed strong friendships with group members, these were not counterbalanced because distant friends and families had no knowledge of the conversion-in-process. In several instances a parent or sibling came to San Francisco intending to intervene after having learned of the conversion. Those who lingered eventually joined up too. Keep in mind that becoming a Moonie may have been regarded as deviant by outsiders, but it was an act of conformity for those whose most significant attachments were to Moonies.

During the quarter century since Lofland and I first published our conclusion—that attachments lie at the heart of conversion and therefore that conversion tends to proceed along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments—many others have found the same to be true in an immense variety of religious groups all around the world. A recent study based on Dutch data (Kox, Meeus, and 't Hart 1991) cited twenty-five additional empirical studies, all of which supported our initial finding. And that list was far from complete.

Although several other factors are also involved in the conversion process, the central sociological proposition about conversion is this: *Conversion to new, deviant religious groups occurs when, other things being equal, people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to nonmembers* (Stark 1992).

Data based on records kept by a Mormon mission president give powerful support to this proposition. When missionaries make cold calls, knock on the doors of strangers, this eventually leads to a conversion once out of a thousand calls. However, when missionaries make their first

contact with a person in the home of a Mormon friend or relative of that person, this results in conversion 50 percent of the time (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

A variation on the network proposition about conversion is that successful founders of new faiths typically turn first to those with whom they already have strong attachments. That is, they recruit their first followers from among their family and close friends. Thus Muhammad's first convert was his wife Khadijah; the second was his cousin Mi, followed by his servant Zeyd and then his old friend Abu Bakr. On April 6, 1830, the Mormons were founded by Joseph Smith, his brothers Hyrum and Samuel, and Joseph Smith's friends Oliver Cowdery and David and Peter Whitmer. The rule extends to Jesus too, since it appears that he began with his brothers and mother.

A second aspect of conversion is that people who are deeply committed to any particular faith do not go out and join some other faith. Thus Mormon missionaries who called upon the Moonies were immune, despite forming warm relationships with several members. Indeed, the Moonie who previously had "no use for church at all" was more typical. Converts were not former atheists, but they were essentially unchurched and many had not paid any particular attention to religious questions. Thus the Moonies quickly learned that they were wasting their time at church socials or frequenting denominational student centers. They did far better in places where they came in contact with the uncommitted. This finding has received substantial support from subsequent research. Converts to new religious movements are overwhelmingly from relatively irreligious backgrounds. The majority of converts to modern American cult movements report that their parents had no religious affiliation (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Let me state this as a theoretical proposition: *New religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive and discontented, and those affiliated with the most accommodated (worldly) religious communities.*

Had we not gone out and watched people as they converted, we might have missed this point entirely, because when people retrospectively describe their conversions, they tend to put the stress on theology. When asked why they converted, Moonies invariably noted the irresistible appeal of the Divine Principles (the group's scripture), suggesting that only the blind could reject such obvious and powerful truths. In making these claims converts implied (and often stated) that their path to conversion was the end product of a search for faith. But Lofland and I knew better because we had met them well before they had learned to appreciate the doctrines, before they had learned how to testify to their faith, back when they were not seeking faith at all. Indeed, we could remember when most of them regarded the religious beliefs of their new set of friends as quite odd. I recall one who told me that he was puzzled that such nice people could get so worked up about "some guy in Korea" who claimed to be the Lord of the Second Advent. Then, one day, he got worked up about this guy too. I suggest that this is also how people in the first century got themselves worked up about someone who claimed to be the Lord of the First Advent. Robin Lane Fox suggests the same thing: "Above all we should give weight to the presence and influence of friends. It is a force which so often escapes the record, but it gives shape to everyone's personal life. One friend might bring another to the faith.... When a person turned to God, he found others, new 'brethren,' who were sharing the same path" (1987:316). Peter Brown has expressed similar views: 'Ties of family, marriages, and loyalties to heads of households had been the most effective means of recruiting members of the church, and had maintained the continued adherence of the average Christian to the new cult" (1 988:90).

The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a *structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments.* Most new religious movements fail

because they quickly become closed, or semiclosed networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow. Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks, able to reach out and into new adjacent social networks. And herein lies the capacity of movements to sustain exponential rates of growth over a long period of time.

Some readers may suspect that the rapid rise in the absolute number of new Christians between 250 and 350 would require mass conversions even though the rate of conversion remained constant at 40 percent per decade. Admittedly, exponential growth curves are counterintuitive and easily seem incredible. Nevertheless, the *dynamics of the conversion process* are not changed even as the absolute numbers reach a rapid growth stage along an exponential curve. The reason is that as movements grow, their social surface expands proportionately. That is, each new member expands the size of the network of attachments between the group and potential converts. As noted above, however, this occurs *only* if the group constitutes an *open network.* Thus if we are to better understand and explain the rise of Christianity, we must discover how the early Christians maintained open networks-for it would seem certain that they did. This last remark sets the stage for a brief discussion of the appropriate scope of social scientific theories and whether it is possible even to apply propositions developed in one time and place to other eras and cultures.

ON SCIENTIFIC GENERALIZATION

Many historians believe that cultures and eras verge on the unique. Thus in his very thoughtful response to my use of the network theory of conversion to discuss the success of the mission to the Jews (see chapter 3), Ronald F. Hock noted that I seem to think that networks, for example, are not "all that different from period to period, society to society" (1986:2-3). He then pointed out that

> the networks utilized by Mormons are those consisting of a member's family, relatives, and friends, but are ancient networks the same? Ancient cities are not modern ones, and ancient networks that were centered in aristocratic households included more than family and friends: domestic slaves, freedmen, and perhaps parasites, teachers, athletic trainers, and travelers. In addition, urban life was lived more in public, so that recruitment could proceed along more extensive and complex networks than we find among Mormons in our more nuclear and anonymous cities and suburbs.

I am certain that Hock is correct, but I am unrepentant What he is noting are details that might tell us how to discover networks should we be transported to ancient Antioch, but that have no implications for the network proposition per se. *However* people constitute structures of direct interpersonal attachments, those structures will define the lines through which conversion will most readily proceed. The definition of network is not locked to time and space, nor is the conversion proposition.

Many historians seem to have considerable trouble with the idea of general theories because they have not been trained in the distinction between concepts and instances. Proper scientific concepts are abstract and identify a class of "things" to be regarded as alike. As such, concepts must apply to all possible members of the class, all that have been, are, shall be, or could be. The concept of chair, defined as all objects created to seat a lone individual and support his or her back, is an abstraction. We cannot see the concept of chair. It is an intellectual creation existing only in our minds. But we can see many actual chairs, and as we look at some, we discover immense variation in size, shape, materials, color, and the like. Moreover, when we look at chairs used in the ancient world, we perceive some very noticeable differences from the chairs of

today. Nevertheless, each is a chair so long as it meets the definition set out above—other somewhat similar objects belong to other object classes such as stools and couches.

These points apply as fully to the concept of social network as to the concept of chair. The concept of social network also exists only in our minds. All that we can see are specific instances of the class—networks involving some set of individuals. As with chairs, the shapes and sizes of social networks may differ greatly across time and space, and the processes by which networks form may vary as greatly as do techniques for making chairs. But these variations in details never result in chairs' becoming pianos, nor do variations in their makeup ever turn social networks into collections of strangers.

It is only through the use of abstract concepts, linked by abstract propositions, that science exists. Consider a physics that must generate a new rule of gravity for each object in the universe. And it is precisely the abstract generality of science that makes it possible for social science to contribute anything to our understanding of history, let alone to justify efforts to reconstruct history from social scientific theories. Let me now turn to that important issue.

SOCIAL THEORY AND HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

During the past several decades historians of the New Testament era have become increasingly familiar with social science and have become increasingly inclined to use social scientific models to infer "what must have happened" in order to fill blanks in the historical and archaeological record. As Robin Scroggs pointed out in an influential essay, "there may be times when a sociological model may actually assist our ignorance. If our data evidence some *parts* of the gestalt of a known model, while being silent about others, we *may* cautiously be able to conclude that the absence of the missing parts is accidental and that the entire model was actually a reality in the early church" (1980:166). Since those lines were published, the practice Scroggs suggested has become common (Barton 1982, 1984; Holmberg 1980; Elliott 1986; Fox 1987; Gager 1975, 1983; Green 1985; Malina 1981, 1986; Meeks 1983, 1993; Kee 1983; Kraemer 1992; Sanders 1993; Theissen 1978, 1982; Wilken 1984; Wire 1991). I have quite mixed reactions to this literature. Some studies I have read with pleasure and admiration. Other examples have made me very uncomfortable because the social science "models" utilized are so inadequate. Some of them are merely metaphors—as Durkheim's "discovery" that religion is society worshiping itself is merely metaphor. How would one falsify that statement, or assertions to the effect that religion is a neurotic illusion or the poetry of the soul? The problem with metaphors is not that they are false, but that they are *empty*. Many of them do seem to ooze profundity, but at best metaphors are merely definitions. Consider the term *charisma*.

Max Weber borrowed this Greek word meaning "divine gift" to identify the ability of some people to convince others that their authority is based on divine sources: "The holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission. His success determines whether he finds them. His charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their master" (1946:246). Charisma is commonly observed in religious leaders, and surely no one would dispute that Jesus and many of the apostles and early evangelists had it. Thus the literature on the early church is saturated with the term. Unfortunately, charisma is too often understood as a nearly magical power possessed by individuals rather than a description of how they are regarded. That is, their power over others is attributed to their charisma, and it is often suggested that particular religious leaders are so potent *because* they had charisma. Roy Wallis, for example, claimed that Moses David (David Berg), founder of the Children of God, maintained control over his followers because of his "charismatic status" (1982:107). But this is

entirely circular. It is the same as saying that people believed that Moses David had divine authority because people believed he had divine authority. Because Weber's discussions of charisma did not move beyond definitional and descriptive statements, and said nothing about the causes of charisma, the concept is merely a name attached to a definition. When we see someone whose authority is believed by some people to be of divine origin, we have the option of calling this charisma, but doing so will contribute nothing to our understanding of why this phenomenon occurs. Hence when studies of the early church utilize the term *charisma,* what we usually confront is only a name that too often is thought to explain something, but does not.

Besides metaphors and simple concepts, other "models" used in this literature are nothing but typologies or *sets* of concepts. One of the most popular of these consists of various definitions to distinguish religious groups as *churches* or *sects.* The most useful of these definitions identifies churches and sects as the end points of a continuum based on the degree of tension between the group and its sociocultural environment (Johnson 1963; Stark and Bainbridge 1979, 1987). Sects are religious groups in a relatively high state of tension with their environment; churches are groups in a relatively low state of tension. These are very useful concepts. Unfortunately, they are often used, even by many social scientists, as if they explained something. All such efforts are circular. Thus it is circular to say that a particular religious body rejects the world *because* it is a sect, as Bryan Wilson (1970) often does, since bodies are classified as sects because they reject the world. The concepts of church and sect do nothing more (or less) than allow us to classify various religious bodies. But theories using these concepts do not reside in the concepts themselves. For example, it is well known that religious bodies, especially if they are successful, tend to move from a higher to a lower state of tension—sects often are transformed into churches. But no explanation of this transformation can be found in the definitions of church and sect. Instead, we must use propositions to link the concepts of church and sect to other concepts, such as upward social mobility and regression to the mean, in order to formulate an explanation (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987).

Let me emphasize: concepts are *names,* not *explanations.* The act of naming some objects or phenomena tells us nothing about why they occur or what they influence. Explanation requires theories: abstract statements saying *why* and *how* some set of phenomena are linked, and from which falsifiable statements can be derived (Popper 1959, 1962). Metaphors, typologies, and concepts are passive; they cast no light of their own and cannot illuminate the dark corners of unrecorded history (Stark and Bainbridge 1979, 1985, 1987). Granted, concepts may permit some useful comparisons among some sets of phenomena—comparisons of the social class composition of two religious movements, for example, can be very revealing. But if a model is to provide more than *classification,* if it proposes to *explain,* then the model must include not simply concepts, but propositions. The difference here is that between a parts catalog and a working diagram of an engine. That is, a model must include a fully specified set of interrelations among the parts. Such a model explains why and how things fit together and function. For this task, only a theory, not a conceptual scheme, suffices.

It is not surprising that scholars trained in history and in textual interpretation might find themselves more comfortable with an older generation of social 'scientists" who dealt in metaphors rather than scientific theories, if for no other reason than that their work abounds in literary allusions and is redolent of ancient library dust. But let it be noted that in science, unlike papyrology, older seldom is better. And I regard it as an essential part of my task in this book to familiarize historians of the early church with more powerful and modern social scientific tools,

and particularly with real theories rather than with concepts, metaphors, and typologies pretending to have explanatory power.

However, even if we use the best social science theories as our guide for reconstructing history, we are betting that the theories are solid and that the application is appropriate. When those conditions are met, then there is no reason to suppose that we cannot reason from the general rule to deduce the specific in precisely the same way that we can reason from the principles of physics that coins dropped in a well will go to the bottom. Even so, it is better when we can actually see the coins go down. *Need* is the only justification for the application of social science to fill in historical blanks. But we must be very cautious not to fill the blanks with fantasy and science fiction.

In this book I shall attempt to reconstruct the rise of Christianity on the basis of many inferences from modern social scientific theories, making particular use of my own formal theorizing about religion and religious movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1979, 1980, 1985, 1987; Stark and Iannaccone 1991, 1992). I will frequently employ the arithmetic of the possible and the plausible to test various assumptions. To guard against error I shall test my reconstructions against the historical record whenever possible, as I have done in this chapter.[3]

Notes

1. Paul Johnson makes the perceptive point that the Decian persecution, which began around the year 250, was a reaction to the fact that "Christians were now far more numerous and that their numbers seemed to be increasing rapidly (1976:73).

2. Within the movement she was invariably referred to as "Miss."

3. Reading the New Testament, especially the letters written by various apostles, one can easily conclude that almost from the start the Christian movement was a very large and flourishing undertaking. Thus when Peter includes in the salutation of his first epistle "the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia," the intended audience seems imposingly numerous. Indeed, in Romans 16, Paul names more than two dozen Christians to whom he sends his greetings. My colleague Michael Williams has sometimes asked students in his seminars about the total size of the intended audience for such letters. Invariably, students think it numbers into many thousands. In contrast, I calculate that there would only have been a total of between two thousand and three thousand Christians during the 60s, the decade during which Paul was executed and Peter was crucified. In defense of my projections we must note that whatever the size of the congregations in various cities at this time, they still held their services in private homes—even in Rome. Moreover, a brief return to my experiences with the Moonies may prove instructive here.

Early in the 1960s, after several years of missionizing in San Francisco, Miss Kim decided that the group needed to split into small mission teams, each taking on a new a city. She was concerned that members spent too much of their time with one another and that perhaps more fertile mission fields awaited elsewhere. So in twos and threes her young members struck out on their own—to Dallas, Denver, Berkeley, and elsewhere. And once her teams were established in their new cities, Miss Kim's expectations were partially met as a trickle of new converts began to come in. Like Paul, Miss Kim wrote many letters—often devoting considerable space to matters of doctrine and interpretation. Moreover, Miss Kim's letters abounded in greetings. Were I possessed of a selection of these letters, I think they would precisely compare with New Testament letters in terms of the apparent size of the audience. The following fictitious salutation is typical of Miss Kim's correspondence as I remember it: To sister Ella, to brother Howard, to Dorothy visiting from Dallas, and to all who now partake of the Unification Church in San Jose, greetings in Father's name. But the fact is that there probably were not yet two hundred members in the whole United States when letters like that were being sent by Miss Kim. Ella, Howard, and Dorothy would have been the only Moonies in San Jose, since the partakers Miss Kim often referred to were not yet members, but only people willing to discuss religion with members.

CHAPTER TWO

The Class Basis of Early Christianity

FOR MOST of the twentieth century historians and sociologists agreed that, in its formative days, Christianity was a movement of the dispossessed—a haven for Rome's slaves and impoverished masses. Friedrich Engels was an early proponent. claiming that "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" (Marx and Engels 1967:316). These views seem to have first gained ascendancy among

The early church was anything but a refuge for slaves and the impoverished masses, as illustrated by this portrait (ca. 300) of the Christian Galla Placidia and her children, done in gold leaf on glass.

scholars in Germany. Thus New Testament scholars trace this view to Deissmann ([1908] 1978, 1929), while sociologists look to Troeltsch ([1911] 1931), who claimed that in fact all religious movements are the work of the "lower strata.' Marxists also look to Germany in this same period for Kautsky's ([1908] 1953) elaborate expansion of Engels's views into an orthodox analysis of Christianity as a proletarian movement, which, he claimed, even achieved true communism briefly. Moreover, many scholars confidently attributed this conception of early Christians' social origins to Paul on the basis of his first letter to the Corinthians, in which he notes that not many of the wise, mighty, or noble are called to the faith. By the 1930s this view of Christian origins was largely unchallenged.[1] Thus the well-known Yale historian Erwin R. Goodenough wrote 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 front 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" (1931:37).

In recent decades, however, New Testament historians have begun to reject this notion of the social basis of the early Christian movement. E. A. Judge was perhaps the first major scholar of the present generation to raise a vigorous dissent. He began by dismissing the tack of noble Christians as an irrelevancy:

> If the common assertion that Christian groups were constituted from the lower orders of society is meant to imply that they did not draw upon the upper orders of the Roman ranking system, the observation is correct, and pointless. In the eastern Mediterranean it was self-evident that members of the Roman aristocracy would not belong to a local cult association. . . [Moreover they] amounted to an infinitesimally small fraction of the total population. (1960:52)

After a careful analysis of the ranks and occupations of persons mentioned in the sources, Judge concluded:

> Far from being a socially depressed group, then, . . . the Christians were dominated by a socially pretentious section of the population of big cities. Beyond that they seem to have drawn on a broad constituency, probably representing the household dependents of leading members....
>   But the dependent members of city households were by no means the most debased section of society. If lacking freedom, they still enjoyed security, and a moderate prosperity. The peasantry

and persons in slavery on the land were the most underprivileged classes. Christianity left them largely untouched. (60)

Moreover, Judge perceptively noted that the "proof text" in 1 Cor. 1:26—28 had been over-interpreted: Paul did not say his followers included *none* of the wise, mighty, or noble—merely that there were "not many" such persons, which means that there were *some.* Indeed, based on an inscription found in Corinth in 1929 and upon references in Rom. 16:23 and 2 Tim. *4:20,* many scholars now agree that among the members of the church at Corinth was Erastus, "the city treasurer" (Furnish 1988:20). And 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 *(Annals* 13.32, 1989 ed.), was a Christian (Sordi 1986). Nor, according to Main Sordi, was Pomponia an isolated case: '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 same century, before Paul's arrival in Rome" (1986:28).

Since Judge first challenged the proletarian view of the early church, a consensus has developed among New Testament historians that Christianity was based in the middle and upper classes (Scroggs 1980). Thus Jean Danielou and Henri Marrou (1964:240) discussed the prominent role of "rich benefactors" in the affairs of the early church. Robert M. Grant (1977:11) also denied that early Christianity was "a proletarian mass movement," and argued that it was "a relatively small Cluster of more or less intense groups, largely middle class in origin." Abraham J. Malherbe (1977:29-59) analyzed the language and style of early church writers and Concluded that they were addressing a literate, educated audience. In his detailed study of the church at Corinth in the first century, Gerd Theissen (1982:97) identified wealthy Christians including members of "the upper classes." Robin Lane Fox (1987:31]) wrote of the presence *"of* women of high status." Indeed, soon after judge's book appeared, the Marxist historian Heinz Kreissig (1967) recanted the proletarian thesis.[2] Kreissig identified the early Christians as drawn from "urban circles of well-situated artisans, merchants, and members of the liberal professions' (quoted in Meeks 1983:214).

Curiously, this new view is a return to an earlier historical tradition, Although Edward Gibbon was often quoted in support of the proletarian thesis—"the new sect of Christians was almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace, of peasants and mechanics, of boys and women, of beggars and slaves" ([1776-l788] 1960:187)—he had actually preceded this line by identifying it as "a very odious imputation' To the contrary, Gibbon argued, Christianity necessarily would have included many from the lower ranks simply because most people belonged to these classes. But he saw no reason to think that the lower classes were disproportionately represented among Christians.

During the nineteenth century many famous historians went further than Gibbon and argued that the lower classes were disproportionately *under*-represented in the early church. Indeed, W. M. Ramsay wrote in his classic study that Christianity "spread 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 emperors (1893:57). Ramsay attributed similar views to the famous German classicist Theodor Mommsen. And, just as his many German contemporaries were promulgating the proletarian thesis, Adolf Harnack (1908:2:35) noted that Ignatius, in his letter to the Christian congregation in Rome, expressed his concern lest they interfere with his martyrdom (see chapter 8). Harnack pointed to the obvious conclusion that Ignatius took it for granted that Christians in Rome had "the power" to gain him a pardon, "a fear which would have been unreasonable had

not the church contained members whose riches and repute enabled them to intervene in this way either by bribery or by the exercise of personal influence.

Thus we come full circle. Obviously, if we wish to understand the rise of Christianity, we shall need to know something about its primary recruitment base—who joined? I am satisfied that the new view among historians is essentially correct. Nevertheless, *any* claim about the social basis of early Christianity must remain precarious, at least in terms of direct evidence, and it is unlikely that we shall ever have much more than the fragments of historical data we already possess. But there is another approach to this matter: to reconstruct the probable class basis of Christianity from some very well tested sociological propositions about the social basis of new religious movements. Indeed, this seems the best topic with which to begin my efforts at reconstruction because historians do not regard this as a controversial matter. Thus as I am able to show the close correspondence between my theoretical conclusions and the data assent-bled by historians, the latter may place greater confidence in the reconstructive enterprise per Se. The fundamental thesis is simply put: If the early church was like all the other cult movements for which good data exist, it was not a proletarian movement but was based on the more privileged classes.

CLASS, SECT, AND CULT

William Sims Bainbridge and I have distinguished between *sect* movements and *cult* movements (Stark and Bainhridge 1979, 1985, 1987). The former occur by schism within a conventional religious body when persons desiring a more otherworldly version of the faith break away to "restore" the religion to a higher level of tension with its environment. This is the process of sect formation analyzed by H. Richard Niebuhr (1929). Sociologists can cite both theory and considerable research to show that those who take part in sect movements are, if not the dispossessed, at least of lower social standing than those who stick with the parent body.

Cult movements, on the other hand, are riot simply new organizations of an old faith; they are *new faiths,* at least new in the society being examined. Cult movements always start small—someone has new religious ideas and begins to recruit others to the faith, or an alien religion is imported into a society where it then seeks recruits. In either case, as new faiths, cult movements violate prevailing religious norms and are often the target of considerable hostility

For a tong time the thesis that religious movements originate in lower-class deprivation was generalized to all religious movements—not only to sects but to cult movements as well. Thus not only were sects such as the Free Methodists and the Seventh-Day Adventists regarded as lower-class movements, so too were the Mormons, Theosophists, and Moonies. No distinction was made between cults and sects (cf. Wallis 1975); all were seen as protest movements and therefore as essentially proletarian (Niebuhr 1929). Moreover, the proletarian basis of many religious movements often has simply been asserted as if self evident without the slightest effort's being made to assess who actually joined. Thus Gay confidently informed his readers about English converts to Mormonism, "most of whom were poor" (1971). He gives not the slightest clue as to how he knows this. As we shall see, it very likely was not true *unless,* in the context of nineteenth-century Britain, the Mormons were perceived as a Protestant sect rather than as a new religion.

Recently, however, the manifest absurdity of imputing a proletarian base to many new religious movements has overwhelmed sociological certitude. Indeed, when one examines what is involved in accepting a new faith (as opposed to being recruited by an energetic organization based on a conventional faith), it is easy to see why these movements must draw upon the more

privileged for their recruits. As a useful introduction to this discussion, I will assess current sociological theory on the relationship between social class and religious commitment in general.

CLASS AND COMMITMENT

As with the social basis of religious movements, so too sociologists long assumed that the lower classes were more religious than the rich. Since the founders of modern social science, from Marx to Freud, all regarded religion as a compensator for thwarted desires, as false consciousness or neurotic illusion, the prevailing sociological orthodoxy held that religious commitment served primarily to assuage the suffering of the poor and deprived. The results of early survey studies came as a rude surprise: a series of investigators called the roll and found the deprived conspicuously absent from church membership and Sunday services (Stark 1964).This led to a revision of the deprivation thesis when it was discovered that religious commitment consists of a number of somewhat independent dimensions (Glock 1959; Stark and Glock 1968) and that the poor tend to be more religious on some of these dimensions while the rich are more religious on others (Demerath 1965; Glock and Stark 1965; Stark 1971). Thus negative correlations were found between social class and accepting traditional religious beliefs, having religious and mystical experiences, and frequency of personal prayers. In contrast, there are positive correlations between social class and church membership, attendance at worship services, participation in church activities, and saving grace before meals. But there seem to he no correlations between social class and belief in life after death or in the existence of heaven. Recently this array of empirical findings has been encompassed by three propositions linking power or class position to forms of religious commitment.

The starting point is to notice that religion can in fact compensate people for their inability to gain certain things they desire, However, the inability $_0$f humans to satisfy desires has *two* quite different aspects. First, some people are unable to gain desired rewards that are only *scarce— rewards* that others are able to obtain, or to obtain in more ample amounts. These include the tangible rewards such as wealth and health, the lack of which underlies all deprivation interpretations of religion. Clearly, religions provide a variety of effective mechanisms by which people can endure such deprivations, including promises that earthly sacrifice will merit heavenly recompense. But we must also recognize a *second* aspect of deprivation: the ability of religion to compensate people for desired rewards that seem to be absolutely *unavailable* to anyone, at least in this life. The most obvious of these, and perhaps the one most intensely sought by humans, is victory over death. No one, rich or poor, can gain eternal life by direct methods in the here and now, The only plausible source of such a reward is through religion, and the fulfillment of this promise is postponed to another world, a world known only through religious means. Finally, we must recognize that as organized social enterprises, religions are a source of *direct rewards* to members. That is, religious organizations reward some people with status, income, self-esteem, social relations, entertainment, and a host of other things they value. These distinctions lead to the following propositions (Stark and Bainbridge 1980).

First: *The power of an individual or group will be* positively *associated with control of religious organizations and with gaining the rewards available from religious organizations.*

Second: *The power of an individual or group will be* negatively *associated with acceptance of religious compensators for rewards that actually exist*

Third: *Regardless of power persons and groups will tend to accept religious compensators for rewards that do not exist in this world.*

The second of these propositions captures the long tradition of deprivation theories of religion: that the poor will pray while the rich play. We may call this the *otherworldly* or sectlike

form of religious commitment. The first proposition, on the other hand, explains the relative absence of the lower classes from more conventional religious organizations, for it captures the religious expression of privilege. We can call this the *worldly* or churchlike dimension of religious commitment. The third proposition can be called the *universal* aspect of religious commitment, since it notes that in certain respects everyone is potentially deprived and in need of the comforts of faith. It is this proposition that explains why the upper classes are religious at all, why they too are susceptible to faith (something Marxist theories can only dismiss as aberration or as a phony pose meant to lull the proletariat into false consciousness). Moreover, the third proposition helps explain why the more privileged are drawn to cult movements.

THE APPEAL OF NEW RELIGIONS

It is obvious that people do not embrace a new faith if they are content with an older one. New religions must always make their way in the market openings left them by weaknesses in the conventional religion(s) of a society. In later chapters I shall explore the conditions under which conventional faiths fail to serve substantial population segments. Here it is sufficient to point out that as weaknesses appear in conventional faiths, some people will recognize and respond to these weaknesses sooner than others. For example, as the rise of modern science caused difficulties for some traditional Christian teachings, this was recognized sooner by more educated people. In similar fashion, as the rise of Greek and Roman science and philosophy caused difficulties for pagan teachings, this too was first noticed by the educated (deVries 1967). To state this as a proposition: *Religious skepticism is most prevalent among the more privileged.*

But skepticism does not entail a general immunity to the essential supernaturalism of all religions. For example, although sociologists have long believed that people who give their religious affiliation as 'none" are primarily secular humanists, considerable recent research shows this not to be the case. Most such people are merely indicating a lack of conviction in a conventional brand of faith, for they are also the group *most* likely to express interest in belief in unconventional mystical, magical, and religious doctrines. For example, "nones" are the group of Americans most willing to accept astrology, yoga, reincarnation, ghosts, and the like (Bainbridge and Stark 1980, 1981). Moreover, people who report their original religious background as "none" are extremely over represented in the ranks of converts to new religious movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

It is surely not surprising that people who lack an anchorage in a conventional faith are most prone to embrace a new one. Nor should it be any surprise that people from privileged backgrounds are more likely to have weakened ties to a conventional faith. But can it really be true that it is the privileged who are most likely to embrace new religious movements? This is precisely what we ought to expect when we realize that conversion to a new religion involves being interested in *new culture—* indeed, in being capable of mastering new culture.

Studies of early adopters of cultural innovations have long found them to be well above average in terms of income and education (Larsen *1962).* What is true of new technology, fashions, and attitudes ought also to be true in the realm of faith. For new religions always involve *new ideas.* Consider citizens of the Roman world as they first confronted the Pauline church. This was not simply a call to intensify their commitment to a familiar faith (as sect movements always are). Instead of calling Romans to return to the gods, Paul called them to embrace a new worldview, a new conception of reality, indeed to accept a *new* God. While sects are able to appeal to people of little intellectual capacity by drumming the old, familiar culture, new religions find such people difficult to reach. Thus they must gain their hearings from people of social standing and privilege.

But why would such people join? Most of the time most of them will not, which is why it is so rare for a new religion to succeed despite the thousands of them that are born. But sometimes there is substantial discontent with conventional faith among the more privileged. That the less privileged become discontented when a religious organization becomes too worldly to continue to offer them potent compensators for scarce rewards (proposition 2) is well known—this is the basis of sect movements. But there has been little awareness that sometimes a traditional faith and its organized expression can become so worldly that it cannot serve the *universal* need for religious compensators (proposition 3). That is, religious bodies can become so empty of supernaturalism that they cannot serve the religious needs of the privileged either. At such moments, the privileged will seek new options. Indeed, it is the privileged who will be most aware of erosions of the plausibility structure of conventional faiths.

In short, people must have a degree of privilege to have the sophistication needed to understand new religions and to recognize a need for them. This is not to say that the most privileged will be most prone to embrace new religious movements, but only that converts will be from the more, rather than the less, privileged classes. Indeed, Wayne Meeks (1983) proposes *relative deprivation* as a major source of recruits to the early church—that people having substantial privilege, but less than they felt they deserved, were especially likely to convert.

THE CLASS COMPOSITION OF CONTEMPORARY NEW RELIGIONS

Recently a considerable body of data has been amassed on who joins new religious movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Let us begin with the Mormons since they are the most successful new religion to appear in many centuries—indeed, they seem on the threshold of becoming a new world faith (Stark 1984, 1994)

Mormonism was not and is not a proletarian movement. It began in one of the most "prosperous, and relatively sophisticated areas" of western New York, an area with a high proportion of cosmopolitan Yankee residents and one that surpassed other parts of the state in the proportion of children enrolled in school (O'Dea 1957:10). Those who first accepted Joseph Smith's teachings were better educated than their neighbors and displayed considerable intellectualism. Consider too that m their first city, Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1841 the Mormons established a municipal university at a time when higher education was nearly nonexistent in the United States. Moreover, within several years of the church's founding, non-Mormon neighbors in Missouri and Illinois began to complain that the Mormons were buying up the best land and displacing them. These were not collective purchases by the church but private ventures by individual Mormons, which is further evidence of the converts' relative privilege (Arrington and Bitton 1979)

In similar fashion Christian Science sprang to prominence by attracting the relatively affluent, not the downtrodden. Wilson (1961) noted the unusual number of English Christian Scientists with tides and the abundance of well-known and aristocratic family names among members. The U.S. Census data on American denominations, published during the first third of this century; reveal that Christian Science far surpassed all other denominations in terms of per capita expenditures, justifying the impression of the group as disproportionately affluent. Spiritualism, too, found its base in the middle and upper classes both in the United States and in Great Britain (Nelson 1969; Stark, Bainbridge, and Kent 1981). In her studies of members of the Unification Church (more widely known as the Moonies), Eileen Barker (1981, 1984) found English converts to be many times more likely than others their age to be university graduates. The same is true of American converts. Americans who have joined various Hindu faiths also follow the

rule: 89 percent of members of Ananda (Nordquist 1978) and 81 percent of members of Satchidanana (Volinn 1982) had attended college.

Survey research studies of general populations confirm these case study results. Table 2.1 is based on a 1973 sample of the San Francisco area (Wuthnow 1976). Here we can see that persons who have attended college were several times as likely to report that they were at least somewhat attracted to three Eastern religions that, in an American setting, qualify as cult movements. Moreover, persons who had gone to college were three times as likely as others to report that they had taken part in one of these groups. Table *2.2* is based on a 1977 Gallup Poll of the adult U.S. population. The top section of the table shows that the less educated are substantially more likely to report that they have had a "born again" experience, and to have been involved in "faith healing." This is as it should be, for, in an American context, these are sect activities—associated with higher-tension Christian denominations. However, the remainder of the table involves *cult* activities. And once again we see that the college educated show the largest proportion of participants followed by those with only high school educations, with the grade school educated being almost devoid of cult participation.

Table 2.1 Education and Attraction to Cults

	Attended College	*Did Not Attend College*
Attracted to:		
Transcendental Meditation	17%	6%
Yoga	27%	12%
Zen	17%	5%
Claimed to have taken part in one of these groups	16%	5%

Table 2.2 Education and Involvement in Cults and Sects

	College	*High School*	*Grade School*
Sect Involvement			
Has been involved in faith healing	6%	7%	11%
Has been "born again"	27%	36%	42%
Cult Involvement Has been involved in:			
Yoga	5%	*2%*	0%
Transcendental Meditation	7%	3%	2%
Eastern religions	2%	1%	0%
Mysticism	3%	1%	0%

Finally, table 2.3 reports the findings of the 1989-1990 National Survey of Religious identification. Conducted by Barry A. Kosmin and his colleagues, it is the largest survey of American Religious affiliation ever conducted—113,000 cases. Because the sample was so immense, it is possible to assemble a significant number of persons who named a cult movement when asked their religious affiliation. When we examine the data, it is no surprise that members of the major denominations tend to be college-educated—indeed, three-fourths of American Jews have been to college. Nor is it a surprise that most members of Protestant sects are not well educated—only 10 percent of members of the Worldwide Church of God have attended college.

But notice the cult groups.[4] They are the most educated groups—exceeding even Jews and Episcopalians in terms of the percentage of members who have attended college. Admittedly, the

percentages for individual groups are based on small numbers of cases—only twelve people gave their religious affiliation as New Age, and only ten named Eckankar. But the findings are extremely consistent across groups, and when the cases are totaled, we see that, overall, 81 percent of members of American cult movements have been to college. Indeed, cult members are more likely to have attended college than are those who claim no religious preference or who claim to he agnostics.

Technically, the Mormons still constitute a cult movement within the religious definitions operative in the United States. However, they have endured so long and have grown so large that their tension with their social environment has been greatly reduced. And, just as Christianity did not remain a middle- and upper-class movement forever but eventually penetrated all classes, the Mormons are not as singularly based on the educated as are the other cult movements shown in the table. Moreover, these data include all Mormons, not just recent converts—while the data on the other groups would be unlikely to include any second-generation members. Nevertheless, the Mormons display a high proportion of college-attenders (55 percent), thus conforming to the general proposition that new religious movements are based on the privileged.

Clearly, then, not just any unconventional religion is an outlet for proletarian discontent. It is not poor kids who are run-rang off and joining cult movements in contemporary America. Indeed, Volinn (1982) found that more than two-thirds of the members of Satchidanana had college-educated parents! Cult movements, insofar as we have any data on their members, are based on the more, not the less, privileged. Rut can we apply this rule to early Christianity?

Table 2.3 Education of Contemporary American Religious Groups

	Percent Who Attended College
Denominations[a]	
Roman Catholic	48%
Jewish	76%
Episcopal	70%
Congregational (United Church of Christ)	63%
Presbyterian	61%
Methodist	46%
Lutheran	45%
Sects	
Assemblies of God	37%
Nazarene	34%
Jehovah's Witnesses	23%
Worldwide Church of God	10%
Cults	
New Age	67%
Scientologv	81%
Wiccan	83%
Eckankar	90%
Deity	100%
	81%
Total	
Mormons	55%
Irreligious	
None	53%
Agnostic	72%

[a]Baptists have been omitted because they constitute such a mixture of sects and denominations, and because of the confounding effect of race.

CHRISTIANITY AS A CULT MOVEMENT

During his ministry, Jesus seems to have been the leader of a sect movement within Judaism. Indeed, even in the immediate aftermath of the Crucifixion, there was little to separate the disciples from their fellow Jews. However, on the morning of the third day something happened that turned the Christian sect into a cult movement.

Christians believe that on that day Jesus arose from the dead and during the next forty days appeared repeatedly to various groups of his followers. It is unnecessary to believe in the Resurrection to see that because the apostles believed in it, they were no longer just another Jewish sect. Although it took time for the fact to be recognized fully (in part because of the immense diversity of Judaism in this era), beginning with the Resurrection Christians were

participants in a new religion, one that added far too much new culture to Judaism to be any longer an internal sect movement. Of course, the complete break between church and synagogue took centuries, but it seems clear that Jewish authorities in Jerusalem quickly labeled Christians as heretics beyond the boundaries of the community in the same way that Moonies are today excluded from Christian associations.

Moreover, whatever the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, when historians speak of the *early* church, they do not mean the church in Jerusalem but the Pauline church—for this is the church that triumphed and changed history. And there can be no doubt that Christianity was not a sect movement within conventional paganism. The early church was a cult movement in the context of the empire, just as the Mormons were a cult movement in the context of nineteenth century America (and remain a cult in the eyes of evangelical Christians).

> If this is so, and if cult movements are based on a relatively privileged constituency, can we not infer that Paul's missionary efforts had their greatest success among the middle and upper middle classes, just as New Testament historians now believe? In my judgment such an inference is fully justified unless a convincing case can be made that basic social and psychological processes were different in the days of Rome from what they are now—that in antiquity the human mind worked on different principles. Some historians might be tempted to embrace such an assertion, but no competent social scientist would consider for a moment. Moreover, evidence based on a list of the earliest converts to Islam supports the conclusion that from the start, Muhammad's followers came from among young men of considerable privilege (Watt 1961)

CONCLUSION

I am fully aware that this chapter does not "prove" that the early church had its greatest appeal to the solid citizens of the empire. Had Paul sent out not simply letters but also questionnaires, such proof might be forthcoming. But it is idle to d certainty where none ever will be forthcoming. Moreover, science does not proceed by testing empirically each and Every application of its theories. (When physicists go to a base- ball game, They count hits, runs, and errors like everyone else. They do not keep score on whether each fly ball comes back down.) The whole point of theories is to *generalize* and hence to escape the grip of perpetual trial and error. *And* the point of sociological generalizations such as *Cult movements over recruit persons of more privileged backgrounds* is to rise above the need to plead ignorance pending adequate evidence on every specific group.

Finally, what difference does it make whether early Christianity was a movement of the relatively privileged or of the down- trodden? In my judgment it matters a great deal. Had Christianity actually been a proletarian movement, it strikes me that the state necessarily would have responded to it as a p*o1itical* threat, rather than simply as an illicit religion. With Marta Sordi (1986), I reject claims that the state did perceive early Christianity in political terms. It is far from clear to me that Christianity could have survived a truly comprehensive effort by the state to root it out during its early days. When the Roman state did perceive political threats, its repressive measures were not only brutal but unrelenting and extremely thorough—Masada comes immediately to mind. Yet even the most brutal persecutions of Christians were haphazard and limited, and the state ignored thousands of persons who openly professed the new religion, as we will see in chapter 8. If we postulate a Christianity of the privileged, on the other hand, this behavior by the state seems consistent, it as is now believed, the Christians were not a mass of degraded outsiders but from early days had members, friends, and relatives in high places—often within the imperial family—this would have greatly mitigated repression and persecution. Hence

the many instances when Christians were pardoned. I shall return to these matters in later chapters.

In conclusion, it might be well to confess how I came to write the essay on which this chapter is based. Having begun to read about the early church, I encountered Robin Scroggs's (1980) discussion of the new view that Christianity was not a proletarian movement. My immediate reaction was, "Of course it wasn't; cult movements never are." And that is precisely what this chapter has attempted to spell out.

Notes

An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Sociological Analysis* 47 (1986): 216-225.

1. The most distinguished dissenter was the Yale historian Kenneth Scott Latourette (1937:109-110).

2. Albeit some Marxists still insist not only that Christianity was a proletarian movement, but that this remains the dominant scholarly view (cf. Gager 1975).

3. Unfortunately Arrington and Bitton, despite being devout Mormons, readily interpret the characterization of Mormon converts by their nineteenth-century enemies as scum and riffraff to mean that most Mormons were very poor. Presumably the great trek west caused serious financial losses and subsequent hardship for many Mormons, but that is not pertinent to their social origins and essential class position. Moreover, given where and when the Mormons began, the am appropriate comparisons are to people in the immediate environment, which was the frontier, not Park Avenue.

4. I have limited the data to cult movements without ethnic ties. Hence Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Shintoists, Taoists, Bahaists, and Rastafarians were not included.