Why God? Explaining Religious Phenomena, Rodney Stark, Templeton Press, 2017 (ISBN 978-1-59947-520-2), viii + 296 pp., hb $24.99

In his newest book, Rodney Stark addresses two main questions and provides us with a scientific method for answering these questions. The questions are: (1) what is religion, and (2) is religion disappearing from world history. To answer these questions, he provides us with an account of what it means for a theory to be scientific and how the most popular scholarly definitions of religion fall far short of this goal. Some of them he labels scurrilous metaphors at best, all of them are godless in that they attempt to define religion without reference to God where Stark believes this will fail.

Stark defines his own approach in contrast to the most widely used definitions and methods found in religious studies today. For instance, he considers the popular definition of religion given by Emile Durkheim:

> Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church and all those who adhere to them. (p. 2)

In this definition, we have the common duality of sacred/secular that is still invoked for religious matters. This presupposes a dualistic framework and so does not fit monistic (all is one) conceptions of reality. Stark's complaint is that it is both vague and not scientific.

In order to define what he means by a scientific method, Stark appeals to Karl Popper. Popper developed his theory of falsification as he observed the shortcomings in popular but inadequate explanations offered by Marx, Freud, and Adler. 'Thus did Popper discover, or at least make explicit, the proposition that a real theory must be "incompatible with certain possible results of observation"' (p. 8). And so Stark gives his definition:

> A theory is a set of abstract statements that explain why and how some aspects of reality are connected and from which some specific empirical and falsifiable conclusions may be derived. Unfortunately, most things social scientists have been content to call theories of religion do not come close to meeting this standard. (p. 8)

Durkheim's theory of religion does not meet the standard of falsification. And neither do the other major theories used in the academy today. Consider J. Milton Younger who defined religion merely as 'a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life' (p. 4). Or Clifford Geertz who said,

> religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and lost-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions

of the general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (p. 4)

These have falsifiability problems and also do not coherently explain the difference between religion and what in many causes is non-religion but has these qualities. Notice that they are attempts to explain and define religion without reference God.

Perhaps all of this means that religion is *sui generis* and cannot be defined. Max Weber and others were reluctant to define religion. Robert Bellah condemned all efforts to define religion.

> He claimed that any formal definition he could imagine would necessarily exclude some things that obviously were religious … Eventually, seemingly in response to his critics, Bellah wrote that 'for limited purposes only, let me define religion as a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence'. (p. 4)

Eliade also chose to define religion as 'based on the sacred rather than upon a god or gods to enable him to recognize Buddhism as a religion' (p. 5).

It is to solve this problem, Stark suggests a definition and then a scientific method for falsifying his theory of religion. 'Godless definitions of religion have not only flourished among social scientists. This view has also been popular among faculty in religious studies departments' (p. 4). In their place, he gives us 192 propositions, as well as definitions under each. The first deals with human nature as rational and religion: Proposition 1: within the limits of their understanding, restricted by available options, guided by preferences and tastes, humans will attempt to make rational choices. Definition of religion: consists of a very general explanation of being (metaphysics) predicated on the existence of a god or gods, and including the terms of exchange with a god or gods (theology). Humans are rational in the sense that: 'they will attempt to follow the dictates of reason to achieve their desired goals' (p. 18). This is practical rationality; it is means/ends reasoning. He then continues in his work of giving propositions that relate to how religious groups form, how they relate to each other and the rest of society, and ultimately how humans use religion to find meaning. His definition of religion explains why humans eventually rely on an appeal to the supernatural and thus answers the question 'Why God?'

In the end, the religion he explains follows a Kantian mold: we posit God to make sense of the afterlife and to guarantee a connection between virtue in this world and reward in the next. In this sense, it is what we might call the ancient but continuing worldview which teaches that God/gods save us by giving us a good afterlife and the way to assure ourselves of this is to keep the rules of the God/gods. Although Christianity is sometimes made to fit this model, it is akin to the Greek/Egyptian

religion and not like the Biblical worldview which teaches that although it is clear that God exists, humans have exchanged the glory of God for idols, and this condition of spiritual death requires redemption through vicarious atonement to restore to the knowledge of God.

The book ends in the dichotomy of skepticism and fideism. Untimely, we do not know if life has meaning, but we can choose to believe that it does. He says that humans believe and hope life has meaning, the universe appears to have been created by an intelligent designer, only an intelligent designer can give meaning, so all efforts to find meaning will lead to an intelligent designer, and thus the humans will inevitably discover God.

Proposition 192, the everlasting basis for religion will be the human conviction and hope that life has meaning. This ending does not capture the distinctions between conceptions of God/gods, how these affect what it means to lead a virtuous life, and if at the end of the day only the material world exists. Stark's book is an important contribution with which to wrestle, and it provides externalist descriptions of the formal relation between ideas and behavior. Hopefully, it presses us to learn how to distinguish God from non-God in order to know what is clear about God from the things that have been made.

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Reading Scripture to Hear God: Kevin Vanhoozer and Henri de Lubac on God's Use of Scripture in the Economy of Redemption, Kevin Storer, James Clarke & Co., 2015 (ISBN 978-0-227-17531-6), xxvi + 154 pp., pb £15

There appears to be a convergence in recent years between both Protestants and Catholics that although historical-critical methodologies are an indispensable aspect of scriptural interpretation, they are inadequate for either the fullness of interpretation or for churchly proclamation of the gospel. Protestants and Catholics alike have been calling for a half century for the development of a 'canonical exegesis' or 'theological exegesis' that can take seriously the unity of the Bible as a whole.

This shared project emerged not only from the deconstruction of the unity of the Bible under the influence of higher criticism, but also from the sense that a historicist approach to scripture could not take seriously its place as *sacred* Scripture. If Scripture is not an historical artifact but rather a living text through which God speaks to every generation of