

Unit 2: The Church Is Mystery

Getting Started

- Assign the students to read Unit 2, “The Church Is Mystery” (pages 3487). Then ask them to read the following article.

The Story

Rodney Stark is an expert in the sociology of religion. In the following excerpt from his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, he discusses some of the reasons that led Christianity to become the dominant religion in the Roman Empire in a very short period of time.

- Here are some words you will encounter in this article:

Sociology: the study of human society

Marxist: Characteristic of the political philosophy advocated by Karl Marx, whose ideas led to the rise of atheistic communism in the twentieth century.

Epiphenomena: Products of the mind with no power to influence reality.

Triumphalism: The attitude that a religious or political philosophy is better than all others.

Doctrine: The teaching of the Church, including the unchanging truths called dogma.

Cyprian: An early third century theologian who led North African Christians during the persecution by the Roman emperors Decius and Valerian.

The Rise of Christianity by Rodney Stark

A Brief Reflection on Virtue

In contrast with times past, historians today are more than willing to discuss how social factors shaped religious doctrines. Unfortunately, at the same time they have become somewhat reluctant to discuss how doctrines may have shaped social factors. This shows up with particular frequency in the form of allergic reactions to arguments that attribute the rise of Christianity to superior theology. . . .

Read the rest of this article at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/starktheology.html>

Discussion

- Lead the students in a discussion of the following questions:
 1. What, according to the author, led to the rise of Christianity as one of “the most sweeping and successful” movements in history? (“ . . . it was the religion’s particular doctrines that permitted Christianity to be among the most sweeping and successful revitalization movements in history. And it was the way these doctrines took on actual flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity.”)
 2. How did pagans view their gods? (*The gods demanded sacrifice and worship, and could be induced to exchange services for sacrifices, but did not care how humans treated one another. In fact, the pagan gods were cruel to one another and to humans.*)
 3. What was the pagan view of mercy? (*Pagan philosophers regarded mercy and pity as defects of character to be avoided by all rational people: “Since mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it was contrary to justice.”*)
 4. How did Christian doctrines about God and mercy differ from the pagan view of these things? (*Christians taught that God loves humanity, and because God loves humanity, those who love God can only please him by loving one another, even enemies.*)
 5. In what concrete ways did Christian doctrines change life in the Roman world? (*It united people of different ethnicities without making them abandon their ethnic heritage; it “prompted liberating social relations between the sexes and within the family” and reduced class differences; and eliminated “the casual cruelty of pagan custom.”*)
 6. What are some of the ways that Christian teachings influence society today?

Being Church

How do religious beliefs shape society?

- Say to the students: “The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States says, in part, ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.’ In this activity, we’re going to explore how religious doctrine affects society by imagining that this part of the First Amendment has been revoked; as a result, any state can establish an official state religion, or even prohibit the exercise of religion altogether.” (One might want to note, as a historical aside, that was the original situation in the United States. The First Amendment initially applied only to the federal government, and many of the states did indeed endorse a particular church. Only with the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment following the Civil War was the First Amendment applied to state and local governments.)
- Divide the students into two groups representing two different states (you may want to use the name of the state your students live in and the name of a neighboring state). Explain to the students that one state has established Catholicism as the official state religion; another state has prohibited the exercise of religion altogether.
- Explain to the students that they represent the government of each state. The students in the Catholic state should decide what laws they will pass to establish Catholic belief and practice (dogmas and ethics) in the state. The students in the atheistic state should decide what laws they will pass to eradicate all religious belief and practice in the state. Each group should record their laws on a sheet of paper or newsprint.
- Next, instruct the students to create a five-minute skit depicting what everyday life in each state would look like ten years after its laws were passed. Allow each group to present its skit.
- Close the activity by leading a discussion about how religious beliefs and practices influence society. Some possible questions: After doing this activity, what do you conclude about how religious beliefs and practices affect society? Is it possible to completely eradicate all religious beliefs and practices from society? How much influence do you think Catholicism has on our society? Is the freedom of religion clause of the First Amendment generally good or bad for our society? If you could reword the First Amendment’s freedom of religion clause, what would it ideally say? In light of this activity, how important do you think it is for young people to know their faith?

Additional Activities

- Use the Journal Questions on pages 40, 42, 46, 47, 62, 66, 70, 76, 78, and 82 of the student text as discussion questions at the beginning of the session.
- Have the students complete the art activity described in the “Learn by Doing” section on page 86 of the student text.
- Lead the students in one of the prayer services described in the Teacher’s Wraparound Edition (pages 49 and 71).
- Use the “Extending the Lesson” activity on page 52 of the TWE to lead the students in an analysis of Catholic teaching in the media.
- Use the Enrichment activity on page 56 of the TWE to have students create displays that reflect different understandings of Church.
- Use the “Extending the Lesson” activity on page 62 of the TWE to lead students in a discussion of the permanent elements of the Church.
- Use the “Extending the Lesson” activity on page 76 of the TWE to help students explore what the Bible says about the nature of the Church.
- Assign the “Permanent Elements of the Church Case Studies” handout on page 330 of the TWE.

Additional Resources

- For books related to this unit, see the bibliography on page 47 of the Teacher’s Wraparound Edition.
- For an interview in which Rodney Stark describes more specifically how Christianity improved the lot of women, the sick, and others, see “A Double Take on Early Christianity” at <http://www.jknirp.com/stark.htm>. For other Internet links, see pages 50 and 72 of the TWE.
- Videos related to this unit include *Witness to Hope* (Videos with Values, 116 minutes) about the life of John Paul II; *Church History: Birth and Infancy*; *Church History: The First Thousand Years*; *Church History: Adolescence (1500-1815)* (Twenty-Third Publications, 60 minutes each).