



## **The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success**

*Rodney Stark*

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Many books have been written about the success of the West, analyzing why Europe was able to pull ahead of the rest of the world by the end of the Middle Ages. The most common explanations cite the West's superior geography, commerce, and technology. Completely overlooked is the fact that faith in reason, rooted in Christianity's commitment to rational theology, made all these developments possible. Simply put, the conventional wisdom that Western success depended upon overcoming religious barriers to progress is utter nonsense.

In **The Victory of Reason**, Rodney Stark advances a revolutionary, controversial, and long overdue idea: that Christianity and its related institutions are, in fact, directly responsible for the most significant intellectual, political, scientific, and economic breakthroughs of the past millennium.

In Stark's view, what has propelled the West is not the tension between secular and nonsecular society, nor the pitting of science and the humanities against religious belief. Christian theology, Stark asserts, is the very font of reason: While the world's other great belief systems emphasized mystery, obedience, or introspection, Christianity alone embraced logic and reason as the path toward enlightenment, freedom, and progress. That is what made all the difference.

In explaining the West's dominance, Stark convincingly debunks long-accepted "truths." For instance, by contending that capitalism thrived centuries before there was a Protestant work ethic—or even Protestants—he counters the notion that the Protestant work ethic was responsible for kicking capitalism into overdrive. In the fifth century, Stark notes, Saint Augustine celebrated theological and material progress and the institution of "exuberant invention." By contrast, long before Augustine, Aristotle had condemned commercial trade as "inconsistent with human virtue"—which helps further underscore that Augustine's times were not the Dark Ages but the incubator for the West's future glories.

This is a sweeping, multifaceted survey that takes readers from the Old World to the New, from the past to the present, overturning along the way not only centuries of prejudiced scholarship but the antireligious bias of our own time. **The Victory of Reason** proves that what we most admire about our world—scientific progress, democratic rule, free commerce—is largely due to Christianity, through which we are all inheritors of this grand tradition.

## **The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success for online ebook**

### **Robert says**

I learned more about world history and the rise of the West by reading this book than in all of my history classes through high-school and college. The Victory of Reason opened my eyes to the development of capitalism in the West as an out-springing of monotheism and the belief that God wants man to use his reason. Stark dispels many myths about the "dark ages" and sheds some very practical light on the disparity between North and South America. He is able to present and support his ideas without getting into tedious, historical detail. We are left asking an important question: if capitalism came about only through Christianity, can it survive a transition to secularism?

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### **Michael Gerald says**

Faith and science are not – and should not – be locked in conflict. As the search and production of knowledge in the Medieval Period shows, the Christian faith did not hamper the development of science; it actually inspired it. To deny modern science's Christian roots can be considered a most vile form of intellectual dishonesty. With the strong adherence to reason as a gift that ought to be used to understand God's nature, ways, and the universe He created, Catholic medieval scholars embarked on a quest for knowledge whose fruits the world still consumes to this day.

Faith and religion are not less reliable sources of knowledge. Religion, if used with reason, can be and is still a source of valid knowledge. And modern science must shed the smug scientism of some of its practitioners and believers that deludes them into thinking that knowledge production is their exclusive turf. (Wallerstein, 2002). The belief that the world can be understood by using reason and the optimistic belief of human progress came from the Catholic faith. Modern science did not come about despite of Christianity, but because of it.

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### **Justin Tapp says**

Stark sets out to challenge anthropologists like Jared Diamond who contend that Europeans rose to prominence mainly out of geographic factors in their favor. Stark's hypothesis is that Christian thinking--forward looking thought towards progress and in favor of basic equality and property rights-- led to European development. That while the decline of the Roman Empire is something historians have lamented in centuries past, it was precisely the catalyst that freed up individuals to become entrepreneurs. Stark makes the point that Max Weber's protestant work ethic hypothesis is a myth--capitalism existed long before protestantism.

In short, Stark thinks like an economic historian and shows that it's the incentives that matter. I thought Ferguson's Ascent of Money (my review) did a good job of showing the development of basic finance and economic thought. But Stark goes further back than Ferguson did, and does a much better job. Ferguson's book was a bestseller and got a PBS special. Stark's book won't.

The problem I have with Stark's book is that the links he makes to Christianity being a catalyst for economic development come across rather weakly. Early church fathers frowned on lending and commercial activity. There was a long period where the Catholic church looked more favorably on these activities, and then after the Protestant Reformation the Catholic church reverted back to opposing those activities and preserving its sovereignty. So, the church has played it both ways.

But if you can link Christian thinking to equality-- no king has any more right to your property than you because God shows no favoritism-- then you have the basis for property rights, which is the basis for capitalism.

This book was recommended to me by my dean, and then someone referred me to Horizon Community Church in Cincinnati, where the pastor was preaching a sermon series supposedly inspired by the book. So, it was a must-read. I'm requiring it for the Winterfest course I'm teaching on the history of economic and financial thought.

In all, I give this book 3.5 stars out of 5. Namely because I'd bet that someone has some good arguments to oppose Stark. But the book is an easy read and is quite entertaining and informative. I am humbled by how much I learned from it.

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### **Zach Hedges says**

I must say that I was quite disappointed when I finished this book, whose title and summary seemed so intriguing to me. Unfortunately, Stark's main thesis--that the principle of "reason", as unique to Christianity, was the primary factor in the rise of capitalism and indeed all of Western civilization--is largely confined to his introduction and conclusion. The chapters in between are dedicated to unnecessarily detailed descriptions (through the use of "case studies") of capitalism's evolution through varying historical context, with almost no reference or connection to the original argument. The reader is left to speculate for himself just what relevance these elaborate descriptions might hold for the broader questions of 1) the relationship between Christianity and reason, and 2) the relationship between reason and freedom--critical questions which the author himself has raised in his introduction. For whatever reason (no pun intended), Stark appears quite content to skip over them in order to focus primarily on the relationship between economic/political freedom and capitalism.

While the author makes some interesting historical observations (I did enjoy his contribution to the debunking of the "Dark Ages" narrative), one wonders, given his apparent disinterest (or inability) to establish clear and convincing connections between Christian faith and the rest of his subject matter, if it would not be more appropriate for this book simply to be entitled "The Victory of Freedom." For a satisfying examination of the connections between "Christianity" and "Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success", I recommend looking elsewhere.

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### **Douglas Wilson says**

This is one of the most *satisfying* books I have read in a long time. It is one thing to reject, as I have for many years, the idea of the "Dark Ages," but Stark demonstrates just how "undark" they were. Leave it to secular

thinkers to tag the most advanced human society to date as a period of blind superstition. And this book is potent evidence against those who want to represent free markets as an Enlightenment concept, one that Christians should leave behind. What we now call capitalism was alive and well for almost a millennium before Adam Smith. And Christians invented it. As they say, go, fight, win.

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### **Athens says**

About 15% of the way in, it became clear that this book would be controversial in a public way.

Without being an apologist for Stark, and certainly not so only this far in, he is making me consider some things that I had not considered before.

In specific, in the Christian model the individual makes free-will choices and is responsible for those choices. This assertion is then coupled with the duty of that individual to understand and use the formal process of ~reason~ to come to conclusions about how the world is and what choices & behaviors are justly and reasonably chosen.

You or I may or may not agree with any number of assertions or points of view held by the author, but please note that he is actually using the reasoning process in this book, the one he describes as being enabled by the Christian mode of rational thought (I would almost say the Christian mode of scientific thought).

To the reviewer Brad, I would politely point out that he does not equate Christianity with reason, rather he asserts that uniquely among religious cultures Christianity has enabled and fostered the process of reason.

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### **Jeffrey Backlin says**

The clarity and honesty of this book are refreshing. The author cuts through the platitudes of politically correct verbiage and notes that Christianity is a powerful conceptual force that brought about modern society. Stark notes that Christianity is a rational theological enterprise that lends towards progress in thinking and that the dark ages are a misnomer: considerable frameworks were created for the emergence of Capitalism. Well written, will read more of Stark for sure.

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### **Patrick says**

Given the title of this book, I expected an expert but narrowly-focused argument. Rodney Stark delivers far more than that. He may be the best researcher writing nonfiction today, and his prose is never dry or needlessly academic. The result is a gripping one-volume history of Christendom from an economic point of view. Stark addresses (and demolishes) the myths of the "Dark Ages," while also regaling the reader with tales about the Italian city-states, not to mention France, Spain, England, the Netherlands, and their New World colonies. He does not say as much about Buddhism and Islam, but it's just enough to draw an instructive contrast between Christian culture and its rivals. I can't remember the last time I learned so much so painlessly from one book.

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## **Socraticgadfly says**

When Stark can make broad-sweeping, but not very accurate statements such as "Capitalism was developed by the great monastic estates," you know to buckle your seat belts, you're in for a historically bumpy ride.

Here, as in "For the Glory of God," Stark claims to be rehabilitating Christian religious history from people labeled as militant atheists and others who are always implied to be inaccurate rewriters of history.

Well, if you read my more in-depth review of that book, you'll see that, while I note Stark does have some tidbits of factual learning to toss out, between unhistorically re-reporting old myths as fact, tossing out opinion as fact, and other strategems, he is often the rewriter of history himself.

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It is true that capitalism as we know it first arose in the "Christian West." But Stark makes a huge logical error, in addition to his historical ones.

He assumes without warrant that a statistical correlation implies a logical one.

First, the theoretical defenders and exponents of modern capitalism, such as Adam Smith, were not orthodox Christians but Deists. (In "For the Glory of God," Stark can airbrush someone like Isaac Newton into an orthodox Christian, touching up his Unitarian delvings into the Trinity and even ignoring his fascination with mystical fringe science or beyond.

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Next would be the borderline intellectual dishonesty of trying to reread (or perhaps we should say, sociologically retranslate) people such as Scholastic philosophers Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas as though they had just graduated the University of Chicago or the Wharton School of Business. Just because you can do it, doesn't mean it should be done, that it produces any real insight or that it is otherwise valuable.

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In short, unless you are a fairly conservative Christian seeking a academic justification for an "us vs. them" mindset that, if it went much further, might come close to the Stalinist USSR in defending Christian creativity, feel free to skip this book.

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## **Dennis says**

I love well-researched books that correct the false impressions left to us from historians who write with an anti-Christian agenda. Authors such as Edward Gibbons (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,) Jared Diamond (Guns, Gems and Steel), Carl Sagan (The Demon Haunted World) and Daniel Boorstin (The Discoverers) either through innuendo, ambivalence, or outright animosity, leave their readers with the impression that Christianity was either irrelevant, or else a great impediment to progress. Stark's "The

"Victory of Reason" is one of a very few that I have found which bring to light historical facts that run against the aforementioned narrative. Other such books I have enjoyed are: C.S. Lewis' "The Discarded Image," M. Stanton Evans' "The Theme is Freedom," Amity Shlaes' "The Forgotten Man" and Burton Fulsom's "New Deal or Raw Deal" and "The Myth of the Robber Barons." Each of these books in their own way undo common misconceptions about history. (A few of these address the issue of rewritten Christian history. Others correct misconceptions about the free vs. government-controlled markets and capitalism) Each deserves its own review, and if you're interested, you can find good book reviews of each on Amazon. I've read each of them, and I thoroughly enjoyed each one.

If History interests you, then I recommend that you give one or more of these books a look.

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## **David says**

Rodney Stark argues here, as he has in other places, that it was Christian faith that motivated the West to pursue capitalism. From this pursuit came western success. Stark argues that those who dissociate Christian faith from western achievements such as science and capitalism are rewriting history.

Stark argues in chapter one that Christian faith was unique in believing that progress was God-given. This allowed later theologians to reinterpret scripture when necessary. Therefore, while the Bible does not allow interest, theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas used God-given reason to argue that such a prohibition against interest was not a once-for-all command and that interest was indeed allowable in a Christian society. Along with this, it was Christian theology that led to the rise of science, the abolition of slavery, and the rise of individualism. Stark spends more time on this in other books, but his basic point is that only in the West did astrology become astronomy and alchemy become chemistry. This was due to Christian faith and other ideologies and cultures (Greece, Rome, China, Islam) actually created thought worlds that inhibited such advances.

In chapter two Stark takes on the idea that the "dark ages" were a time of regression and little cultural advancement. He argues that this whole concept was created by secular, enlightenment philosophers hostile to Christian faith and it does not match the fact. Stark shows that the medieval era, the "dark ages", were a time of great technological advancement with new ways of production, waging war, and transporting products. During this era was also seen the beginnings of capitalism, with the first capitalist societies being found in the Italian cities of Venice, Genoa, Florence and Milan (chapter three). He shows that it was distinctly Christian ideas such as moral equality (all people are equal, kings and nobles are not just created higher on the totem pole), that states and kings are not the ultimate authority that led to capitalism. Also important was the geography of Europe which led to disunity; in the absence of one centralized government there was room for development in many different regions.

This idea becomes important in part two of the book. After discussing the growth of Italian capitalism throughout Europe (chapter four) and its movement north into England and Dutch areas (chapter five), Stark looks at why capitalism failed to take hold in Spain and France (chapter six). His argument was that Spain and France were run by strong central governments that stifled progress and kept the populace in a medieval feudalism. In such a society there is no reason for people to work harder because they get nothing out of it. Further, higher taxes that supported the extravagant lifestyle of the nobility worked, in the long run, to cripple production and the economy. Spain never became a producer of goods, relying on imports from their colonies in Latin America and taxes on their holdings throughout Europe. The Spanish crown declared

bankruptcy numerous times in the 1500s and 1600s and as they lost their territory, they lost their income. England on the other hand continued to develop technologies that better aided production, they paid workers more but also produced more allowing them to sell products throughout Europe for less. This led to the Industrial Revolution in England, allowing the British to flourish.

Finally, in chapter seven Stark shows how this played out in the "New World." He argues that North America inherited the attitudes of England, encouraging people to work hard for themselves and to compete. On the other hand, South America inherited the attitudes of Spain where people worked for the benefit of the crown. According to Stark, this is why the US and Canada have flourished economically while Mexico and South America have not.

Along with this, Stark talks about differences in religion. One of Stark's main theses, which he mentions in other books, is that religion grows where there is a competition. A centralized state church supported by taxes does not provide motivation to reach out to the people and leads to stagnation. A church without support from the government, forced to compete with other churches for members and funds, leads to a vibrant religious society.

So in Stark's view, competition is the key to religious and economic growth. Societies that emphasize freedom, competition and where the government more or less gets out of the way are ones with strong religious communities and flourishing economies. When the state tries to control the church, as well as controlling labor and charging high taxes, the religion and the economy weaken.

Overall, I found this book intriguing, if not fascinating. Stark makes a strong historical argument for free market capitalism based on its success over against other ideologies that lead to a society languishing in poverty. He shows that it was Christian theology that created capitalism, leading to the prospering of the western world.

Stark is not concerned with biblical arguments, and some Christians may want to take him to task on this. Just because the course of Christian history led to certain things, such as capitalism, does not mean such is faithful to scripture. In other words, in returning to scripture, as Christians must always do, do we find justification for free market capitalism? Stark does go this direction briefly when he mentions Constantine's legalizing Christianity. This led to two Catholic churches: the church of piety and the church of power. The church of piety is rooted in the pre-Constantinian church of "dedicated, poorly paid, and rather ascetic clergy, who sometimes knowingly risked martyrdom" (202). Many Christians today look to those pre-Constantine days as the ideal for how the church should be, and see all the favors heaped on the church afterwards as a veering off the path. The church of power is the church after Constantine that had political influence, justified things the Bible did not such as interest, and soon ran the western world.

Stark's argument is that without the church of power, Christianity would not have endorsed progress and thus not been in favor of science or capitalism. This is a point that would be good for discussion, especially among Christians who see the Constantinian endorsement of Christianity as the cause of all evil that followed after. Stark argues that the Quran also forbids interest and without Christianity's acceptance of progress in interpretation this is why the Islamic world to this day frowns on interest, making capitalism difficult. For Stark, without Constantine, the church would be in the same position.

I think Stark's work here is a reminder of the importance of competition. Humans thrive on competition which is why churches are healthier where there is religious freedom, freedom to compete. Likewise, economies do better where there is freedom for businesses and individuals to compete. At the same time, Scripture does not allow Christians to accept a simple "survival of the fittest" in the economic world. The

church of piety is always there to remind the church of power that Jesus calls his followers to care for the weak, poor, oppressed and sick.

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### **Jason says**

Professor Stark, a Baylor University social sciences professor, has written a book that should complement recent works by men like Jared Diamond or Victor Davis Hanson, in explaining why the West, and especially why particular forms of Christianity have led to unique successes for its adherents around the present world. Stark has written to especially critique ideas in the famous book, the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Instead he argues that Christianity in general has led to forms of government and capitalism that have met with rounds of worldwide success.

Stark backs up his thesis with example and statistical analysis to show why western Christianity's core beliefs, that man knows God by further investigation and expansion of knowledge and that diversification of ideas and roles led to spin off ideas among industry, the family and government throughout Europe.

Reason for Stark is a direct child of Christianity. Greek philosophy may have had a lot to say about reason, and with the rise of Islam, much of Greek thought may have been preserved, but it was the special combination of Christian faith using reason, which led to things unforeseen in the world. In actuality, Irish monks had more access to ancient writings, often by a ratio of 8:1 than did Islamic scholars. And what the Middle and Far East may have had in raw knowledge, they were able to do less with more because there was not application for reason in their faith, unlike western Christianity.

Two areas of history receive excellent examination by Stark: the middle ages, which according to his analysis, proved to be more rational and better equipped to handle the world than the later Renaissance, was the creator of international finance, multiple practical technological inventions and free institutions which later faded away as the high middle ages embraced reason without faith.

Finally, Stark compares and contrasts British North America with Latin America to attempt to show why these two regions are so different in wealth, general freedom and technological innovation. Probably the book uses statistics at its best with its comparison between feudal Latin America and capitalistic Anglo America. Because Christianity was separated from the state, the church flourished in ways it never did in the south, in active members and in influence on society. Stark attributes the economic output of Anglo America largely to the embrace of rational theology that began centuries ago, that ran through northern Italy, the low countries, Britain and later America and the rest of the Anglo nations.

Stark does not cheer lead for any particular side, but is very effective to show through his research that reason, Christianity, democratic reforms and capitalism are usually inseparable from each other. The author closes by asking if capitalism needs Christianity in today's world, and whether globalization has made capitalism's reliance on rational theology relevant. The conclusion is that they are forever linked, as evidenced by the explosion in the growth of the Christian faith and rational theology as the same time as globalization has spread the blessings of capitalism and freedom.

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### **thethousanderclub says**

The Victory of Reason begins with a truly provocative idea, especially in our age of secular-centric historical

commentary. Scholar Rodney Stark posits that the driving force of Western success was due to ideas inculcated in Christianity. With Christianity, and much of faith in general, being as unpopular as it is in academia, this is a disruptive idea. Stark attempts to prove his outlook in *The Victory of Reason* and does so with mild success.

I have long believed that ideas matter and have consequences. Although that seems elementary, certain scholars would not necessarily agree, especially depending on their field of study. To read a book like *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, for example, would make one believe that the progress of humanity has little to do with the volition of humans. Rather, the irresistible forces of evolution and chance, including something as mundane as longitude and latitude, determine the destiny of humanity. *The Victory of Reason* presents a very different world and outlook, a world driven by the choices of humans—collectively or individually—and those choices are driven by ideas, such as those found within Christianity.

So does Stark make his case successfully? Yes and no. The book is detailed, albeit not exhaustive, and historical evidence is confidently presented. The trouble starts to occur with the analysis of certain historical periods, such as the Dark Ages, in which Stark rejects the common interpretation of history regarding that time period. Although most of the information is interesting, it feels farther and farther away from the original theory the more you keep reading. (I will say certain passages in the book reminded me of reading *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith; the in-depth analysis of potato growing or wool production can make for some less than thrilling reading). Stark does eventually circumscribe his historical musings into the framework of his theory, but it doesn't happen enough and the book sometimes feels disconnected from the main idea.

Stark's personality was on display in his writing much more than many other scholars. I could appreciate his contrarian viewpoints being a contrarian myself. The writing feels caustic in some ways, but his rejection of several common beliefs is always followed by persuasive historical evidence. The profundity of the premise—that the ideas of Christianity are primarily responsible for the momentous advances in western civilization—demands a commiserate level of profundity in writing and historical commentary. *The Victory of Reason* as an explication fell a bit short in proving its main premise, although I don't believe Stark is wrong. Although I am very sympathetic to Stark's assertion, I wish his book would have been put together a bit more coherently and circumspectly.

*The Victory of Reason* is a valuable book to read and study due to its mostly contrarian viewpoint on momentous historical circumstances. The premise is fascinating, as well as much of the content, but the book doesn't quite come together the way it needs to. Having said that, this is the first book of Rodney Stark's I have read, and I look forward to reading and enjoying more of his work. He has some fascinating things to say, and I'm eager to explore more of the world from Rodney Stark's viewpoint.

<http://thethousanderclub.blogspot.com/>

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### Ron says

It is commonplace to think of Christianity and rationalism as opposite historical and philosophical forces. In this study, Stark demonstrates that elements within Christianity actually gave rise not only to visions of reason and progress but also to the evolution of capitalism. "Rodney Stark may be the most influential religious researcher of the past hundred years. He has revolutionized contemporary thought about religion and economics, and in this book - his most provocative yet - he makes a compelling case for the claim that

we owe our prosperity, freedom, and progress to centuries of faith in one great, loving, and rational God. The Victory of Reason is itself a victory of reason in a field long dominated by anti-Western, anticapitalist, and antireligious myth. Stark's extraordinary scholarship has made it possible to again ask, and perhaps finally answer, some of the most enduring questions about faith and spirituality." Laurence Iannaccone, George Mason University

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## **W. Littlejohn says**

If I had come across this book in a vacuum, no doubt I would've thought it mediocre and occasionally annoying, but nothing to get worked up about. But, knowing as I did (from word of mouth and from the enthusiastic blurbs on the cover) that many in conservative evangelical circles loved this book, I spent the entire time I was reading vexed by the question "Why?" And unable to satisfactorily answer that question, I found myself in a very ill temper throughout. Now, because this book received such endorsements from such unlikely quarters, I shall be ridiculously thorough in backing up my many criticisms, and if you don't have patience to read the whole thing, I understand.

Of course, that's not to say that there's not much to profit from in this book--there certainly is. In the full version of this review, I discuss three things that I enthusiastically learned from this book. (Click here) And, it's understandable why Christians might get excited about this book at first glance. After all, it advertises itself as a sort of modern-day *Speeches on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers*--a defense of Christianity against the critiques of the Enlightenment and its followers, showing that Christianity is not in fact barbaric, backward, repressive, obscurantist, etc.

However, there's a problem with this particular defense even more serious than that of the original *Speeches on Religion*--in this case, the author is an unbeliever, and not just any unbeliever, but one who seems to be particularly doped up on modernity, accepting uncritically all of its trappings as eminently desirable. This much is evident from the title, which made me highly skeptical despite the rave reviews: *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*. Now, for all my Kierkegaardianism, I'm certainly not one to say that Christianity is anti-reason--indeed, it is the only viable source of true reason--but it is certainly skeptical enough of it that it is oddly incongruous to describe its triumph as "The Victory of Reason." Remember that we're talking about a faith that preaches as its central event the voluntary crucifixion of its God as a lower-class ruffian at the hands of imperial authorities, and then claims that he popped up alive again three days later, having, somewhere in the midst of all this, conquered all evil spiritual forces and erased all the sins of the world. I can think of a lot of ways to describe the triumph of such a faith, but "The Victory of Reason" would not be among them. (It is perhaps rather telling that Stark does not, so far as I remember, once mention either the crucifixion or the resurrection.)

See, here's the problem. There's two ways a book like this could be written. One would be to assume that the Bible and the historic Christian faith were good and true, and then to show that it had borne good and true fruits in modernity, despite many troubling and countervailing tendencies in modernity. Such a book would have much to offer, though I would still be suspicious at points. The other approach is to assume that modernity and the Enlightenment are good and true, and then show that they grew out of many things that were good and true in Christianity, despite many troubling and countervailing tendencies in Christianity. Such is the approach of this book. In the first approach, Christianity is the yardstick by which modernity is measured; in Stark's, modernity is the yardstick by which Christianity is measured. Of course, that could be said of any number of modern attacks on Christianity; what makes Stark's book so maddening is that he claims to find that Christianity measures up to this yardstick--that Christianity is in fact reasonable,

progressive, and capitalistic in our modern sense. Unsurprisingly, in order to make Christianity fit this Procrustean bed, he has to push it and pull it, emphasizing this odd element here, and covering up this important element there, in order to make it fit. The result is a “Christianity” that any sensible Christian should disavow, and a historical narrative that is scarcely coherent.

Now, it seems that some have latched onto this book because for them it provides a defense of capitalism as something Christians should embrace. But the problem with this (aside from Stark’s failure to clearly analyze “capitalism”) is that this isn’t what Stark is trying to do—he is taking for granted that capitalism is a great good, and is then trying to “defend” Christianity as something capitalists can embrace. This means, of course, that Stark’s hierarchy of values is quite inverted from that of a Biblical Christian, and it shows in all kinds of deeply troubling ways. Repeatedly, Stark points to a genuine historical change in how Christendom responded to some social or economic issue, and, because “progress” is his barometer, he consistently rejects the earlier form of Christianity as “irrational” and seemingly, un-Christian, while the later form represents for him the true (because “rational”) Christianity. The problem is, of course, that in general, Christians at the time (and Biblically-minded Christians today) would clearly recognize the later form as a heresy or corruption.

Thus, Stark tends to identify heretical or corrupt elements in the Christian tradition, holds them up as as the true Christian tradition, and thereby asserts that Christianity is friendly to his Enlightenment ideals of reason, progress, and mammon. The result, therefore, in my mind, is to mount a convincing case that genuine Christianity is in fact hostile to capitalism, since Stark repeatedly demonstrates that it became receptive to capitalism only after deserting its first love.

(In the full version, I pause here to consider at length the ways in which Stark fails to even provide a persuasive account of capitalism, much less Christianity. [Click here](#))

Right at the beginning, in seeking to equate Christianity with “reason,” he says, “Theology consists of formal reasoning about God.” (5) That is certainly one definition of theology, but it sounds like something from Turretin. Although formal reasoning about God is certainly part of the theological task, few theologians would want to describe theology’s essence in such an arid way. Curiously enough, when Stark goes on to give examples of how Christian theology uses reason, he cites Aquinas’s defense of the perpetual virginity of Mary—an “irrational” doctrine if there ever was one. The irony seems lost on Stark, but in my mind, this example illustrates well the role of reason in the Christian tradition--disciplined reasoning about tenets of faith that often radically subvert what reason itself would tell us.

Shortly after this, Stark admits that, to be sure, many influential churchmen opposed an over-reliance on reason in favor of a greater role for mystery and mysticism. But these views, he asserts, remained outside of the mainstream of true Christianity that was to be found in the universities. On what basis, we may well ask, can Stark, an unbeliever, presume to make such sweeping judgments about what constitutes the mainstream and the periphery of the faith?

Stark then proceeds to sketch the differences between Christianity on the one hand and Islam and Judaism on the other. Of course, I heartily agree with him that Christianity fosters cultural progress in a way the other two do not, but any Biblical Christian should reject the reason he provides: “Scholars often refer to Judaism and Islam as ‘orthoprax’ religions, concerned with correct (ortho) practice (praxis) and therefore placing their ‘fundamental emphasis on law and regulation of community life.’ In contrast, scholars describe Christianity as an ‘orthodox’ religion because it stresses correct (ortho) opinion (doxa), placing ‘greater emphasis on belief and its intellectual structuring of creeds, catechisms, and theologies.’” (In the margin here, I scribbled “Nay, you beast!”) While it is certainly true that Christianity has always had a tendency to

indulge in doctrinal debate to an unhealthy degree, and has developed a rather sophisticated system of doctrines, it is a particularly modern, Protestant, post-Enlightenment notion to think of Christianity as being in essence a set of intellectual propositions. In the New Testament, and throughout most of the Church's history, Christianity has been all about right practice and community life. Inasmuch as it has failed to focus on this, it has failed to live up to its proper calling, and so the Enlightenment obsession with reason that in some ways grew out of scholasticism, though a child of Christianity, is a bastard and no true son--a distinction that Stark does not recognize.

In distinguishing Christianity from Islam and Judaism, Stark also tries to claim that Christianity does not read its texts about Jesus as "divine transmissions" that "have encouraged literalism." (9) Christianity has a freer, more flexible relationship to its founding texts that enable it to accommodate progress. For example, he says (having apparently not taken the effort to understand the New Testament teaching on slavery) "While Christian theologians could plausibly correct Saint Paul's understanding of God's will concerning slavery, such corrections were (and are) essentially precluded in other faiths--except as heresies." Again, while it may be true that Christianity has at times (especially in modernity) treated the Bible this way, this is not true Christianity and Christians should be immediately suspicious of Stark's project.

These problems continue to crop up throughout Stark's crucial opening chapter.

For example, on page 11, he calls Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* "a monument to the theology of reason" which "consists of logical 'proofs' of Christian doctrine and set the standard for all subsequent Christian theologians." Of course, while logic and reason played a major part in the work, it is hardly accurate to describe it as a collection of "logical proofs of Christian doctrine." Plus, it certainly did not set the standard for all subsequent Christian theologians--ever heard of Protestantism?

A little later, he says, "Aquinas and his many gifted peers could not have excelled at rational theology had they conceived of Jehovah as an inexplicable essence." But, of course, they did conceive of him that way!

On page 14, he cites the "great, if neglected, medieval theologian-scientist Nicole d'Oresme" saying that "God's creation 'is much like that of a man making a clock and continue its own motion by itself.'" Well, no wonder this theologian was neglected if he said stuff like that--that's a classic statement of the heresy of deism. Stark's confusion of deism and Christianity continues for quite a number of pages. For instant, on page 16, he enlists Descartes's view that "God is perfect and therefore 'acts in a manner as constant and immutable as possible,' except for the rare exceptions of miracles." Later, on pages 20-21, he contrasts Islam's "extremely active God who intrudes on the world as he deems it appropriate" with Christianity: "Islam did not fully embrace the notion that the universe ran along on fundamental principles laid down by God at the creation but assumed that the world was sustained by his will on a continuing basis." Of course, there's a big problem with this--orthodox Christian theology has always taught the latter!

Next, he goes on to gush about how individualism is the product of Christianity: claiming that "It is the individual citizen who was the focus of Christian political thought." (23) Now, I've studied Christian political thought quite a good deal, and I don't ever remember this particular emphasis; in my experience, the opposite is generally true--Christian political thought is particularly concerned with social bodies and the common good. On the next page, he says, "From the beginning, Christianity has taught that sin is a personal matter, that it does not inhere primarily in the group, but each individual must be concerned with her or his personal salvation." From the beginning? The beginning of what? The Enlightenment?

In his discussion of individualism and personal liberty, he claims a thoroughly anti-predestinarian stance as the orthodox Christian one. He enlists Augustine in defense of the proposition that "while God knows what we will freely decide to do, he does not interfere," but, notably, he is working off of Augustine's *De Libero*

Arbitrio, rather than his later anti-Pelagian writings, in which he retracted many of his earlier statements.

The point here is not that Christianity has not encouraged rational enquiry, scientific investigation, individual liberty, the progress of civilization, prosperity, etc. I would contend that it has. But in Stark's hands, all of these points are made in a fashion that is only half-true. True Christianity does promote individual liberty, but not individualism; it promotes rationality, but not rationalism, prosperity, but not capitalism.

Stark accepts the Constantinian thesis--that there was a radical shift in Christian values as Christians were catapulted into positions of power and quickly set to work providing theological legitimations, rather than critiques, of power. The problem is that Stark thinks this is altogether a good thing, and this should make us immediately suspicious. The same pattern appears all throughout, as he identifies genuine shifts that occurred within Christianity, but, where true Christians would see corruption and apostasy, he sees great progress and innovation. For example, he is very enthusiastic about the way the great monastic estates and other church institutions accumulated vast wealth, sometimes growing into huge profitable institutions resembling modern corporations in some ways. In one bizarre section about the monasteries, he talks about how "The manual labor prescribed by the rule of Saint Benedict was reduced to entirely symbolic tasks about the kitchen. The monks lived like lords" and then goes on to gush, as if this were a good thing, "All of this was possible because the great monasteries began to utilize a hired labor force." (61) (To cap off the oddity, he starts praising the Christian work ethic and contempt for luxury on the next page, right after praising the monasteries for finding ways to ensure they didn't have to do work and could live in luxury. Of course, this particular contradiction is endemic to capitalist thinking.) But the problem is that these developments were decried on all sides, and critiqued by one reforming movement after another, from the Cistercians to the Franciscans to the Protestants. Christians repeatedly insisted that the monasteries that turned into engines of profit had abandoned monastic and Christian principles.

The same problem appears with usury, where he tries to argue that, despite the traditional usury prohibition, Christianity actually favored usury, because many of the worldly hierarchy engaged freely in usurious practices to help finance the buying and selling of church offices. These and other related practices of the exceedingly corrupt late medieval Church are embraced as part of the development of capitalism. Never mind the fact that they were condemned by all honest Christians and eventually incited the massive schism of the Reformation.

In my mind then, the book actually demonstrates, contrary to the thesis that Stark is seeking to advance, that genuine Christianity opposed capitalism as a corrupting force, rather than encouraged it. Stark recognizes this challenge in the form of the traditional theology of the just price and the prohibition on usury, and so he seeks to address these. But his response to this challenge is so pitiful that it leaves one more doubtful than ever about the strength of Stark's thesis. A single paragraph addresses the issue of the just price, claiming that Christian theologians basically considered the just price to be the one determined by free market forces. On usury, he is even worse, apparently having made no serious effort to understand the scholastic teaching on the issue and dismissing it as "confusing" and "fuzzy," though it is clear, in his mind, that the gist of the thirteenth and fourteenth-century developments is to nullify the usury ban in the face of the pressure of worldly economic realities. Stark ends this section by scolding Islamic banks for holding firm to their religious convictions and attempting to do business accordingly, unlike their Christian counterparts, who more willingly abandoned their Scriptures: "Religious opposition to interest, combined with the avarice of repressive regimes, prevented capitalism from arising in Islam, and still does. Victories of reason have yet to be won." (68) In passages like this, Stark shows his true colors: he is not really in favor of the Christian religion, but is in favor of what he sees as the Christian willingness to abandon religious scruples in favor of reason.

The same movement appears in his treatment of property rights, which was shockingly naive, clearly ignorant of the complexities both of Biblical teaching on the subject and of early modern developments and disputes concerning how private property was to operate and be protected. Here too his narrative is one of an irrational early Christianity which was against property rights, superseded by a late medieval rational Christianity that set the stage for full-blown modern capitalism. The narrative has a vague truth to it, but as Christians, we should ask which stage in the development was Christian, and which was heretical.

Indeed, Stark occasionally seems to mess up and accidentally enlists examples that directly contradict his thesis, such as when he discusses a “Puritan”-style Italian ascetic movement (“the Humiliati”) that arose in opposition to the materialism of Italian capitalism, and details how Protestant Puritanism also strove vigorously against the affluence of Dutch capitalism.

The clearest evidence that Stark’s project is sharply at odds with orthodox Christianity comes in the last chapter, where he treats religions as economic competitors in a religious marketplace, and argues that Christianity succeeds better the more the Church is divided, because then it benefits from competition, and is able to offer a diversity of “religious products” to suit various needs. Churches are encouraged to take a more and more explicitly marketing-oriented approach to “promoting” their religious “products.” Of course, this is entirely antithetical to the orthodox confession of “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” and should be proof to Christian readers that Stark’s values and his understanding of Christianity are far from theirs.

Of course, none of this is to say that true Christianity is necessarily antagonistic to capitalism across the board; clearly it isn’t. But the relationship between Christianity and capitalism is obviously a deeply ambiguous and conflicted one, contrary to Stark’s thesis, and the concept of capitalism itself is deeply ambiguous and conflicted, though you wouldn’t know that from Stark’s presentation.

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