

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

Rodney Stark

New York: Random House, 2005 (304 pages)

In the last decade, sociologist Rodney Stark has published several significant books, all for the purpose of defending Christianity's positive contributions to Western culture and the world at large. To do so, he has had to attack two trends. The first trend is the denial that metaphysical beliefs are significant in history and culture. Consider, for example, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* by Jared Diamond. The book has been a bestseller and the basis of a popular series on PBS. The title provides the basic thesis. Diamond argues that different people have different histories not because of different biologies but because of differences in their physical environments. Notice the false dilemma: either genes or geography. The problem is that those categories are not jointly exhaustive. Sure, genes and geography are part of the story, but what about philosophical ideas, beliefs about God, and religious traditions? Apparently, these are immaterial things, which to the truly modern thinker, are nothing at all.

In contrast to Diamond, Stark argues that a society's beliefs, far more than its real estate, shape its destiny. That claim alone is controversial, but Stark does not stop there. He bucks a second trend, arguing that we in the West owe our political and economic freedoms to specifically, if not uniquely, Christian ideas: "The success of the West," Stark argues, "including the rise of science, rested entirely on religious foundations, and the people who brought it about were devout Christians." (Stark argues for the Christian origins of modern science in his previous book, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-hunts, and the End of Slavery* [2003]). This contradicts the received wisdom, which considers Christianity the antithesis of freedom. Even the words we use to describe various historical periods betray an anti-Christian stereotype. There were the Dark Ages, after enlightened Rome collapsed and the church darkened the minds and imaginations of Europe. Then came the Middle Ages, when things got a little better; and finally, we reached the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, when sweet reason finally broke free from the shackles of obscurantist faith to give us human rights, freedom, and prosperity.

There have been exceptions to this basic trope, of course. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, for instance, Max Weber argued that Protestantism gave rise to capitalism through a combination of sanctified diligence and Puritan thrift. We owe to Weber the ubiquitous references to the Protestant work ethic. Weber was wise to seek the origins of capitalism in Christianity, but ironically, Weber's thesis was, in a sense, just an interesting twist on the prevailing opinion because his argument was strongly anti-Catholic. In any case, historians have found many flaws in Weber's argument, so the relationship of Christianity to capitalism is still academically an open field.

The cartoonish, anti-Christian version of Western history has been out of favor with professional historians for some time, but it still shapes our perceptions and our language, much as Freudianism does. Even skeptics of Freud, for instance, still find it difficult to avoid referring to the superego, the subconscious, and oral fixations. Similarly, historians still find it hard to describe the West without blaming Christianity for everything from slavery to witch hunts.

Stark does not just tweak but flatly challenges the official story in almost all of its particulars. In this book, only the latest of several on related themes, Stark focuses not on Christianity generically but on the way in which Christianity nurtured faith in reason and progress. As Stark puts it:

[T]he rise of the West was based on four primary victories of reason. The first was the development of faith in progress within Christian theology. The second victory was the way that faith in progress translated into technical and organizational innovations, many of them fostered by monastic estates. The third was that, thanks to Christian theology, reason informed both political philosophy and practice to the extent that responsive states, sustaining a substantial degree of personal freedom, appeared in medieval Europe. The final victory involved the application of reason to commerce, resulting in the development of capitalism within the safe havens provided by responsive states (xiii).

Of special significance, Stark identifies the development of systematic theology, formal reasoning about God, in Christianity. He argues that such intellectual exercises were not trivial but led, eventually, to quite tangible social success.

To defend his thesis, Stark spends much of his time describing the profound cultural and technological innovations that emerged in the so-called Dark Ages. Water mills, wind mills, horse collars and shoes, wheeled plows, chimneys, eyeglasses, clocks, stirrups, the magnetic compass, and many other inventions find their origins in the Dark Ages. Similarly, education and capitalism emerged not with the Reformation or the Enlightenment but in medieval monasteries. Finance and banking emerged first in northern Italy's city states centuries before Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg door.

Woolen cloth first brought capitalism to northern Europe, and capitalism continued to prosper there after it was repressed by despots in southern Europe. At this point, Protestantism rightly enters the story. Because much of the north became Protestant, however, it was easy for historians to associate capitalism with Protestantism and anti-capitalism with Catholicism. Stark thinks this is a mistake and spends the last two chapters of his book explaining why the colonies of the New World had such different fates. For Stark, the Catholic-Protestant divide was less significant than the difference between the Spanish and British colonial outlook. Spain was given to despotism, while Britain was, by comparison, much more liberal. Therefore, the ways in which these powers built empires were profoundly different. "The British colonies were founded on production," Stark writes, "the Spanish colonies on extraction." Such extraction propped up the Spanish dynasty for a while, but it failed to create wealth. Not surpris-

ingly, it eventually failed and left the Spanish colonies in political and economic disarray. The former British colonies, in contrast, have largely succeeded.

Stark ends by arguing that nations that protect property rights, individual freedom, and freedom of religion—such as the United States—actually encourage greater religiosity, than do those countries—like much of Europe—that have state churches and less regard for private property and individual rights.

Stark intends his thesis to be provocative. His book has been criticized for lacking the nuance appropriate to a study of history. If his argument has one main problem, it is in identifying Christianity's faith in reason as *the* deciding factor. He would have been on safer ground arguing that the core Christian package, intermingled with classical sources, was responsible for the success of the West. Faith in progress and reason are only part of the story. Stark would probably agree, however, because he argues as much in his previous books, such as *For the Glory of God, One True God*, and *The Rise of Christianity. The Victory of Reason*, then, seems more balanced if read in light of these previous works. Besides, when trying to pierce a calcified mythology, it is often best to use a sharp spear.

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Trust and Entrepreneurship: A West-East Perspective **Hans-Hermann Höhmann and Friederike Welter (Editors)** Cheltenham, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar, 2005 (296 pages)

Since the fateful year of 1989, Europe has experienced a dramatic transformation politically as well as economically, binding once starkly divided areas into close interactions hitherto unseen in the history of Europe—at least since the Roman Empire. The economic transformations of the eastern bloc and the countries of the former Soviet Union provide special insights into the process of economic and cultural transformation as well as the qualities of Western Europe as seen in contrast with the East. *Trust and Entrepreneurship* attempts to provide a very specific window into these transforming relationships and, in the process, highlight the key aspects for the role of trust, in all its forms, in facilitating or hindering economic development, specifically in regard to entrepreneurs. The book comprises an anthology of sixteen papers derived from the September 2003 conference Trust and Entrepreneurial Behavior in East and West European Economies at the University of Bremen, under the joint sponsorship of the Research Center for East European Studies, Bremen, and the Rhine-Westphalia Institute of Economic Research, Essen.

The first six chapters discuss the general issues of trust in relationship to small businesses and the manner in which social scientists examine this issue empirically. The next six chapters examine the former communist societies of central and Eastern Europe as well as countries from the former Soviet Union. In all cases, the time period empirically examined is more than a decade after these societies started the transition to