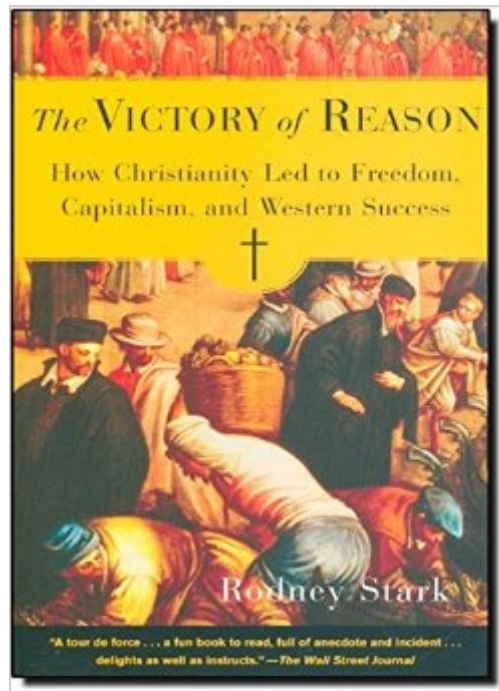


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The Victory Of Reason: How Christianity Led To Freedom, Capitalism, And Western Success



Synopsis

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. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

An acquaintance who just took a medieval history course at a local junior college was quoted to me as saying something to the effect that "Anyone who knows anything about medieval history could never be a Christian." At least since Edward Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", it has been fashionable to trash Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular, blaming Christianity for every imaginable evil in the modern world. While Christians have done their share of evil during history, Christianity (and Catholicism in particular) has done more than its share of good. In high school and college I learned that Greco-Roman Culture served as the cornerstone of Western Civilization, with the Jewish cult of Christianity serving as a religious veneer. Rodney Stark, in a trilogy of well researched, well reasoned books, turns that idea on its head. Christianity is the cornerstone of Western Civilization and Greco-Roman Culture is the veneer. "The Victory of Reason" is the third in a series of books studying the influence of Christianity on Western Civilization, the first two being "For the Glory of God" and "One True God." Each of these books looks at different aspects of Western Civilization to determine how they were influenced by Christian theology. How were they influenced? Profoundly! "The Victory of Reason" looks at the concepts of freedom and capitalism, and how they were natural outgrowths of both Christian theology and favorable economic conditions. Along the way, Stark makes some iconoclastic statements and backs them up with sound argument. e.g. The fall of the Roman Empire was a good thing. The Dark Ages were more progressive and enlightened than the Classical World. Taken together, "The Victory of Reason," "For the Glory of God," and "One True God" make a very strong case for the proposition that were it not for Christianity (particularly the Catholic Church), we'd probably still be living in a pre-industrial, pre-scientific world dependent in large measure on slave labor. Stark acknowledges the evil done in the name of religion, but unlike some of his fellow academics, he does not ignore the good. For a similar treatment of the influence of Christianity on Western Civilization, read Thomas Woods' "How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization."

The first paragraph alone is worth the price of this book. The paragraph clearly states the question that every educated person must frequently ask himself, but avoids discussing in public, i.e., why did other societies not advance as did the West? I have never seen an adequate treatment of this question. Recently "Guns, Germs and Steel" by Jared Diamond claimed that geographic determinism is the dominant factor controlling cultural development. While one of the most interesting and entertaining books I have read in years, GG&S fails to convince, most notably in the case of China, the progress of which Diamond says was severely attenuated due to "Beaureaucratic" reasons. This is an insufficient answer. As Stark would say, the question needs to be asked, why did the bureaucracy do this? (As I have always wondered, why did the Chinese invent gunpowder, but not develop guns or cannon?, paper but not the printing press, books and a system of libraries?) If readers can set aside our culturally sanctioned prejudices against Christianity and especially Catholicism, and approach the book with an open mind, they will be immediately captivated as I was from the first few sentences. Truly one of the most illuminating and rewarding books I have ever read.

I was prepared to dislike this book. For one thing, I am not a fan of the "dismal science," and knew the story Stark was telling here was largely economic. Also, although I am a Christian, and even an apologist, it seemed to me that his last three books on the subject already proved that Christianity benefited Western culture. Enough, already! It seemed overkill to claim the Gospel led not only to science, an end to slavery, a higher status for women, and better care for the sick, but also the Bank of America and Microsoft! And having read the book, I concede justice in some criticisms below. Stark (and others) persuade me that Medieval Europe was the freest, most prosperous great civilization on earth to date. He does not persuade me, though, that Rome never really fell; and while something may indeed have been gained for the common man in escaping the heavy imperial thumb, something was lost, too -- like literacy. But never mind that. If you are thinking of reading this book, you may already have strong views on the effect Christianity has had on civilization. Those views will mislead you. Whether you agree or disagree with Stark's viewpoint, this book is worth reading. Why? Because it is chock full of interesting historical facts that you will not learn elsewhere. Because it connects those facts into a fascinating (even on economics!) history of the rise of Western civilization, from Italy to the "Low Countries" to England to America. Most of this book tells that story. You can ignore the argument at the beginning and end, and still profit and enjoy reading the tale, full of sound and fury, signifying much. Not that you should ignore the argument! I respect

the Humanities prof below, who does not much cotton to Stark's Christian views, but learns from him anyhow, disagrees with respect, and retains an open mind about disputed claims. Some reviewers seem less open-minded. One pastor comments, "Most appalling is that Stark would use Christianity to support a system (capitalism?) which is detrimental to the poor, outcast, and marginalized." This is absurd. Stark shows in great detail that nothing has helped the poor more than capitalism, and nothing hurt them worse than statism. Someone else (perhaps reading that comment!) remarks, "To equate Christianity with reason is a bit of a stretch." To make that equation more plausible, see the anthology of comments by great Christian thinkers entitled "Faith and Reason" on my web site, christthetao.com. A few reviewers use the words "Galileo" and "Inquisition" like a charm, to ward off the force of Stark's arguments. They need to read Stark more carefully, not only this book, but also For the Glory of God and perhaps One True God. I also highly recommend his remarkable essay, "Secularization, RIP." The fun thing about Stark, even the early, agnostic Stark (of A Theory of Religion and The Rise of Christianity), is his extraordinary talent for thinking outside the box, and for coming to original, counter-intuitive, yet surprisingly plausible conclusions. Stark is, without a doubt, one of the most original and interesting thinkers in the world today. author, Jesus and the Religions of Man

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