

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

Rodney Stark. 2005. New York: Random House. 281 + xvi pages. ISBN: 1-4000-6228-4, \$25.95.

Reviewed by Earl Grinols, Baylor University.

Charles Kindleberger, the great MIT economic historian, was fond of reminding listeners that financial capital is like water: it flows to spread and seek its own level, but tends to travel in channels. Intellectual capital is much the same: it seeks new understandings, but tends to flow in familiar channels. Until a new channel is dug, new ground is not reached.

Rodney Stark in *The Victory of Reason* has dug a new channel. It remains for later scholars to travel in the conduits he has excavated, to expand and to improve them, but the direction has been set. More than from any other cause, the modern world has been blessed by the example and spread of Christian European and North American economic industry and success. It is difficult to imagine what the world today might be had Christianity not arrived when it did, but it is easy to imagine that the fruitless, repetitive, and destructive cycles of despots greedy for power, government confiscation and expropriation of private wealth, oppression of the people, suppression of individual initiative, slavery, and aggression without the intellectual checks of Christianity would have formed a world that was conceptually unchanged from the world as it was before the birth of Christ. Had capitalism and western science not gained a toehold protected by Christian intellectual structures, we might be in a much worse place.

Why for centuries were the Chinese content to use gunpowder merely for fireworks and as an incendiary, though it was known in China from around 900 A.D.? “Knowledge of this Chinese explosive arrived in Europe, sometime between 1300 and 1310. But while the Chinese were very slow to develop cannons and then made little use of them, and also failed to apply this technology to individual firearms, in Europe the application to gunnery was immediate—cannons probably were first used in battle during a siege of Metz in 1324” (p. 45). Why did Greek learning do little or nothing to prompt progress or science in Islamic countries in the centuries when it was “alive and deeply appreciated” among Muslim scholars and Europe knew virtually nothing of it (p. 20)? Why was alchemy pursued in many civilizations, but only in Christian Europe did it lead to chemistry (p. 14)? Why did Europeans travel to explore the globe, instead of other civilizations travelling to explore Europe? Why, when they encountered

other civilizations, did European explorers find European technology so superior to that in the rest of the world? Why, in so many other cases, did Christian Europe invent, borrow, expand, and exploit so many scientific, intellectual, and ethical devices that others failed to utilize? Darwin might have suggested that one race had favored characteristics; others might have suggested geography or climate or agriculture; others steel, guns, or sailing ships. But agriculture and metal technology has been available to other cultures and times without the same results. Guns and sailing ships could have been invented elsewhere.

Moral innovations are no less important than physical. It is well known to constitutional scholars that the American Constitution sprang from the Christian worldview held by its primary authors. Influenced by moral philosophers such as John Locke, who in turn were influenced by Christian thinkers, Adams and Jefferson wrote that men were “endowed by their creator” with inalienable rights. Likewise, the concepts of limited government, the need for separation of powers, and the need for checks and balances arose from Christianity’s understanding that man is naturally sinful and tends toward self-deceit. The subsequent tangible consequences are immense. Founded with Christian doctrine, the U.S. Constitution is the longest standing constitution in the world.

Stark’s objective is similar on a bigger scale. He wants to explain why it is that Christianity, not paganism, not simply monotheism, not Buddhism, not Hinduism, not Judaism, and not Islam, is the essential cause and source of modernity’s capitalist transformation and success. Christians are taught to respect other religions and to endorse freedom of conscience, but that should not deter them from identifying essential differences. “While the other world religions emphasized mystery and intuition, Christianity alone embraced reason and logic as the primary guide to religious truth” (p. x). Stark’s is a bold thesis, especially to Christians who are accustomed to speaking generously of “Judeo-Christian” roots and to acknowledge what they have learned from other cultures. Talmudic Judaism from the time of Christ on, as a case in point, is an *orthoprax* religion, as is Islam—concerned primarily with right (*ortho*) practice (*prax*) of the rules. Jewish and Islamic debates typically “involve whether some activity or innovation (such as reproducing holy scripture on a printing press) is consistent with established law” (p. 8). In contrast, Christianity is an *ortho-dox* religion that emphasizes right (*ortho*) opinion or thinking (*doxa*). Christian debates tend to be over understanding, where understanding can always be improved by “*discovering* God’s nature, intentions, and demands, and on understanding how these define the relationship between human beings

and God (p. 5).” Christianity is not a dead, but a living religion that invites the application of reason to establish truth.

Although most of the book is devoted to the necessary task of establishing the link between Christianity and capitalism, many, especially non-Christians, who read *The Victory of Reason* might tend to respond in resentment or offense. These should be careful to consider the force of the arguments, however, rather than take counsel from mere emotion. One of the advantages of Stark’s book is that a brilliant, mature, and established scholar has taken on so much of the false reasoning and conventional conviction about the sources of Western capitalism and success. For example, he dismisses Max Weber’s notion that the Protestant ethic was needed for the rise of capitalism, due to the fact that capitalism arose earlier than Protestantism. “Capitalism was not invented in a Venetian counting house, let alone in a Protestant bank in Holland. It was evolved, beginning early in the ninth century, by Catholic monks who, despite having put aside worldly things, were seeking to ensure the economic security of their monastic estates” (p. 55). Nor is he particularly keen to link the Catholic ethic to capitalism, though he does conclude that “it is entirely legitimate to link capitalism to a Christian ethic” (p. 62).

A mid-career Samsung executive, in the United States to earn an MBA, once asked me over dinner what I thought was the secret of American success. He and other Samsung executives had often talked about the question, he said. Having studied in the United States for over a year and a half, he realized, he went on to say, that the material he was learning for his degree was valuable, but not unlike that which he would have learned in Korea. There must be something else. I therefore relate well to the statement quoted in *The Victory of Reason* of a leading Chinese scholar explaining what accounted for the success of the West:

At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West is so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don’t have any doubt about this (p. 235).

So how does a leading scholar go about making the case for so far-reaching a thesis? Consider what the endeavor must include. It must discuss the philosophical bases of the different religions and distinguish the necessary distinctive feature or features of Christianity that the other

religions lack. It must document the different progression of science, engineering, letters, attitude of the ruling class, and progress of capitalism under different regimes. The different outcomes must then be linked to the different philosophies. The negative issue of why progress took root only in some places blessed by Christian civic and sacerdotal leaders and not others must be addressed: Why *this* region, *this* group of people, at *this* time and not others? Along the way, the author must be prepared to debunk widely and sometimes long-held myths. I have already alluded to one such myth, the belief that the Protestant ethic was necessary for capitalism. There must be the proper mix of theology, philosophy, sociology and economics as well as an understanding of the effect of government. It helps if documentation and proofs are ample, but the book must be well written and attractive. Stark's work more than meets all of these challenges.

A check of the table of contents reveals a logical and orderly approach. The introduction explains why reason is linked to progress. It makes important points, some well known, others not, that are essential to the connections made later. Europe excelled because of capitalism. Capitalism took root because of faith in reason and freedom. Faith in reason and freedom were tenets of Christian *ortho doxa*. For example, from the earliest days, Christian fathers taught that reason was the supreme gift of God. The rest involves filling out the arguments and providing documentation and proof. As a consequence of its worldview Christianity is oriented to the future. Other religions are oriented to the past, and freedom has seldom existed in most of the world. The remainder of the book is divided into the "Foundations" section—the meaning of rational theology, the characterization of medieval technical, cultural, and religious progress as the cradle of capitalism, the effects of tyranny as the opponent of capitalism—and the "Fulfillment" section—discussing Italian capitalism, capitalism's move north to Holland and England, and Catholic anti-capitalism through Spanish and French despotism.

A separate chapter is devoted to capitalism in the new world. Stark explains that this chapter really should not be necessary, but is probably expected and valuable nevertheless. It forms an "out of sample" type of test of the theory. Why did English colonies and their descendants perform so much better than Spanish colonies? The differences, including ones that persist to the present, are revealing. It caused me to wonder what the world's 13th largest economy, just behind Canada, is lacking that so many Mexicans flee it to illegally enter the United States to find economic opportunity. Why do Texans, Arizonans, and Californians not travel south for their economic opportunity?

For a thesis so far reaching it would be difficult to provide enough proofs to satisfy every critic. A book large enough to do so would be unfeasible. Stark provides plenty of proofs, does so in enough depth to be convincing, and does it with clarity and incisiveness. For example, he discusses the Chinese iron industry of the tenth century where private individuals had “seized the opportunity presented by a strong demand for iron and the supplies of easily mined ore and coal” to produce—astonishingly—more than a hundred thousand tons by 1078. But soon after the end of the 11th century the smelters and foundries were abandoned ruins. Why? The Mandarin courts held that “commoners must know their place; only the elite should be wealthy. So, they declared a state monopoly on iron and seized everything. And that was that.” Quoting Winwood Reade, Stark explains, “*Property is insecure*. In this one phrase the whole history of Asia is contained” (p. 72). Stark then contrasts this common government viewpoint to Christian theological foundations that the Bible provides for private property.

The aftermath of the battle of Lepanto, 1571, provides another proof for a different culture. Victorious Christian sailors looting the flagship of Ali Pasha the Ottoman commander found his enormous fortune in gold coins on board and “fortunes nearly as large were found in the galleys of several other Muslim admirals.” What can we learn from this? “If such a person could find no safe investments and dared not even leave his money at home, how could anyone else hope to do better?” (p. 73). Indeed, private property must be secure for capitalism to function. Christianity provided the theological basis for private property that was absent in other cultures.

It is clear that I think Stark undertook a daunting task for a significant thesis. I found his treatment exceptionally clear and forceful. That is not to say that a fuller examination of available evidence might not spend more time on various objections to the thesis. Although questions of the success of Christianity in supporting capitalism and the failure of other religions and cultures are dealt with, I personally wonder how a more extensive treatment of the failures and deficiencies of other religions as they relate to the necessary conditions for capitalism would be received. I think Stark has hit the right balance, and strongly recommend his book to Christians, adherents of other religions, and to those who claim no religion. They will have their curiosity stimulated and they will learn. Is not the willingness to engage in intellectual challenge, and to follow it where it leads, a victory of reason that Christian culture supports? Rodney Stark is to be commended for his honesty and courage to present the facts and follow them where they lead. ■