

## BOOK REVIEW

of

Rodney Stark,

*For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations,  
Science, Witch-Hunts and the End of Slavery,*  
Princeton University Press, 2003.

This book is in the Evangel Library,  
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Once in awhile I come across a book that surprises and delights me by yielding much more than I anticipated when I started reading it. Such is this book by Rodney Stark. It almost seems to be somewhat of a paradigm shift in academic understanding of the impact of Christianity upon civilization. At least I can hope so. Stark is Professor of Sociology and Comparative Religion at the University of Washington. The author's academic position, the publisher, and a quick overview of the book would not suggest what is found inside: an author with a passion for truth, a willingness and ability to dig it out without blindly following the prevailing views, and an annoyance, and even anger, at those who have either not taken the time and effort to research prevailing views but repeat them in their own writings, or worse, intentionally write to mislead and distort for personal reasons.

It is not clear what Stark's religious position is. At the end of the Introduction he writes: "Finally, because this is a work of social science, not philosophy, I have taken pains neither to imply nor deny the existence of God. This is a matter beyond the scope of science. Consequently, my personal religious views are of concern only to me." Well, of course, his religious views are of concern to more than himself, and we might even question whether the existence of God is beyond the scope of science, especially for one in a soft science such as sociology. Nevertheless, I take what he says to mean that he writes as a professional sociologist, and that he has made the sincere effort to be as objective as possible, and that therefore what he writes should be evaluated on its own merits. I respect him for stating his intentions, nonetheless I couldn't help but wondering where he is at religiously as I read the book. At times I thought him to be a Roman Catholic, but at other times to be a Protestant, but it is not clear. So perhaps he has disguised his religion well. But it is difficult for me to believe that he could be unaffected by his own studies, and it would seem to me that he is a friend of Christian truth, based on his contributions in this book.

While the subtitle may imply equal treatment of all monotheistic religions, such is not the case. He does include perceptive comments about Islam, and a little about the Jewish faith, but the book is almost entirely about Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity. In the interests of objectivity, not everything written is flattering, but the way he overturns many things assumed to be true about Christianity, at least in secular education, and about Western civilization, is truly refreshing.

*For the Glory of God* has four large chapters. Chapter 1 is titled God's Truth: Inevitable Sects and Reformations. Chapter 2 is God's Handiwork: The Religious Origins of Science. Chapter 3 is God's Enemies: Explaining the European Witch-Hunts. Chapter 4 is God's Justice: The Sin of Slavery.

While Stark has interesting observations to make about the Protestant Reformation, and the cause of the witch-hunts in Europe and America, and about the abolition of slavery as well, in the remaining space I will concentrate on what he has to say about the religious origins of science. To begin with he makes the sweeping claim that science arose but once in the history of mankind, and that it arose in western Europe, and that it arose there not in spite of Christianity but precisely because of its influence. In fact, it was because of the influence of non-Christian religions elsewhere that science did *not* arise elsewhere. He claims it did not arise in ancient Greece: forms of philosophy did, but the empirical method was very much *not* part of the Greek thought processes. Science did not arise in the West due to the Enlightenment; Stark claims that there was no such thing as the Enlightenment, but that the Enlightenment was an invention of materialists with an agenda to discredit Christianity. There was no such thing as the "Dark Ages," but the very successful attempt was made to present such things and distort history for the sinister goal of discrediting Christianity. It wasn't that "enlightened" souls had to struggle against an oppressive church, but rather true enlightenment was the natural outgrowth of a Christian worldview. In fact, for a supposedly dispassionate scholar Stark makes some very impassioned charges against colleagues. He names Daniel Boorstin, for example, Pulitzer Prize winning University of Chicago professor, and Librarian of Congress, who in his best-selling *The Discoverers* (1983) included a chapter titled "The Prison of Christian Dogma." In the chapter Boorstin condemned Christianity for imposing an era of general ignorance and fanaticism upon Europe. Stark documents many of Boorstin's claims, and then proceeds to disparage them one by one and states that "modern historians and archaeologists have completely discredited these views, and there is no excuse for Boorstin to have repeated them." Some would fault him for naming names, but in the battle for truth it is important to expose those opposed to it. Stark also discusses Andrew Dickson White (1832-1918), founder and first president of Cornell University. While long departed, Stark claims that White wrote the most influential book ever written on the conflict between science and theology. Stark claims that the book not only has errors but blatant *lies*. The upshot for Stark is "not only that there is no inherent conflict between religion and science, but that *Christian theology was essential for the rise of science*" (emphasis his). OK, you can take a breath now.