

BOOK REVIEW

of

Rodney Stark,

The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success,
Random House, 2005.

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

Some of the things that Rodney Stark writes in this book are quite startling, and I probably would have found them to be incredible except for two things: he documents what he claims, and he had already established himself with me as an excellent writer through previously written books. He debunks much of what has passed for common knowledge. He actually mocks those who refer to the middle ages as the “Dark Ages,” at least those who should know better, and he identifies those who perpetrated this distortion and indicates why they did so. Stark claims that the “idea that Europe fell into the Dark Ages is a hoax originated by antireligious, and bitterly anti-Catholic, eighteenth-century intellectuals who were determined to assert the cultural superiority of their own time and who boosted their claim by denigrating previous centuries as – in the words of Voltaire – a time when ‘barbarism, superstition, [and] ignorance covered the face of the world.’ Views such as these were repeated so often and so unanimously that, until very recently, even dictionaries and encyclopedias accepted the Dark Ages as an historical fact. . . . Fortunately, in the past few years these views have been so completely discredited that even some dictionaries and encyclopedias have begun to refer to the notion of Dark Ages as mythical.” Then Stark develops through much of the book, in a very convincing way, an historical perspective on the middle ages that demonstrates the absurdity of the concept of the “Dark Ages,” almost humorously again and again referring to the “Dark Ages.” What this demonstrates to me is how we must question what the elite would have us believe, and that no matter how often something is repeated doesn’t make it true. How nice it would be if we could trust everything our teachers have told us, but once deception has been widely received it becomes all the more difficult to correct. According to Stark, there simply was no “Dark Ages.” The advance of Christianity in the West brought enlightenment and freedom with it everywhere it went.

Another major contribution of this book, and one that might not set quite as well with most of us, is that the Protestant Work Ethic is another myth. He explains why that misconception may have gotten started, but most of all that no one in western Europe or the United States, being mostly protestant, had any motivation to challenge it, so it has also persisted, but nonetheless untrue. He debunks this simply by giving a somewhat detailed history of industry and capitalism in northern Italy and then later in Flanders and England before the Protestant Reformation!

But what about the Renaissance and the Enlightenment? Although Stark doesn’t address the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in any significant way, he does mention them. The Renaissance preceded the Reformation and was supposedly a return to the classical knowledge of Greece and Rome. Yes, however we should note two important points. First, it was the Church that preserved that knowledge in the West, which is probably granted by most. And second, it contributed virtually nothing to the scientific understanding of anything, which would probably be denied (some would be shocked by the thought) by most. Stark presents this second point by establishing another of his startling ideas, that science never arose in Greece! So how could the Renaissance bring that knowledge back? “Greek learning was a *barrier* to the rise of science! It did not lead to science among the Greeks or the Romans, and it stifled intellectual progress in Islam, where it was carefully preserved and studied.” However, we have been led to believe, or I was at least, that the Renaissance was a great boon to knowledge, and finally people really desiring to learn could get out from under the oppression of Christianity. Stark responds: “the West is said to have surged ahead precisely as it *overcame* religious barriers to progress, especially those impeding science. Nonsense. The success of the West, including the rise of science, rested entirely on religious foundations, and the people who brought it about were devout Christians.”

Similar things may be said about the Enlightenment. “For the past two or three centuries, every educated person has known that from the fall of Rome until about the fifteenth century Europe was submerged in the ‘Dark Ages’ – centuries of ignorance, superstition, and misery – from which it was suddenly, almost miraculously rescued, first by the Renaissance and then by the Enlightenment. But it didn’t happen that way. Instead, during the so-called Dark Ages, European technology and science overtook and surpassed the rest of the world!”

The title of the book is “The Victory of Reason,” not “The Victory of Christianity.” Yet the subtitle clearly indicates that this “Victory” was brought about by Christianity. How is reason related to Christianity, and why is it that that relationship is so critical to “Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success”? According to Stark, Christianity is an historically-based faith and its theology has developed through the application of rational thought. He studied other major religions of the world and concludes that they are not rational faiths. For example, Stark writes that the “East lacks theologians because those who might otherwise take up such an intellectual pursuit reject its first premise: the existence of a conscious, all-powerful God.”

Near the end of the book, Stark considers “Feudalism and Capitalism in the New World.” His claim is that not “much greater insight is needed to explain why the New World north of the Rio Grande eventually eclipsed even Europe in terms of economic might, while everything south languished: because North America was modeled on England while Latin America re-created Spain.” Earlier in the book he considered in detail the prosperity of England and the lack thereof in Spain. But this leads to my criticism of the book. Is it Christianity and reason that has led to freedom, etc., or is it something else such as capitalism versus what he calls command economies. In much of the book, including the last chapter on the New World, he argues the latter. If that is so, Christianity, it would seem, has embraced both economic systems. Are they both a “Victory of Reason,” or just one. He has not developed the connections among reason, Christianity, and economic systems nearly as well as I think is needed in order for his book to have maximum impact.

However, with that criticism, I can still say that this book is a very delightful read indeed. Whether it will ever make the New York Times book list or not, or whether it will win any awards I can’t say. That doesn’t matter. It is enlightening, and that is enough.