

Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). x + 488 pages. £24.99.

Rodney Stark is a leading American sociologist who thinks big and shows scant regard for disciplinary boundaries. He made his name in the sociology of religion, where he claimed to have killed off secularisation theory – he even wrote an article entitled ‘Secularization, R.I.P.’ Having accomplished this feat, he has recently set out to conquer other worlds. In *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, 1996), he offered a widely praised sociological account of the early church, whilst in *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton, 2001) he developed his grand theory of religion. *For the Glory of God* extends this project by examining the historical impact of Christian monotheism through four case studies: reformations, the rise of science, the early modern witch-hunts, and the abolition of slavery.

Stark has two major targets. The first is *reductionism*, which discounts the force of religious belief in history, and suggests that whatever believers may think, the motivation for their actions is fundamentally non-religious. Stark wants to insist that people’s beliefs really matter. In contrast to many sociologists and anthropologists, he argues that religion is fundamentally about ‘the supernatural, not ritual’. Whilst godless religions may appeal to ‘small intellectual elites’, the religion of the vast majority of mankind consists in belief in gods/God. Moreover, monotheists behave differently to polytheists, pantheists and atheists, and monotheistic civilisations have developed in unique ways precisely because of their belief in ‘one true God’.

Stark’s second target is *anti-Christian (especially anti-Catholic) bias*, which exaggerates the evils of the Christian past and consistently underplays its achievements. Stark insists that reductionism and anti-Christian bias have plagued much of the historiography on the rise of science, the witch-hunts and the abolition of slavery. The examples he cites include rationalist historians of science (e.g. Andrew Dickson White and Theodore Draper), liberal historians of persecution (e.g. W. E. H. Lecky, Henry Lea), feminist writers on witchcraft (e.g. Anne Barstow, Andrea Dworkin), and Marxist and revisionist historians of abolitionism (e.g. Eric Williams and David Brion Davis). This is an eclectic list, and some of those cited are long dead. Moreover, Stark employs a great deal of recent historical writing to debunk older rationalist and anti-Christian myths, which suggests that much historical scholarship is *not* driven by either reductionism or anti-Christian bias. Nevertheless, he does have a point. In the popular mind at least, Christianity is often blamed for witch-hunts and persecutions, and given little or no credit for the rise of science or the abolition of slavery. Even some professional historians still seem to entertain a remarkably dismissive view of the Christian past.

In contrast to such reductionist and anti-Christian historians, Stark’s basic thesis is that monotheistic belief has been a powerful force for good and ill:

Moral fervour is the fundamental topic of this entire book: the potent capacity of monotheism, and especially Christianity, to activate extraordinary episodes of faith that have shaped Western civilisation (p. 365).

The world we live in, Stark implies, is a world profoundly shaped by Christianity. He does not pretend that Christian monotheism is a *sufficient* factor in the rise of science, the witch-hunts, or the abolition of slavery, but he does argue that it was a *necessary* one. No other civilisation, he maintains, witnessed these three remarkable phenomena.

Although some forms of basic science flourished in ancient Greece, China and the world of Islam, none of these civilisations gave birth to modern science. Although belief in witchcraft is almost universal, only in the West were there large-scale witch persecutions claiming up to 60,000 lives. And although slavery has been present in most societies, Christendom was distinctive in condemning and eradicating it in early medieval Europe, and then abolishing it once more (after it had arisen again in the New World) in the nineteenth century. A variety of factors fed into these developments, but Stark is convinced that the distinctiveness of the West is inseparable from its Christianity. When it came to the rise of science, the witch-hunts and the abolition of slavery, 'Western civilisation really was God-given' (p. 376).

Stark's book comes with recommendations on the dust jacket by two eminent Christian scholars: the sociologist David Martin, and the historian of witchcraft and the Devil, Jeffrey Burton Russell. Both share Stark's willingness to paint with broad brush-strokes on a large canvas, and many historians will naturally feel more sceptical about a scholar who thinks he can solve four major historical problems within a single book. Stark is fond of devising neat formulas of the A+B+C=D variety:

The frequency and intensity of witch-hunting will have been highest where and when: (1) Serious efforts were made to *suppress* magic and sorcery, and there was a high probability that *satanism would be imputed* to such activities, and (2) there was substantial *conflict* among religious groups representing credible threats to one another's *institutional power*, causing the withdrawal of tolerance for religious nonconformity, and (3) weak central ecclesiastical and/or political *governance* prevented 'national' elites from *curtailing local enthusiasms* (p. 255).

Organized opposition to slavery arose only when and where (1) the appropriate moral predisposition was (2) stimulated by the salience of the phenomenon and (3) was not counteracted by perceived self-interest (p. 339).

Historians may wince at these formulae, but they do identify key factors and offer testable hypotheses.

More problematically, Stark can be seriously misleading on certain topics. His superficial and confused treatment of the Enlightenment offers a good example. Firstly, he follows Peter Gay in treating the Enlightenment as an unambiguously secular movement, ignoring the trend in recent historiography towards identifying a variety of Enlightenments, some of which (especially in Protestant countries) were sympathetic to Christianity. Stark assumes that one is either an Enlightenment thinker or a Christian, but one cannot be both. Locke is listed as an Enlightenment man, and Stark clearly does not appreciate that he was also a devout (if heterodox) Protestant. Abolitionists, by contrast, are classed as Christians, and were therefore not influenced by the Enlightenment. This kind of simplistic, either-or thinking mars his argument. Secondly, Stark is clearly intent on downplaying the impact of the (secular) Enlightenment, which leads to a curious double standard of the sort he criticises when applied to Christianity. Thus the Enlightenment gets blamed for witch-hunting, because Stark bizarrely states that the peak of witch-hunting *coincides* with the Enlightenment (pp. 221-2); but it also gets no credit for the decline of witch-hunting, which *predates* the Enlightenment (pp. 277, 283-87).

Such flaws are disappointing, because they will lead some historians to dismiss a book that is packed with sharp observations and surprising facts. I was particularly struck by his section on the condemnation and eradication of slavery in early medieval Christendom – as Stark notes, the disappearance of slavery in Europe passes without comment in most histories of the continent, even though it stands in

sharp contrast to the situation in the Islamic world at the same time. This early abolition serves to undermine the tired stereotype of the 'Dark Ages', which as Stark also shows was a period of technological development – nicely illustrated by a couple of pages on the revolution caused by the invention of the stirrups and the Norman saddle. Despite having a sociologist's affection for the grand overview, Stark includes a wealth of telling detail and he is alive to the ironies of history. He rightly notes that the leading sixteenth-century French intellectual, Jean Bodin, was a critic of slavery, a political absolutist, a closet freethinker, and the author of one of the most influential treatises on witch-hunting! In seventeenth-century England, some of the leading proponents of the new science, including Henry More, Joseph Glanvill and Isaac Newton, were also firm believers in such things as witchcraft, astrology and eschatological date setting. Stark highlights one of the greatest ironies of the history of Christendom: that the onset of bloody anti-Semitism, heresy persecutions, and witch-hunts coincides with the period of Christendom's greatest intellectual and cultural creativity, from the start of the second millennium and the 12th-century renaissance through to the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century.

Thus one of the strengths of this book is that (at its best) it avoids simplification, and stresses the complexity of history. It reminds us that human beings, even great Christian human beings, are fallen and finite and profoundly shaped by their time and place. By telling this complicated story, and highlighting the complexity and ironies of history, Stark undermines crude pseudo-historical assaults on the Christian faith. In this respect, his book is akin of Philip Sampson's *Six Myths Challenging Christian Faith* (IVP, 2000), which showed how secular tales about Galileo, Darwin, witch-hunts, the environment, the body and missionaries have been used to undermine Christianity.

Both Stark and Sampson remind us that secular myth making poses a challenge to Christian historians. Because Christians are committed to truth, honesty and accuracy, we ought to eschew whitewashing the Christian past. A crude apologetic that celebrates Christian glories while consistently underplaying the achievements of non-Christians and the failings of believers is both bad history and bad religion. Yet Christian historians have a responsibility to rebut crude secular apologetic. False and unsympathetic accounts of the impact of Christianity still abound, and we should show why the faith cannot be dismissed so easily.

The chief merit of Stark's book is that it asks big questions, questions perhaps too vast for the self-respecting professional historian. The reputation of the historian is usually based on his or her careful cultivation of a particular field (or even a particular allotment!), and not many have an overview of the entire landscape. The ambitious scholar may hold forth on the origins of the English Civil War or the French Revolution, but few would dare to tackle the grand question: how did Christianity shape Western civilisation? Stark lacks these inhibitions, and although his boldness gets him into trouble at times, this book does help us to think afresh about the civilisation we call 'Christendom', which dominated Europe from the fourth to the eighteenth century.

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