Reason: Christianity to Capitalism

by M. Assunta Forgione | illustration by Tyler R. Pack
The Victory of Reason offers an interesting view on the genesis of freedom, capitalism, and western success. Rodney Stark begins by explaining why reason could only evolve through Christianity by comparing its underlying assumptions to other forms of faith. Then, he proceeds to show how by assuming the possibility of progress, monastic estates provided the way towards technical and organizational innovations, which led to the beginnings of commerce. In order to understand the rise of capitalism, the author appropriately dedicates part of the book to explain the notions of individualism, freedom, and human rights. He demonstrates how reason influenced political philosophy and practice to the extent that states were responsive. Accordingly, Stark shows how societies that enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom also experienced a rapid spread of capitalism, while those societies led by tyrannical leaders experienced feudalism. Stark’s arguments provide uncommon insight, but his analysis leaves some unanswered questions, particularly concerning the role of reason on economic and human development in less-developed countries today.

Christianity necessitated an image of God as a conscious, rational, supernatural being of unlimited power and scope who cares about humans and imposes moral codes and responsibilities upon them. This idea generates serious intellectual questions about the nature of those codes and responsibilities. The Christian image of God was that of a rational being who believed in human progress and who more fully revealed himself as humans gained the capacity to better understand. Consequently, Christian theologians devoted centuries to reasoning about what God may have really meant in certain scriptural passages. In comparison, the author suggests that since the “pure” forms of faiths in the East were godless and postulated only a vague divine essence, they had little to reason about. Conversely, although Judaism and Islam embraced the image of God sufficient to sustain theology, they approached scripture as a law to be understood and applied rather than as the basis of inquiry for ultimate meaning.

Therefore, the author asserts that the fundamental theological and philosophical assumptions necessary to forge towards progress were not present in religions other
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than Christianity. His argument is problematic, however. First, from my understanding, all religions have their own forms of rational reflection. The extent to which reason is used will differ from one religion to another, but a rational motive for a belief exists whether that motive encouraged individuals to simply acknowledge ideas or to challenge them. Second, Stark uses the term theology to make his comparison, yet there are some debates on the appropriateness of using the Christian-derived term to refer to reasoned discourse within other religious traditions. The author should have informed the reader of the controversy over the term theology since his logic was fundamental to establishing the source of reason.

Looking specifically at Christianity and medieval Europe, Stark fittingly explains how reason and the possibility of progress contributed to freedom and capitalism. The underlying assumption to better understand the nature of God (i.e., reason) led to the possibility of progress. Hence, having faith in human progression provided medieval Europe with a template that could be applied towards technical and organizational innovations. For this to occur, reasoning had to have taken place because commerce was initially viewed as a degrading activity that involved great moral risk. Eventually, after Constantine’s conversion in 312 CE (Common Era), the accepted view was that commerce was not inherently wicked and that it was up to the individual to live righteously, giving legitimacy to both merchants and churches in commerce.

The earliest forms of capitalism appeared around the ninth century, and technological innovations followed in diverse areas. Innovations in agricultural production, for example, included the adaptation of waterpower, windmills, the horse collar, iron horseshoes, the heavy wheeled plow, and the adoption of the three-field system. The gains achieved by these inventions reduced the need for farm labor, increased their yields, and facilitated the formation of towns and cities.

As estates grew into small cities, they became more dependent on trade. This led to the widespread building of roads and bridges. Accordingly, Europeans developed the means for long-distance transportation of heavy and bulky goods. They designed wagons with brakes and with front axles that could swivel, and created harnesses that allowed large teams of horses or oxen.

Capitalism rested upon free markets, unforced labor, and secure property rights. The innovations laid the foundations for capitalism to expand, but expansion could only occur where freedom was permitted, and freedom existed only in responsive regimes. According to the author, it was Christianity that provided the moral basis for the establishment of responsive regimes in medieval Europe.

The reader learns of the progression towards freedom as a result of reason. Initially, the early church fathers were against private property rights because they claimed that God originally intended that all things be held in common. Through reason, support for private property rights became the prevalent view. Thus, Christian theologians such as Saint Augustine, Giles of Rome, John of Paris, Saint Albertus Magnus, Pope John XXII, and William of Ockham became increasingly critical of the moral authority of the state. By affirming the secularity of kingship, the church made it possible to examine the basis of worldly power and the interplay of rights and rule. Consequently, these theologians had great influence in shaping Christian political sensibilities that brought about freedom.

Another contributing factor to the development of responsive regimes was the size of the political units that ruled. Due to the geographic and cultural impediments of Europe, unity was limited. During the fourteenth century, there were about one thousand independent states in Europe. This had several important consequences. First, it made for weak rulers. Second, it provided an environment of creative competition. Third, it offered the people a chance to depart for a setting with more liberty and opportunity. As a result, some of these states began to develop highly responsive governments.

Responsive regimes were first achieved in the ninth century in certain northern Italian city-states. Italy was the ideal location because the states were able to play off imperial, papal, and Byzantine ambitions to establish and maintain independence. Their political influence was dispersed among various interest groups, such as merchants,
bankers, manufacturers, workers’ guilds, and the traditional rulers of the time (i.e., aristocracy, military, and clergy).

As the regions exercised more freedom, commerce flourished. Monks provided the first business model, and the private Italian capitalists perfected and expanded capitalism by making commercial trade routine, repetitive, and as safe as possible. As a result of their ingenuity, Italians became leaders in foreign trade, and expanded capitalism to northern Europe.

Stark explains further that as Europe entered the seventeenth century, tyranny impeded capitalism in France, Spain, Italy, and the southern Netherlands while a considerable degree of freedom in England and Holland initiated many centuries of industrial growth. The two greatest land powers at that time, Spain and France, had faith in progress and reason. Why was reason not victorious? The author claims that the French and Spanish were unable or unwilling to produce things for themselves. They focused on their territorial ambitions and spent a large part of their resources to sustain very powerful military forces.

If reason was present, and the author claims that it is the source that led to freedom and capitalism, why did it fail to overthrow tyranny? In nonresponsive countries, does reason have any influence? The author makes the distinction that England and Holland were predominantly Protestant while Spain, France, and Italy were Catholic; yet, all these countries practice Christianity. The author should have clarified the role of reason in the two religions to strengthen his argument. We need to understand how the division brought on by the Reformation helped bifurcate economic development within the Christian world.

How valid is Stark’s argument about reason and capitalism today? Stark’s analysis of economic progress was carried over to North and South America. According to the author, North America was modeled on England while Latin America re-created Spain. As British colonists, North Americans inherited extensive freedom and a capitalist economy. On the other hand, Spanish colonists in Latin America inherited a repressive and unproductive feudalism. He disagrees with the dependency theory, which claims that the root of the problem in underdeveloped countries stems from their dependence on advanced nations, but he does not justify his position.

Stark concludes that Latin American countries are finally developing the basis for effective capitalist economies, and as long as they do not revert to their old command economies, they will grow. The book left me wondering exactly how reason can guarantee that Latin Americans stay on the path of growth. With this book, Stark made an attempt to link the past to problems experienced today in Latin America, but the mere fact that he dedicated only part of one chapter to this serious dilemma demonstrates that the claim made for reason is too simplistic.

Stark’s insight that the roots of capitalism do not lie in the Protestant work ethic, but rather in Roman Catholic tradition allows the reader to see history in a whole new light. Although it was interesting to read about economic progress during medieval Europe, the true value of reading this book would be to explore how lessons learned could be applied to economic progress today, particularly in Latin America.

Despite some of the gaps in his arguments, Stark’s way of looking at the history of economic progress could benefit NGOs that are trying to build economic self-reliance around the world. For example, NGOs could learn from the strategies used by ecclesiastical leaders to reason with political leaders in an effort to mold more responsive regimes. NGOs dedicated to advocacy work could implement similar strategies to have greater influence on government policies that could promote economic self-reliance. Also, NGOs devoted to development could learn from the strategies used by monastic estates to foster innovation and commerce. These strategies could be integrated into their current strategies to encourage business development and improve economic self-reliance in all geographic areas.

Endnotes

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Assunta Forgione possesses an MBA from the University of Western Ontario with extensive entrepreneurial experience. Throughout her professional career, she held leadership positions in business associations and charitable organizations, including the Canadian Italian Business Professional Association, Toastmasters International, Alliance for Young Smiles, and the 1998 Paralympics volunteer efforts. Her interests in international development led her to Utah where she is currently completing a master’s degree in education (with a focus in comparative international development education) and a doctorate degree in instructional psychology and technology. Her goal is to dedicate her career as a researcher to improve the quality of education in less-developed countries.