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Reviews

Review Essay:
Rodney Stark's Vision of Medieval Christianity

Elspeth Whitney

Rodney Stark. *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003, 504 pages, and *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*. New York: Random House, 2005, 304 pages.

A recent study of medievalism in American popular culture suggests that contemporary perceptions of the Middle Ages serve more often not to situate the writer and his or her reader in relationship to the medieval period itself, but instead to our contemporary situation: “Medieval images are used to construct new conflicts as old ones, reclaiming a past to incite the present to certain reductionist modes of thought and behavior.”¹ This judgment is particularly apt in reference to two recent books by the veteran sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark, which put the Middle Ages front and center of the Western march toward modernity, rationality and morality.

In promoting the Middle Ages, and, more specifically, medieval Christianity, as the point of origin of Western

¹ Angela Jane Weisl, *The Persistence of Medievalism: Narrative Adventures in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3.

progressivism, Stark runs counter to the more usual characterization in the popular press of the Middle Ages as a repository of barbarism, religious violence and repression. It is routine for journalists in *The New York Times* over the past year to refer, for instance, to the “medieval views that dominate Islam.” The identification of the “medieval” as antithetical to the modern values of democracy, tolerance and rationality seems to have acquired new life since 9/11 and often functions as a kind of temporal Orientalism.² Unfortunately for scholars of the Middle Ages, the more positive picture described by Stark, no less than the negative rendering in the popular media, is at bottom a mere appropriation of the medieval era for the author’s own purposes, which have more to do with current political controversies than with an informed understanding of medieval history and culture.

The theses of both books under review here are deceptively simple and straightforward. In *For the Glory of God*, Stark examines four major historical episodes (the Reformation, the rise of modern science, the European witch-hunts and the eventual

² See, for example, Alan Cowell, “World Briefing Europe: Britain: Far-Right Party To Print Muhammad Cartoon,” *New York Times*, 23 February 2005, linking Muslims with “medieval values and undemocratic views”; Martin Burcharth, “A Cartoon in 3 Dimensions; Capture the Flag” *New York Times*, 12 February 2006 and comments such as that by columnist David Brooks that “the Arab world remains caught in its own medieval whirlpool of horror,” “It’s Not Isolationism, but It’s Not Attractive,” *New York Times*, 5 March 2006. In a series of editorials on the Middle East over the past five years, Friedman has characterized, variously, the Iraqi insurgency, the Iraqi state, the Saudi regime, the Taliban, Muslim terrorists in general and bin Laden in particular, and Saddam Hussein as “medieval”: Thomas L. Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; Iraq of Ages,” *New York Times*, 28 February 1998; “Foreign Affairs; Smoking Or Non-Smoking?” *New York Times*, 14 September 2001; “Foreign Affairs; Yes, But What?” *New York Times*, 5 October, 2001; “Spiritual Missile Shield,” *New York Times*, 16 December 2001; “The American Idol,” *New York Times*, 6 November 2002; “The A, B, C’s of Hatred,” *New York Times* 3 June, 2004; “Too Much Pork and Too Little Sugar,” *New York Times*, 5 August 2005; “What Were They Thinking?” *New York Times*, 7 October, 2005; “Iraq At the 11th Hour,” *New York Times*, 31 March 2006,

abolition of slavery in the West) in order to make the case that Christian monotheism has been the driving force behind the creation of the modern West. In *The Victory of Reason*, he sharpens his focus to argue that the Western “victories” of capitalism, modern science, and political freedom were due entirely and exclusively to medieval theology’s unique insistence on the rationality of God and belief in progress.

Stark, therefore, largely without acknowledgement, taps into a number of long-standing arguments about the genesis of the Scientific Revolution, the origins of capitalism, and the role of Christianity in western culture going back at least to the early twentieth century. Stark himself explicitly situates his narrative as a revisionist response to “Western intellectuals”, who he says, have been eager to blame Christianity and religion in general for imperialism, intolerance and the suppression of scientific progress. “Nonsense,” he says. “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.”³ Without Christianity, Stark concludes “we would have a world truly living in the dark ages with astrologers and alchemists but no scientists, a world of despots w/o universities, banks, eyeglasses, chimneys, pianos and a world where most infants do not live to the age of five and many women die in childbirth.”⁴

If scholars of the medieval and early modern periods can be expected to remain skeptical in the face of such breathless claims, the popular press seems to have seized upon Stark’s views with alacrity. Although *For the Glory of God* had little discernible impact outside academic reviewing, *Victory* hit a nerve and received an exceptional amount of coverage, not only in overtly Christian or conservative venues but in mainstream newspapers and magazines. In the *New York Times*, for example, *Victory* was

³ Stark, *Victory*, xi, 6.

⁴ Stark, *Victory*, 233.

the subject of two lengthy reviews, five letters to the editor and a highly enthusiastic column, "The Holy Capitalists" by David Brooks. *Victory* thus garnered as much, or more, attention in *The Times* as any single book published during the past year.⁵ *The Boston Globe* printed an extended interview with Stark reiterating the thesis of *Victory*, and reviews appeared in *The New Republic*, *New Criterion*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, as well as a number of other newspapers.⁶ The blogosphere also reverberated with praise for *Victory*, along with a smaller number of negative reviews.

The largely sympathetic attention paid to *Victory* in the *Times* and elsewhere clearly reflects aspects of the current political landscape, including the increased interest in the role of religion in history since 9/11, the rise of organized religion (especially among conservative evangelical groups) as a force in American politics, and an influential business community eager to assert the social and economic benefits of unfettered capitalism. Stark himself was trained as a sociologist, not as an historian, and gives his readers fair warning of his ideological stance beginning with the titles of his books. It is all the more important, therefore, that professional

⁵ John Meacham, "Tidings of Pride, Prayer and Pluralism," *New York Times*, Book Review, 25 December 2005; William Grimes, "BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Capitalism, Brought to You by Religion," *New York Times*, 30 December 2005; "Letters-Glad Tidings" *New York Times*, Book Review, 8 January 2006; David Brooks, "The Holy Capitalists," *New York Times*, 15 December 2005; "Letters- Religion and Reason," *New York Times*, 25 December 2005.

⁶ The following are generally laudatory about the book: Peter Dizikes, "Faith and Reason: Was Christianity the Engine of Western Progress?" *Boston Globe*, 25 December 2005; Michael Novik, "What Dark Ages?" *New Criterion*, 1 February 2006; Roger Kimball, "Want Progress? You Gotta Believe: Crediting Christianity with spurring Western achievement, a new book asks: If the Dark Ages were so dark, why was so much innovation going on?" *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 December 2005. Alan Wolfe, *The New Republic*, Jan 16, 2006, however, concludes, "This is the worst book by a social scientist I have ever read."

historians address the issues raised by Stark in a serious and systematic manner.

Much of both *For the Glory of God* and *Victory of Reason* are given over to synthetic narrative descriptions of historical events. Chapter 1 of *Glory* describes the history of Christian heresies from the first century through Luther, Chapter 3 describes the European witch-hunts and chapter 4 surveys the history of slavery and its abolition. The final two-thirds of *Victory* is a description of European economic development from thirteenth-century Italy through European colonization of the New World.

Although the tone of these narratives sometimes resembles that of a bright undergraduate discovering basic facts for the first time, they are largely unexceptional, although Stark consistently minimizes recognition of the human cost in lives and suffering justified by religion, and overemphasizes the direct influence of Christian morality on events. The discussion becomes more problematic when Stark begins to provide explanations for historical events culled from his review of the secondary literature. Sometimes Stark's explanations are difficult to quarrel with because they amount to tautologies, for example, when he concludes that Protestantism succeeded where (1) Catholicism was weak, (2) governments responded to popular sentiment which favored Protestantism, or (3) where political regimes could gain from becoming Protestant. Elsewhere he shows a distressing tendency to use long out-dated scholarship as a foil for his claim that many historians are explicitly anti-religion and anti-Catholic, while ignoring or distorting recent scholarship that qualifies or contradicts his own position.⁷

The most egregious examples of Stark's misuse of the scholarship of others occur in his discussions of science and capitalism and will be discussed below. However, even in the less polemical sections of the books he commits this fundamental

⁷ Stark, *Glory*, 12-13, 116.

methodological fault. He implies, for example, that much of “current” scholarly work on the witch-hunts accepts the figure of nine million executions for witchcraft and is dominated by “defective explanations.” This “current” work, however, dates from the 1920s, 1950s and 1960s when the historical study of the witch hunts was in its infancy, making Stark’s rebuttal less than earth-shaking to anyone who has read more recent work on the topic.⁸ On the other hand, it is not surprising that Stark omits mention of virtually all serious scholarship on gender and the witch-hunts and includes “sexism” as one of the “defective” explanations, along with greed, fanatical clergy and insanity.

When Stark’s ideology is more directly engaged, however, his manipulation of the historical record and historical scholarship becomes more blatant. This is particularly true of *Victory*, in which his presentation, while admittedly lively, depends heavily on creating straw men, which only a public largely ignorant about the medieval period would accept. According to Stark, for example, “every educated person” knows that the years from the fall of Rome until the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were the “Dark Ages,” and dictionaries and encyclopedias accepted the “Dark Ages” as historical fact “until recently” (checking his notes, “recently” turns out to be 1934 and 1958).

In order to present a long-standing consensus as his own recent discovery, Stark frequently employs the technique of marginalizing scholarly research which *supports* his position. He treats his discussions of technological innovation in the Middle Ages, for example, as new and startling, borrowing shamelessly from Lynn White, jr., whose name occurs occasionally in the notes but is found nowhere in the text.⁹ Stark deals in much the same

⁸ Stark, *Glory*, 202, 208-225.

⁹ Stark’s argument is, in many ways, a broadened version of Lynn White’s thesis. On some of the methodological problems with White’s thesis see Elspeth Whitney, “History, Lynn White, and Ecotheology,” *Environmental Ethics*, 15 (1993): 151-169 and “Changing Metaphors and Concepts of Nature,” in *Fluxes of Nature, Fluxes of Thought: Ecology, Theology and Judeo-Christian*

way with the relationship between Christianity and science in the Middle Ages, suggesting that no significant scholarship on this issue other than his own has been done since the days of Andrew Dickson White and Alfred North Whitehead.¹⁰

Dealing fully with the difficulties in Stark's argument in *Glory* and *Victory* would require a book-length manuscript. Here I would like to merely address two examples: Stark's treatment of the development of science and his discussion of Thomas Aquinas on property, both of which have echoes in contemporary political discourse. In his discussion these topics, Stark rides roughshod over inconvenient complexities which threaten his equation of Christianity with the origin and essence of modernity. Symptomatic of Stark's steamrolling approach is his cavalier attention to historical detail. References to primary sources are absent or incomplete, sleights of hand abound (Ockham, for example, born around 1290, wrote "shortly" after the Magna Carta), and secondary sources he cites do not turn out to say what Stark says they say.¹¹ Overall, accuracy, nuance and any real understanding of medieval society and culture are sacrificed to an essentializing narrative promoting the uniqueness of Western economic and political success.

Environmental Ethics, ed. David M. Lodge and Christopher S. Hamlin (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 26-52.

¹⁰ In *Glory*, 124, Stark admits that, to his great surprise, his view that Christian theology supported a scientific worldview had "already become the conventional wisdom among historians of science;" nevertheless, he presses on because this truth is unknown beyond "narrow scholarly circles, and because "no one has actually pulled all of the essential themes and findings together to formulate a coherent overall picture of the history of the creative relationship between theology and science."

¹¹ Despite his reliance on Aquinas in both his discussion of capitalism and slavery, Stark gives only absent or incomplete references to the *Summa theologiae*, *Victory*, 244, n109; *Glory*, 412, n173 and n.174; *Victory*, 79.

First, let us turn to science, which Stark discusses at length in *Glory* and more briefly in *Victory*. In Stark's view, Christian theology and science are not only compatible but inseparable. His statement of this claim in *Victory* is worth quoting in full, not only because it sums up his argument but also because its "sound bite" character has resulted in it being widely quoted:

Real science arose only once: in Europe. China, Islam, India, and ancient Greece and Rome each had a highly developed alchemy. But only in Europe did alchemy develop into chemistry. By the same token, many societies developed elaborate systems of astrology, but only in Europe did astrology lead to astronomy. Why? Again, the answer has to do with images of God.¹²

Aside from noting that, in fact, alchemy did become chemistry in medieval Islam, and astrology became astronomy in both ancient Greece and the Islamic world, it is tempting to put this paragraph next to the almost 300 pages of closely reasoned, detailed analysis of scholarship on the causes of the Scientific Revolution in H. Floris Cohen's *The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry* (Chicago, 1994). Arguing specific facts, however, is to miss the point of Stark's convoluted logic, which is to strike a blow in the contemporary culture wars for Christian belief, and against "irreligious" social scientists, who, according to Stark, as a group have aimed to discredit religion in the name of science since the Enlightenment.

In order to sustain his argument that Christian theology is the *only* cause of the rise of modern science, Stark must first eliminate non-Christian antecedents. The gods of China, India, and the ancient Greeks and Romans were "too impersonal and too irrational" to sustain the practice of science; Greek efforts in this direction faltered because they failed to link empirical observations to testable theories and *vice versa*; Islam did not develop science

¹² Stark, *Victory*, 14.

because “Muslim intellectuals regarded Greek learning . . . as virtual scripture to be believed rather than pursued” and, moreover, came to adopt a belief that God sustained the natural world through continuous intervention rather than through natural laws. The logic of Stark’s position forces him to jettison *every* achievement of classical and Islamic science and philosophy, resulting in such absurd statements as “After Plato and Aristotle, very little happened beyond some extensions of geometry.”¹³ Counter examples from both ends of the spectrum are ignored: there is almost no mention of the Stoics, despite the influence they exerted on Christian notions of natural law, human technological progress, and a rational God, and no mention at all of the Jews, no doubt because, while they shared much about Christian “images of God,” they produced little in the way of scientific thought until the seventeenth century.

An even greater difficulty arises because Stark must also show that “real science,” arose in the Middle Ages. While much can be said about how medieval science paved the way for the Scientific Revolution, it is difficult to argue that medieval scientists practiced the *same* science as Galileo, Kepler and Newton. Stark solves this problem by locating the emergence of “real science,” which he defines as a methodology based on a combination of theory and “systematic observation relevant to empirical prediction,”¹⁴ in the work of Jean Buridan, Nicole Oresme and Nicholas of Cusa as precursors to Copernicus. Stark then argues that the Scientific Revolution did not begin with Copernicus, because it began *earlier* with the work of medieval scholastics who suggested the possibility that the earth rotated on its axis.

Personally, I am a booster of medieval science, and I am quite happy to argue that medieval scientists laid the groundwork

¹³ Stark, *Glory*, 148; Stark, *Victory*, 13, 20, 21.

¹⁴ Stark, *Victory*, 12.

for the Scientific Revolution. Stark, however, pushes this argument beyond the point not only of credibility but of intellectual honesty. On the one hand, he fails to acknowledge (1) that Buridan, Oresme and Nicholas of Cusa were speculative thinkers interested in mathematics but not in making systematic empirical observations of the physical world, (2) that they floated the idea that the earth rotated on its axis but never suggested that the earth rotated around the sun, and (3) that Oresme in the end rejected the movement of the earth as “contrary to natural reason” and in conflict with the literal reading of Scripture and the demands of faith.¹⁵ On the other hand, Stark uses the respectable position that the Scientific Revolution did not *begin* with Copernicus because his heliocentric system retained much of the apparatus of the Ptolemaic system, as if that were evidence that the Scientific Revolution was already underway in the late Middle Ages. Stark, for example, caps his discussion with a quotation from I. B. Cohen, the distinguished historian of science: “the idea that a Copernican revolution in science occurred goes counter to the evidence . . . and is an invention of later historians.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, although Stark uses this statement as support for his own position that “real science” started in the Middle Ages, Cohen’s point, which he makes explicitly several times in the chapter from which this quotation is taken, is to demonstrate that the Scientific Revolution (i.e. “real science”), did not occur until *after* Copernicus with the work of Kepler and Galileo in the seventeenth century.¹⁷

¹⁵ Nicole Oresme, *Le livre du ciel et du monde*, ed. by Albert D. Menut and Alexander J. Denomy, trans. with an Introduction by Albert D. Menut (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 537, 539.

¹⁶ Quoted in Stark, *Glory*, 139.

¹⁷ I. Bernard Cohen, *Revolution in Science* (Cambridge, Mass and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), 106, 105-27.

All of this goes to show, I think, that Stark and his intended audience are not really interested in medieval science. Rather, Stark is concerned to counter claims by others that *contemporary* conflicts between scientific and religious viewpoints have been influenced by proponents of religion. Indeed, he argues in *Glory* that perceived conflicts between science and religion are merely trumped up efforts on the part of militant atheists to use science to attack religion, a campaign which has captured all intellectuals *except* scientists. Not surprisingly, Stark focuses much of this discussion around evolution, in which he trots out all the arguments of intelligent design (without mentioning the term), while accusing supporters of Darwinism of socialism, underhanded tactics, and the suppression of scientific data. In the end Stark asserts that “the fracas over evolution was and remains largely a conflict between true believers of both varieties—strident evolutionists being as unscientific as *any* fundamentalists.”¹⁸ Stark claims no religious or political affiliation. A hint, however, emerges in his highlighting in the conclusion to *Glory* of David Aikman’s, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regency Publishing, Inc., 2003); Aikman is also the author of *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush* (W Publishing Group, 2004).

Stark’s treatment of Christian theologians on economic theory, a primary focus of *Victory*, is similarly one-dimensional. Stark wants to draw a clear straight line from Christian faith to democracy, capitalism, and private property as a God-given right. Capitalism itself for Stark is entirely unproblematic. The only hint that there might be a Christian *critique* of capitalism occurs in a few passing references to asceticism as a value largely abandoned by the Church by the time of Constantine. Just as Stark erases any and all dissonance between Christianity and science, all references to sin vanish from his account of medieval attitudes toward money.

¹⁸ Stark, *Glory*, 124, 172, 176.

One therefore finds oneself in the odd position of reading a book on Christianity and economics in which the morality of economic transactions never comes up as a serious question.

Stark's discussion of Thomas Aquinas, whom he features as a chief architect of a theology of the free-market, illustrates the distorting lens of Stark's argument. As was the case in Stark's account of the rise of science, classical philosophy, because it is not Christian, cannot be acknowledged as influencing medieval economic thought. Nowhere, therefore, in Stark's account is the influence of Aristotle on Aquinas mentioned, even though Aquinas's rationale for private property as contributing to the common good in the *Summa theologica* relies heavily on Aristotle's *Politics*, and Aquinas specifically references "The Philosopher" at several points.¹⁹

Stark makes much of Aquinas's lengthy discussion of "just price," emphasizing the degree to which Aquinas argues that "just price" is simply what the market will bear, so long as the seller deliberately does not deceive, or coerce, the buyer. Stark is not wholly off base; Aquinas does go surprisingly far in allowing the seller leeway to take advantage of circumstances. However, Aquinas also places issues of property within the context of the limitations of human life in the fallen world. The state might be natural (following Aristotle) but private property, according to Aquinas, is part of positive law, not of natural law. Moreover, Aquinas, like the canonists, allowed for a range within which the just price might fall, retained the notion of "unjust price," and never abandoned the view that, from a theological and ethical perspective, the gaining of wealth remained problematic.²⁰

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* Pt. II-II Q. 66, art. 1. Aristotle's arguments for the usefulness of private property, on which Aquinas relies, are found in the *Politics*, 2.5.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* Pt. II-II Q. 66 article 2. It has also been pointed out that Aquinas's discussion, unlike modern capitalist attitudes toward property, ultimately subordinates the right of private property to

Medieval Christian thinkers, including Aquinas, continued to consider commercial activity as a perennial temptation to sin. Indeed, Aquinas's whole discussion of property in the *Summa theologica* comes under the heading of "Vices—theft and robbery".²¹ Absent from Stark's narrative is any recognition that the acceptance of trade as directed toward some necessary and even virtuous end by medieval theologians was a concession to practical exigencies, even while the primary message of Christianity remained anti-wealth, a point strenuously made by J. Gilchrist, the main secondary source Stark cited for this section.²²

Instead of writing history, Stark essentializes a streamlined version of Christian theology and institutions, giving them a life of their own unperturbed by historical accidents, or internal contradictions and ambiguities, or outside influences. Stark's progress narrative of Western movement toward capitalism and modern science ignores, or forcibly absorbs, all contrary moves in alternative directions. In Stark's vision of medieval Christianity, there is apparently no tension between faith and reason, no Fall, no original sin, no heaven or hell. Asceticism and mysticism become mere passing interludes, as do moral qualms about acquiring wealth—all these are soon bypassed by a rational Christianity bent on developing free markets and a mechanistic worldview.

Stark's modern Middle Ages thus emerges as the obverse of the violent, repressive and fanatical Middle Ages more favored by popular culture. Neither vision functions as historical representations of the actual Middle Ages. Rather, both visions work to displace contemporary anxieties onto an imagined Middle

the common good, Daniel Westberg, "The Relation between Positive and Natural Law in Aquinas," *Journal of Law and Religion* 11 (1994-95), 14.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, Pt. II-II Q. 66 "Of Theft and Robbery."

²² J. Gilchrist, *The Church and Economic Activity in the Middle Age* (London: Macmillan, 1969; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), 5-7, 50-52.

Ages that serves to define “us” in the present either as who we inevitably are or by who we absolutely are not. Since 9/11 these anxieties have increasingly been framed in terms of religion, “ours” and “theirs.” The reliance placed in *The New York Times* on the Middle Ages and the “medieval” as code for a “clash of civilizations” rhetoric grounded in religious difference is a useful barometer of these anxieties, but does nothing to get beyond a polemics grounded in polarization.

Ironically, Stark’s efforts to turn Christianity into the seamless partner of modernity does at least as much disservice to religion as it does to history. By ironing out the complexities, ambiguities and subtleties of Christian belief and practice, Stark also empties Christianity of its spiritual power and emotional appeal as a religion. His is a Christianity viewed only in instrumental terms, as a technique but not as something which can draw us out of ourselves. Christianity as a set of values may often have promoted the application of reason to the world, but if this is all Christianity had to offer it would not have had the success it demonstrably has.

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