



# The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success

By Rodney Stark

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Many books have been written about the success of the West, analyzing why Europe was able to pull ahead of the rest of the world by the end of the Middle Ages. The most common explanations cite the West's superior geography, commerce, and technology. Completely overlooked is the fact that faith in reason, rooted in Christianity's commitment to rational theology, made all these developments possible. Simply put, the conventional wisdom that Western success depended upon overcoming religious barriers to progress is utter nonsense.

In **The Victory of Reason**, Rodney Stark advances a revolutionary, controversial, and long overdue idea: that Christianity and its related institutions are, in fact, directly responsible for the most significant intellectual, political, scientific, and economic breakthroughs of the past millennium.

In Stark's view, what has propelled the West is not the tension between secular and nonsecular society, nor the pitting of science and the humanities against religious belief. Christian theology, Stark asserts, is the very font of reason: While the world's other great belief systems emphasized mystery, obedience, or introspection, Christianity alone embraced logic and reason as the path toward enlightenment, freedom, and progress. That is what made all the difference.

In explaining the West's dominance, Stark convincingly debunks long-accepted "truths." For instance, by contending that capitalism thrived centuries before there was a Protestant work ethic—or even Protestants—he counters the notion that the Protestant work ethic was responsible for kicking capitalism into overdrive. In the fifth century, Stark notes, Saint Augustine celebrated theological and material progress and the institution of "exuberant invention." By contrast, long before Augustine, Aristotle had condemned commercial trade as "inconsistent with human virtue"—which helps further underscore that Augustine's times were not the Dark Ages but the incubator for the West's future glories.

This is a sweeping, multifaceted survey that takes readers from the Old World to the New, from the past to the present, overturning along the way not only centuries of prejudiced scholarship but the antireligious bias of our own time.

**The Victory of Reason** proves that what we most admire about our world—scientific progress, democratic rule, free commerce—is largely due to Christianity, through which we are all inheritors of this grand tradition.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

It is a commonplace to think of Christianity and rationalism as opposite historical and philosophical forces. In this stimulating and provocative study, Stark (*The Rise of Christianity*) demonstrates that elements within Christianity actually gave rise not only to visions of reason and progress but also to the evolution of capitalism. Stark contends that Christianity is a forward-looking religion, evincing faith in progress and in its followers' abilities to understand God over time. Such a future-based rational theology has encouraged the development of technical and organizational advances, such as the monastic estates and universities of the Middle Ages. Stark contends that these developments transformed medieval political philosophy so that democracy developed and thrived in those states, such as northern Italy, that lacked despots and encouraged moral equality. Stark concludes by maintaining that Christianity continues to spread in places like Africa, China and Latin America because of its faith in progress, its rational theology and its emphasis on moral equality. While some historians are likely to question Stark's conclusions, his deftly researched study will force them to imagine a new explanation for the rise of capitalism in Western society. (*Dec.*)  
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From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* At first glance, this book appears to be a retort to geographic theories of societal evolution, of the sort advanced by Jared Diamond's popular *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Rather than patterns of weather and agriculture, Stark argues, Europe's primacy in economic, political, and social progress was due to its embrace of Christianity, which opened a space for reason and hence science-driven technology. Emphasizing the connection between medieval scholasticism, with its notion of theological progress--the logical science of thinking one's way closer to God--and Renaissance capitalism, Stark maintains that Christianity alone embraced reason and logic, and this gave Christian regions a tactical advantage in developing commerce. An argument made with unavoidably broad strokes, its actual targets are Max Weber's notion of the Protestant work ethic and the conventional story that religion was a barrier to be overcome en route to progress. At times approaching the invective, its defiant tone will invigorate readers who feel religion's place in the trajectory of world history is under attack. But the theological side of Stark's argument--that Christianity is fraternally bound to reason--will challenge the very same readers to reexamine their own relationship with reason. *Brendan Driscoll*

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About the Author

Rodney Stark is University Professor of the Social Sciences, Baylor University. Before earning his Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, he was a staff writer for several major publications. Among his many books are the influential studies *The Rise of Christianity* and *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism*.

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