

Another side of Australia's history

A review of
White Australia Policy
by Keith Windschuttle.
Macleay Press, Sydney,
Australia, 2004

Lara Wieland

When I commenced reading this book I was unsure what to expect; my knowledge of Windschuttle, a controversial historian, was admittedly confined to the mostly negative press he had received and his ongoing arguments with his historian colleagues in the media. Windschuttle is regarded in some circles as a radical right-wing revisionist, akin to a holocaust-denier, for having questioned among other things the extent of Australia's 'stolen generation' phenomenon (the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents).

As someone with a keen interest in issues of 'race' and 'racism', and having a professional involvement in Australian indigenous issues, I was drawn to the topic of the White Australia Policy. This concerns the period of time (not too distantly removed) when Australia's immigration laws were overtly designed to keep out those of non-European descent. I thought there would not be that much more for me to learn on this topic, but this book was enlightening and served to expand my views considerably.

It was particularly interesting where it revealed little-known facts about Australia's history, for example, the number of Chinese immigrants and their involvement in our early history—everywhere, not just on the goldfields. I suspect that the author is correct in suggesting that we rarely get to hear those parts of our history that don't fit with the prevailing theories or beliefs—a phenomenon which is quite familiar, in other disciplines, to

scientists and researchers who believe in biblical creation.

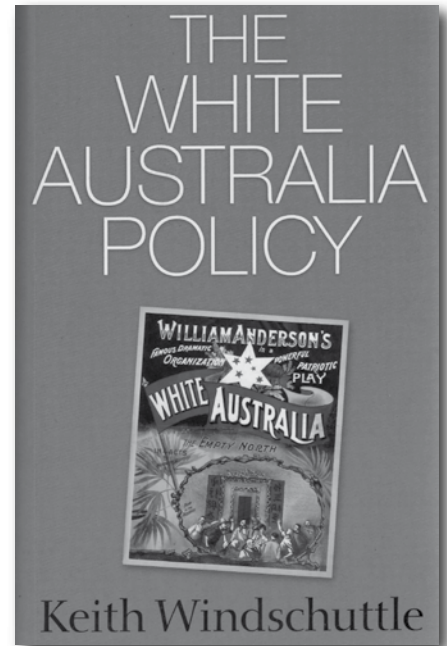
Nevertheless, the further I got into the book, the more uneasy I became with the intensely personal nature of Windschuttle's attacks on his professional colleagues. He gives the impression that all others are hopeless at research and almost downright dishonest, particularly in chapter three where he refers to 'historians' collectively failing to inform readers of important facts or to research their subjects properly. Such constant snide remarks do take away from the credibility of some of his statements. They made me, at least, wonder if the chip he clearly carries on his shoulder towards his contemporaries in the field might affect his own objectivity.

A large portion of the book is spent arguing that much of the anti-Asian sentiment in the early 1900s leading up to the 1950s, and the resulting immigration policies, were not so much about racism *per se*. They were, he argues, more about the fear of losing jobs or upsetting the social and political order by creating an underclass that would provide cheap labour that could be easily exploited. A related factor was the fear that they would bring with them another culture that did not fit with the values of Australians and the British at that time.

He makes this argument quite convincingly, and I found it stimulating to learn so much more about the background to the policies at the time. It provides particular food for thought at a time when the immigration of different cultures and religions is once again topical in Australia, as it is in many other Western countries.

Interestingly, almost one and a half chapters are spent on seeking to convince the reader that Social Darwinism was not as entrenched as we might believe. This is part of his attempt throughout the book to prove that society at that time (late 1800s, early 1900s) in Australia was not 'racist'.

He makes it very clear, though, that both he and his opponents accept without argument the fact that Social



Darwinism, Darwin's beliefs and those of Darwin's followers such as Ernst Haeckel, led directly to racism and acceptance of racist behaviour, something which creation ministries have argued for a long time. Although obviously not a Christian, the author also made a clear connection between the introduction of evolutionary thinking and the attack on Christian values that came with it at this time.

Windschuttle also spends considerable space examining the literature of the day in his attempt to prove that Australians of that era were not particularly racist. His methodology here, though, was not particularly convincing. His main argument was that if popular fictional novels at the time reflected values that were non-racist, then society at that time must have had the same values for these novels to be big sellers. But I'm not sure that exactly qualifies as overwhelming proof, particularly given my own observation of overt racism even today that is nevertheless subterranean insofar as its appearance in popular culture is concerned.

He also tries to bolster his case by stating that the extremely racist and offensive speeches and articles that appeared at the time were printed in papers and circulars that did not have the widest readership and therefore did not represent the consensus of then-current thinking. However, some of the

statements were so vilely racist—for example, suggesting that Aborigines were crude forms of life comparable with kangaroos and platypuses or ‘little else than animals ... the very lowest link of the long chain embraced by mankind ... [that] must perish when brought into contact with it [civilization]’—that one would have expected a huge backlash if there weren’t at least a good proportion of people who were starting to think that way, and this is not addressed. Also, this line of argument came across a bit like saying that articles in *Der Stürmer* could not be used to bolster the claim that anti-Semitism was rife in pre-war Germany, because it had a smaller circulation than much of the popular press.

The last chapter is a discussion on the politics of ‘multiculturalism’. Given the current relevance of this subject, I was a little disappointed with its brevity.

The book ended in a similar manner to that with which it started, with sweeping statements and judgments but little discussion of the evidence that supports them, despite the author having been quite careful about this in the middle of the book with an impressive list of references.

Conclusion

Overall, despite some interesting facts and good points, it was a laborious read, with much repetition. I imagine that someone without an intrinsic interest in the subject would find it tough going.

We know that no-one in this world is without some worldview bias, and an author has a right to state his case strongly. But it would have been a better read, and more convincing, if it came across as a more balanced examination of the facts, rather than a polemic from someone passionately interested in showing his colleagues to be wrong, and who appears to engage in some of the very behaviour of which he accuses them.

This is a pity, as Windschuttle’s book reveals another side to this period of history, an aspect that I appreciated getting to read about, and one that deserves to be more widely known.

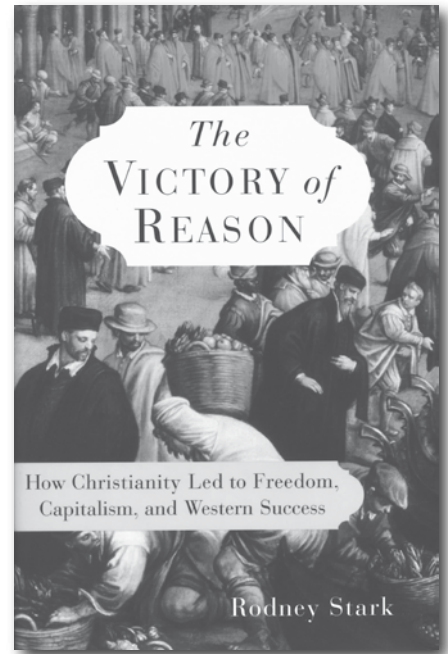
Christianity as progress

A review of
*The Victory of Reason:
How Christianity Led to
Freedom, Capitalism,
and Western Success*
by Rodney Stark
Random House, New
York, 2005

Lael Weinberger

Has Christianity held up Western progress? The traditional sociologists of religion and the old school of science historians both give the impression that religion has indeed stymied social and scientific progress.¹ A growing number of sociologists and science historians are challenging this view, and one of the best known is Rodney Stark. Stark was a research sociologist at Berkeley, then professor of social sciences first at the University of Washington and now at Baylor. He is well known for his 27 books (with more on the way) published by the leading academic and mainstream presses. This latest offering, *The Victory of Reason*, presents Stark’s argument that Christianity, as a religion that values rationality, underlies the development of technology and business in the West.

Stark starts by posing the question: why western success? Some authors have found the answers in ‘geography’, but, Stark replies, ‘that same geography long sustained European cultures that were well behind those of Asia’ (p. ix). Other authors have found the answer in the Europeans’ guns, steel, and ships; but, Stark notes, this is begging the question, why did the Europeans have this wonderful technology before the rest of the world? The most convincing answer, Stark says, is that capitalism fuelled the rise of Western technology—but this still does not answer the question, why did capitalism only develop in the West? The answer Stark gives to this question is found in the European



faith in reason, a faith which contrary to popular intuition, was birthed out of Christianity.

In these opening paragraphs, Stark has presented in reverse order the layout of the rest of the book. He has also made it clear that *The Victory of Reason* advocates two potentially controversial views: Christianity as an agent of social progress, and capitalism as the optimal economic system. Our primary concern in this review is with his treatment of Christianity, but we will briefly summarize his account of free-market economics as they sprang from a Christian background.

Rational Christianity

Stark briefly examines three great non-Christian civilizations (ancient and medieval China, ancient Greece, and medieval Islam), arguing that their level of science and technology were crippled by the philosophies in the culture. Remarkable discoveries were made in medieval China (gunpowder being the best known example), but these were more or less random, and science as a discipline never developed (pp. 16–17). Ancient Greece was on the