

Why the West really is the best!

How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity

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Rodney Stark, a sociologist and historian, is Distinguished Professor of Social Sciences at Baylor University. He has written many excellent books on religion and Christianity and its social impacts including *The Rise of Christianity*, *For the Glory of God*, *The Victory of Reason*, and *The Triumph of Christianity*. This new book builds on these works.

In *How the West Won*, Stark seeks to demonstrate three main points:

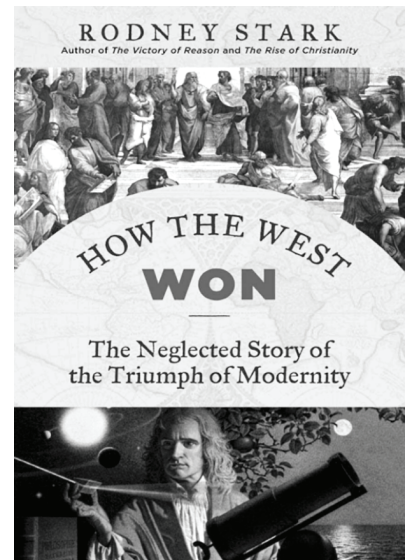
1. The development of Western civilization was overwhelmingly a positive force in world history. It is not only superior to all other civilizations in terms of power and influence but has actually delivered superior political, social, and economic benefits to the members of these societies.
2. Christianity and the church played a key role not only in the development of the Western intellectual tradition but also in events that led to important positive changes in the social, political and economic spheres.
3. Other civilizations had very little, if any, influence on Western civilization and modernity. The myriad of benefits of Western civilization are unique to it—in the sense that only Western civilization produced them. Even where other civilizations did make important scientific

discoveries or technological innovations, they never exploited them in order to produce a social benefit.

Stark begins by noting that courses on Western civilization are now considered suspect and those who offer such courses are viewed as apologists for Western hegemony and oppression. Consequently, most American universities—including top Ivy League schools—no longer offer such courses. While this suppression and distortion remains, students “will become increasingly ignorant of how the modern world came to be” (p. 1). Even worse, students are “being badly misled by a flood of absurd, politically correct fabrications ...” (p. 1). I suspect these consequences are by design and the intended goal of the censors.

Thus, Stark sets out to expose the many such myths and cases of revisionism in regard to the history of Western civilization, including:

1. Rather than a great tragedy, the fall of Rome was the single most beneficial event in the history of Western civilization.
2. The ‘Dark Ages’ never happened—this period saw remarkable progress and innovation in science, technology, architecture, art, literature, and music.
3. The Crusaders did not go in pursuit of land and loot. Their motives were religious and they went deeply into debt to finance their mission. They did not expect to return alive, and most did not.
4. Dramatic changes in climate played a major role in the rise of the West—the Medieval Warm Period was a time of bountiful crops and easy travel; the subsequent Little Ice Age produced crop failures, famines, and plagues.



5. Modern science did not suddenly appear in the 17th century but had roots that stretch back to the foundation of the first universities in the 12th century by the Scholastic natural philosophers.
6. Europe did not grow rich by plundering its colonies. In fact, colonies drained wealth from Europe while at the same time gaining the benefits of modernity.

Greeks and Romans

Stark begins his study by noting that the ancient Greeks were the first civilization to stand out and progress beyond all others. They developed core elements that triggered the emergence of Western society, including military superiority, democracy, economic progress, literacy, arts, technology, and philosophy. However, despite these great achievements, Greek civilization did not rise above the morality of other ancient societies. The economies of all the Greek city-states relied on extensive slavery. In fact, slaves often outnumbered the free citizens. The push to end slavery did not begin until the Catholic Church, in the medieval period, extended the sacraments to all



Figure 1: Belief in a rational God stimulated the pursuit of knowledge and led to the establishment of universities such as Sorbonne, part of the University of Paris and the world's second oldest university.

slaves and then banned the enslavement of all Christians and Jews.

Although the Greeks were among the first to systematically explore and develop various systems of democracy, they did not practise limited government committed to the rule of law and basic human rights. In most city-states, as in Athens, direct democracy was practised: important issues were decided by the votes of all male citizens. No class distinctions were involved and men in manual occupations enjoyed the same rights of citizenship as the wealthiest landowners. However, women and slaves were excluded. Moreover, it should be noted that “democracy merely gives power to the people; it does not ensure that power will be used wisely or humanely” (p. 19). “Athenians several times voted to slaughter all the men and enslave all the women and children of a conquered city-state. They also voted to convict Socrates of heresy and to impose the death sentence” (p. 19). Again, it was Christianity that ultimately provided the theological and moral basis for limited government to put a check on the abuse of power.

Although many historians regard the fall of Rome as a tragedy, Stark explains that the empire’s fall was actually a beneficial rather than a negative event. The Roman era did not result in progress but was merely a pause in the rise of the West. Even the much-lauded Roman roads were actually bad for chariots and slippery for soldiers when wet, so they usually walked on the side of the road. Romans were like the Chinese, uninterested in developing their technology, and the fall of Rome did not give rise to a barbarian Europe but rather to Europe itself.

The not-so-Dark Ages

It is widely believed that the fall of Rome plunged Europe into the so-called Dark Ages of utter barbarism, when society declined and the great achievements of the ancient world were forgotten or neglected, until they were rescued and revived centuries later by the Enlightenment thinkers. As Bertrand Russell put it: “As the central authority of Rome decayed, the lands of the Western Empire began to sink into an era of barbarism during

which Europe suffered a general cultural decline. The Dark Ages, as they are called.”

Likewise, Charles Van Doren posited that the fall of Rome had “plunged Europe into a Dark Age that lasted for five hundred years”. It was an age of “rapine and death” since “there was little law except that of force”. Worse yet, “life had become hard, with most people dependent on what they could scratch with their hands from the earth around their homes”. Van Doren went on to blame Christianity for prolonging the ‘Dark Ages’ because they disdained consumption and materialism while celebrating poverty and urging contentment. But as Stark points out, “serious historians have known for decades that these claims are a complete fraud” (p. xx). He adds that respectable encyclopaedias and dictionaries, such as *Columbia* and *Britannica*, now define the ‘Dark Ages’ as a myth.

Stark demonstrates that the truth is the complete opposite of the common belief: “Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Dark Ages myth is that it was imposed on what was actually ‘one of the great innovative eras of mankind’ During this period, technology was developed and put into use ‘on a scale no civilization had previously known’” (p. 76). It was during this period that Europe made great technological and intellectual leaps forward, putting it well ahead of the rest of the world.

Freedom and political liberty

Most people living in the West today—especially those who were born there—generally take our various rights and liberties for granted. They know nothing else nor do they understand or appreciate the great and often violent struggles and wars in history that secured these rights. But, as Stark points out, a central key to Western success was the development

of political liberty. “If there is a single factor responsible for the rise of the West, it is freedom. Freedom to hope. Freedom to act. Freedom to invest. Freedom to enjoy the fruits of one’s dreams as well as one’s labour. So much of that freedom emerged during the so-called Dark Ages” (p. 139).

Christianity played a major role in this development because it “created a tendency for people not to be resigned to things as they are but rather to attempt to make the situation better” (p. 119). Christian theology also taught there was such a thing as absolute truth that could be rationally sought. These notions led to a rising opposition to slavery: “Belief in free will led directly to valuing the right of the individual to freely choose, with the result that medieval Europe rejected slavery—the only culture ever to have done so without external compulsion” (p. 119). By the end of the 8th century, both the Pope and Charlemagne opposed slavery.

Stark concludes:

“A substantial degree of individual freedom is inseparable from Western modernity, and this is still lacking in much of the non-Western world. No doubt Western modernity has its limitations and discontents. Still, it is far better than the known alternatives—not only, or even primarily, because of its advanced technology but because of its fundamental commitment to freedom, reason, and human dignity” (p. 370).

Pursuit of knowledge and modern science

Belief in the rationality of God was another key element in the rise of the West. A rational God made the pursuit of knowledge possible. Thus, the church created the first universities (Bologna, Paris (figure 1), Oxford etc.) and paid for priests to take classes. The universities were staffed by the much-maligned Scholastics. But Stark

posits that these men were fine scholars who “formulated and taught the experimental method, and launched Western science” (p. 159).

Stark argues that “The most fundamental key to the rise of Western civilization has been the dedication of so many of its most brilliant minds to the pursuit of knowledge. Not to illumination. Not to enlightenment. Not to wisdom. But to *knowledge*. And the basis for this commitment to knowledge was the Christian commitment to theology” (p. 159). He adds:

“The pursuit of knowledge was inherent in theology, as efforts to more fully understand God were extended to include God’s creation—thus inaugurating an academic enterprise known as natural philosophy, defined as the study of nature and of natural phenomena. During medieval times, a long line of brilliant Scholastic natural philosophers advanced Western knowledge in ways leading directly to the Copernican ‘Revolution’ and the extraordinary scientific achievements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (p. 160).

Indeed, Copernicus (figure 2) did not simply emerge from a miraculous virgin birth, gifted with divine insight in regard to his heliocentric theory. Copernicus had been trained by the Scholastics, and the Scholastics had, over the centuries, contributed much of the groundwork for the heliocentric model.

Stark goes on to demonstrate that it was Christians—or at least men who had religious convictions—who began the scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries. Stark identifies 52 ‘scientific stars’ from the period 1543 to 1680—famous scientists who were active in research, not just notable intellectuals such as Francis Bacon and Joseph Scaliger. Of the 52 scientists, only one (Edmond Halley), according to Stark, was an atheist and even this is doubtful.¹ All the others were either devout Christians or at least had strong religious convictions. Although the likes of Voltaire, Rousseau, Locke, Hume, and others have tried to take credit for the achievements of the ‘Scientific Revolution,’ none of these figures played any part in the development of the scientific enterprise.



Figure 2. Nicolas Copernicus was a devoted Christian who was trained by the Scholastics and used their many contributions over the centuries to construct his heliocentric theory.

Technological advances

Progress is not inevitable. Inventions do not just happen. Inventions need to be invented by someone and the likelihood that anyone will invent something is influenced by the extent to which they believe that inventions are possible. Moreover, inventions must not only be made but must also be sufficiently valued as to be used and widely adopted. This is not inevitable either. The Chinese rulers, for example, shut down iron production in the 11th century.

However, the “Christian conception of God as the rational creator of a comprehensible universe, who therefore expects that humans will become increasingly sophisticated and informed, continually prodded the West along the road to modernity” (p. 45). The notion that Christianity held back progress is completely false.

“... advances in both science and technology occurred not in spite of Christianity but because of it. Contrary to conventional wisdom, science did not suddenly flourish once Europe cast aside religious ‘superstitions’ during the

so-called Enlightenment. Science arose in the West—and only in the West—precisely because the Judeo-Christian conception of God encouraged and even demanded this pursuit” (p. 321).

In fact, the so-called Dark Ages saw radical technological progress largely because the stultifying hand of the Roman Empire was gone. The fall of Rome led to the emergence of new trade routes and towns that were devoted to commerce.

The evidence of technological progress during this time is overwhelming. In the 5th century, Germanic tribes developed a heavy plough with a blade that turned the soil over, whereas Rome never moved beyond the scratch plough. The harrow, which was used to break up soil clods, was developed shortly after. The shoulder harness for horses was also developed and farmers adopted the three-plot technique to prevent soil exhaustion. They also developed watermills and windmills and, unlike the Romans, employed them extensively. The Europeans also developed wagons with brakes and front axles that could swivel and to which horses could be harnessed, as

well as new ships with better stability and greater cargo space.

The average person’s standard of living also rose. With the fall of Rome, there was no more food subsidies or daily free distributions of bread, olive oil, and wine. However, Stark points out that studies based on isotopic analysis of skeletons have shown that people in the so-called Dark Ages ate very well, including plenty of meat, and as a result, grew taller and more robust than their predecessors in the Roman empire.

Yet, the most important developments during this period were in regard to military tactics and equipment. “Within several centuries of the fall of Rome, Europeans had developed military technology that far surpassed not only the Romans’ but that of every other society on earth” (p. 84). Military power was extremely important in this era because Islam was on the rise and was now looking toward Europe. Muslim armies had already taken all of North Africa, which had once been solidly Christian. Superior military technology and tactics meant that Europeans were able to maintain a military presence for hundreds of years in the midst of Islamic territory, even though they were vastly outnumbered. Whenever Muslim armies came up against much smaller European armies they were almost always comprehensively routed despite outnumbering the Europeans many times over. The few Muslim victories on the battlefield were due to overwhelming numbers or as a result of sieges.

Islamic societies and the Crusades

Stark also destroys many of the myths about Islamic societies and the Crusades. There is a common belief that early Islamic societies were enlightened and sophisticated and full of culture and, in many ways,



Figure 3. The Teotihuacanos, along with several other South and Central American civilisations, practiced human sacrifice at these pyramids. Human bodies discovered in excavations at the site indicate some men were decapitated, some had their hearts removed, others were killed by repeated strikes to the head, and some were buried alive.

superior to Europe. However, Stark demonstrates that the so-called scientific knowledge and advances came primarily at the hands of Jewish and Christian dhimmies, or slaves, in Muslim-dominated lands. Islamic science and technology did not originate in Islamic culture but were always acquired or plundered from non-Islamic societies. ‘Arabic’ numerals were actually Hindu in origin. “‘Muslim’ or ‘Arab’ medicine was in fact Nestorian Christian medicine; even the leading Muslim and Arab physicians were trained at the enormous Nestorian medical center at Nisibus in Syria” (p. 297). Nestorian Christians were also primarily responsible for collecting manuscripts of the top Greek philosophers (e.g. Aristotle, Plato, Hippocrates, and Galen) and translating them into Arabic and Syriac. In fact, before the 9th century, virtually all the scholars living in Islamic societies were Nestorian Christians. Moreover, the Nestorians earned a reputation among Arabs for being highly skilled accountants, architects, astronomers, bankers, doctors, merchants, philosophers, scientists, scribes, and teachers.

Regarding the Crusades, he notes the common myth that most of the Crusaders set out in search of land and plundered loot. However, he points out that the truth is they “made enormous financial sacrifices to go—expenditures that they had no expectations of making back” (p. 103).

Although some Crusaders committed atrocities, these have often been exaggerated. Moreover, atrocities committed by Muslim forces have largely been ignored. For example, Baybars, Sultan of Egypt, had every Christian killed when Antioch fell in 1268, despite promising to spare their lives. This appears to be the greatest massacre of the entire crusading era! Saladin’s mercy after the capture of Jerusalem appears to be exceptional.

After the Battle of Hattin in 1187, Saladin had every knight beheaded.

New World colonialism

Stark continues his destruction and exposition of historical myths when discussing New World conquests and colonisation. He notes that

“Nearly all modern accounts stress greed and racism as the basis for Europe’s colonial expansion. Granted, both were significant factors, but so too were idealism and charity, especially on the part of Christian missionaries, who were often at least as concerned to educate and modernize foreign lands as to convert the world to Christ” (p. 357).

In fact, by the early 20th century, British and American overseas mission organizations had established 86 colleges and universities, 522 teachers colleges, and thousands of elementary schools in Asia and Africa.

Although colonialism allowed certain individuals and companies to earn great profits, these profits usually came at the expense of their fellow countrymen. Indeed, “European nations typically lost money on their colonial empires” (p. 358). As Stark points out, the American war for independence “was fought largely because the British Parliament, tired of losing money on the thirteen colonies, tried to impose taxes sufficient to cover the costs of administering and defending them” (p. 358).

In any case, many of the conquered ancient empires are not deserving of much sympathy, given that they engaged in cannibalism, mass sacrifice, slavery, and other atrocities. The ancient Aztecs (figure 3), for example, had 18 major ceremonies a year that required extensive human sacrifices, and they were conducted in over 80 different places! As Stark incisively points out:

“To embrace the fundamental message of cultural imperialism requires that one be comfortable with such crimes against women as foot binding, female circumcision, the custom of Sati (which causes widows to be burned to death, tied to their husbands’ funeral pyres), and the stoning to death of rape victims on the grounds of *their* adultery. It also requires one to agree that tyranny is every bit as desirable as democracy and that slavery should be tolerated if it is in accord with local customs. Similarly, one must classify high infant mortality rates, toothlessness in early adulthood and the castration of young boys as valid parts of local cultures, to be cherished along with illiteracy. For it was especially on these aspects of non-Western cultures that modernity was ‘imposed’ both by missionaries and by other colonialists” (p. 366).

In regard to the slave trade, Europeans did acquire many slaves and were responsible for extending the slave trade to the new world. However, they did not create the slave trade; they merely plugged into the pre-existing African slave market that had long been established by Muslims and African chieftains. Indeed, slavery was endemic to most, if not all, pre-colonial African societies. Yet, it was Europeans—prompted by both the Catholic Church and British evangelical Christians—who finally ended slavery in Europe and the African slave trade. No other civilization in history had done such a thing! Moreover, Britain employed its navy to ensure the slave trade ceased: “The earliest British military intrusions into Africa were devoted mainly to stamping out the slave trade. During 1840 alone the British navy intercepted 425 slave ships off the West African coast, hanged the slavers, returned the slaves to Sierra Leone, and set them free” (pp. 357–358).

Conclusion

Rodney Stark is a virtual ‘voice in the wilderness’ in challenging the politically correct dogma and presuppositions that dominate historical and sociological studies concerning Western civilization. It is clear that most of his fellow scholars have ceased to even bother examining the facts. A generation of students is now being indoctrinated with a false, distorted and negative view of Western history, and in the present age of multicultural ideology this lack of knowledge is very dangerous: why defend the institutions and values of a civilization that you believe has stolen, pillaged and exploited its way to prosperity at the expense of simple but noble, idyllic ancient societies? Stark’s book should be required reading for all students. Not only does it serve as a corrective to common historical myths but it also documents the Christian foundations of Western civilization. This is critically important, because if the foundations are undermined or lost, the whole structure collapses.

Again, this book is a must read for all Christians and especially university students. It contains a wealth of information, is well-documented, and contains plenty of historical examples. Moreover, Stark is an excellent writer so the book is interesting and a joy to read. I highly recommend it.

References

1. Halley proposed a bizarre hollow earth idea “trying to rebut allegations of atheism. When he lectured to the Fellows, he was applying for the Savilian chair of astronomy at Oxford, and rumours circulated about his orthodoxy: Halley was, alleged one of the electors, ‘a skeptick and a banterer of religion’. Halley used his semi-hollow earth to support the Christian belief in a universe of finite duration by postulating an aether to slow down the planets. ... Halley established his religious credentials still further by bringing God directly into his argument ...”, Fara, P., Edmond Halley’s last portrait, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 60(2):199–201, 22 May 2006 | doi: 10.1098/rsnr.2006.0143.