360°

MythBuster

OCT 22, 2020 | PRAXIS CIRCLE

https://youtu.be/xOWrDP5T6vs?list=TLGGAIWrLj7F7O0yMzAzMjAyMg

Rodney Stark's Personal Page

Today, just in time for Halloween and our even more scary National Election, we have much good news for fans of religion. Interest in the supernatural is increasing rapidly worldwide, and all of the nihilists out there can't do anything about it. More on that below; but for now, don't let any mean nihilists (one of our favorite movie scenes) bring you down.

(Of course, in our opinion, many nihilists are extremely nice, though nonetheless confused.)

In a recent *Q and D* post we described how Christianity is about World Revolution, not about the status quo. In another we highlighted how the Reformation, in particular Martin Luther, set the West on a pathway to modernity post haste. Dr. Mark Taylor's book *After God* mentioned there describes how Protestantism created new worldview paradigms and social foundations just as it deconstructed the old. In fact, he incorporates this Hegelian dialectical phenomenon into his definition of religion.

We agree.

Similarly, today we present another gem of a book (156 pages), *Reformation Myths: Five Centuries of Misconceptions and (Some) Misfortunes* (2017) by our Expert Contributor, Dr. Rodney Stark. *Reformation Myths* would also agree with Dr. Taylor about the Reformation, in part, but take issue with some more specific themes giving too much credit to Protestantism. As a sociologist, Dr. Stark is an expert on the state of religion globally, as well as on the history of Christianity itself. In the video above he describes his personal dedication to truth in history.

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We admire Dr. Stark and have enjoyed all of his books because he always gets the reader thinking outside-the-box, and he follows truth wherever it leads. We would really recommend that you go to his Personal Page using the link at top and watch at least the first six videos of his interview. (They total only 5 minutes, 35 seconds.) Dr. Stark offers an overview of his approach to Western history and his impression of the general state of the art in academia today.

As you know, we love pirates.

We know Dr. Stark would find general agreement with Allan Bloom in his classic *The Closing of the American Mind* (1988)and with Stanley Kurtz recently in *The Lost History of Western Civilization* (2020). Here's a recent article on the latter. The Academy is closing off the study of Western history from an objective point of view and even arguing it was a new phenomenon of the early 20th century intended to enhance white people's power.

In other words, the study of Western and American history today is reaching new lows. Our judgement is that historical study is worse than in crisis; it's bankrupt. Historians broadly are engaging in the business of brainwashing students rather than presenting facts broadly and seeking to understand from the points of view of the historical individuals and times themselves.

Extremely biased presentism is eating the truth of the past and trashing the good we have worked so hard as Westerners for hundreds to thousands of years to establish..

Without dodging any truth whatsoever, we believe Westerners must develop a much better overall approach to history going back as many as 3,000 years to account for the amazing continuity and progress that's been made though today. Obviously, this approach would emphasize a more positive view of history that can bring people together, rather than set them apart, and there's no need to sugar-coat any facts or leave ones compassion or empathy at the door. Good history doesn't allow that, and Dr. Stark's life's work really helps.

As Dr. Stark says at the end of *Reformation Myths'* "Introduction: The mythical 'Protestant'," written in 2017 on the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (Luther's *95 Theses* being published in 1517), if truth "makes me the 'skunk at the picnic', as one of my colleagues suggested, so be it."

Some of *Reformation Myths'* meta-themes are that Christianity began deconstructing society from the resurrection of Jesus onward and that much of the Protestant Reformation's work had already been done by the Roman Catholic Church by the 9th and 10th centuries. He also emphasizes that "modernity" began way before the Reformation and that the proliferation of Catholic and Protestant versions of religion has been exceptionally good for the spread of religion itself (which is good for humankind).

Surprise: He believes the medieval era was LESS religious than today! Bodies in church were scarce, and behavior was unruly, if not disgusting.

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Next below, we offer select quotes from *Reformation Myths*, followed by an extensive list of bullet point themes. While we recognize it's difficult to prove such broad themes over such a lengthy period in such a short book, we can say that Dr. Stark's general presentation of history agrees with the extensive historical reading and research we have done covering the millennia in question over the last 50 years.

We think it critical to a reappraisal of history today to understand that most of the elements of what we call "capitalism" existed even in ancient times, though all economies then were held down by tyranny and slavery given today's standards, and that, afterwards, most of our current economic fundamentals were developed as early as the 9th or 10th centuries, though not widely practiced.

The conclusion would be that it wasn't secularism that developed our modern society and economy, but Classical Judeo-Christianity (CJC), broadly speaking. That should make the word capitalism meaningless to Christians today, and that's why we need to rethink all Marxist labels commonly employed now to designate successive historical stages. They should have no meaning to CJC worldview in that it completely stands alone; indeed, CJC values dictate why the word capitalism can be so deeply offensive today to so many who believe in Western free enterprise.

Select quotes:

> In 1776, at the beginning of the American Revolution, despite the many Puritans and members of other intense religious sects who had settled there, only about 17 per cent of Americans were active in a local church – about the same as in Europe then (and now). As time passed and the number denominations proliferated, membership rose. By the start of the twentieth century, half of Americans belonged, and today about 70 percent are affiliated with a local church. (page 127 citing *The Churching of America, 1776 – 1990* (1992) by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark and *What Americans Really Believe* (2008) by Rodney Stark)
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> "Once Pandora's Box of reform had been cracked open by Luther, there was little to prevent others from breaking with their church over their own understanding of the Bible. From here, there was no return. The modern world would grow increasingly pluralistic." (page 123 quoting from *Martin Luther and the German Reformation* (2016) by Rob Sorenson)
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> Christian theology has never crystallized. If God intends that Scripture will be more adequately grasped as humans gain greater knowledge and experience, this warrants continuing reappraisal of doctrines and interpretations. And so it was. (page 80)
>
> In any event, despite all the myths and nonsense, I have no doubt that the Reformations were good for Christianity. Pluralism is what makes it the fastest-growing religion in the world. (page 156)

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Reformation Myths' Select Themes:

- Comparing Catholic differences to Protestant differences in various contexts can lack coherence because the diversity of each group makes the differences within often bigger than between them
- Church attendance and reverence was low in medieval times
- Magic was embraced in Europe more than theology, then as now
- Religion was just as political to Protestant as to Catholic kings
- Protestantism did not mean limited monarchy, and Luther was no democrat
- Most in the Church were extremely rich due to centuries of "capitalist" property management, trade, and manufacturing practices
- Most Protestant kings and churches were extremely repressive and just as much as, if not more than, Catholic kings and churches
- Most Protestant state churches excluded all other religions and were often quite anti-Semitic
- The Crusades were clearly a war against Muslim aggression over many centuries
- The Reformation accelerated the development of language, culture, and nations
- Stark believes that nationalism can be good and bad, but is very good, on balance
- Weber's theory of the Protestant work ethic creating capitalism is false. Religious attitudes began changing after Constantine in the Fourth Century, and all of the elements of capitalism were fully developed in extremely wealthy monasteries by the 9th and 10th centuries. "Religious capitalism" broke into the open with Augustine, Benedict (Monastery Rule), and Aquinas – Cash economy, profits good, just price theory, FMV, interest is ok, corruption bad, trade, manufacturing, banking, bills of exchange, insurance, accounting and applied mathematics and engineering
- What created the West's economy is the Christian Work Ethic and Christianity itself, broadly speaking, not the Protestant Work Ethic
- By the end of the 1200's there was a "theology of capitalism" of sorts
- Weber's thesis, the Enlightenment's name, and "Protestant" Scientific Revolution are all part of modernism's arrogance; there was no sudden break with the past; paradigm shifts based on just one event rarely occur in history given that most of history "stands on the shoulders of many giants"
- Science developed best in the West because the West believed it was possible due to reason being the foundation of nature; the West's Creator God instantiated nature with reason and rationality; this was and is different than the pagan and Eastern worldviews
- In the early Middle Ages England and the Netherlands led the way with the development of middle classes unlike any others
- Yes, the development of the Western idea of individualism is critical to the Western worldview, but any perceived dominance of a philosophy of radical individualism or egoism is absolute nonsense; Western Christianity is extremely group-oriented, balanced, and always has been
- Protestantism did not cause disenchantment or secularization; proliferation of denominations does not do that; it strengthens religion
- In fact, it strengthened religion much through increased religious competition in the religious marketplace; this is the great driving force for religion in the world today, where human beings remain naturally oriented toward the supernatural; monopolies like Government, especially religious ones that stifle freedom, are lazy and inefficient

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- Religion is increasing in Latin America after centuries of RCC monopolistic domination, and it's helping the RCC itself; evangelical natives are replacing missionaries worldwide, which is good because that's how Christianity grew – person-to-person or friend-to-friend – at such high rates originally; in a sense, Martin Luther is helping the RCC around the world today
- Secularization is not "just around the corner" anywhere; actually, the opposite is happening
- Secularization is failing as a master narrative; "believing non-believers," "spiritual but not religious," and "believing non-church goers" still believe in the supernatural
- Religious liberty does not exist in Europe, as it does in America
- Long-term, Dr. Stark anticipates a religious revival in Europe due to the natural state of human beings and population trends favoring religious couples that have many more children than secular couples
- Only educated people do stupid stuff like liberation theology and collectivism
- Global religious growth is often broad-based from religious concerns and not as much from desires to be wealthy in various material ways, though much greater wealth creation is almost always the product of a CJC worldview

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