

## **A Look at How Theologians Have Justified Radically Changing Christian Doctrine Over the Centuries**

For those of you who may think some of the things on this web site are wrong, and who may doubt that Christianity and its doctrines have been radically changed ever since Christian theologians began to use Reason to displace Bible-based faith and doctrine, you'll be interested in the below introduction to a book published 6 years after this site's *The Age of Reason*. The author (below) is attempting to defend theology's use of the Reason that came from pagan Greek philosophy to change Christian doctrines and the foundational underpinnings of Western civilization, and he will openly and plainly say things like, "reason and logic" [not the Bible] are "the primary guide to religious truth." Yes, theologians think Reason is good, and the progress that has resulted from it is their proof.

The book's author is a modern scholar who wants to convince you that the radical changes made to Christianity and its doctrines over the centuries by Reason-wielding theologians were good because those radical changes resulted in "progress" in Western civilization. His "proof" is that progress is good...and since Reason-based theology was a major cause of that progress, Reason itself must be good...which means the radical changes to Christian doctrine can also be called "progress"!

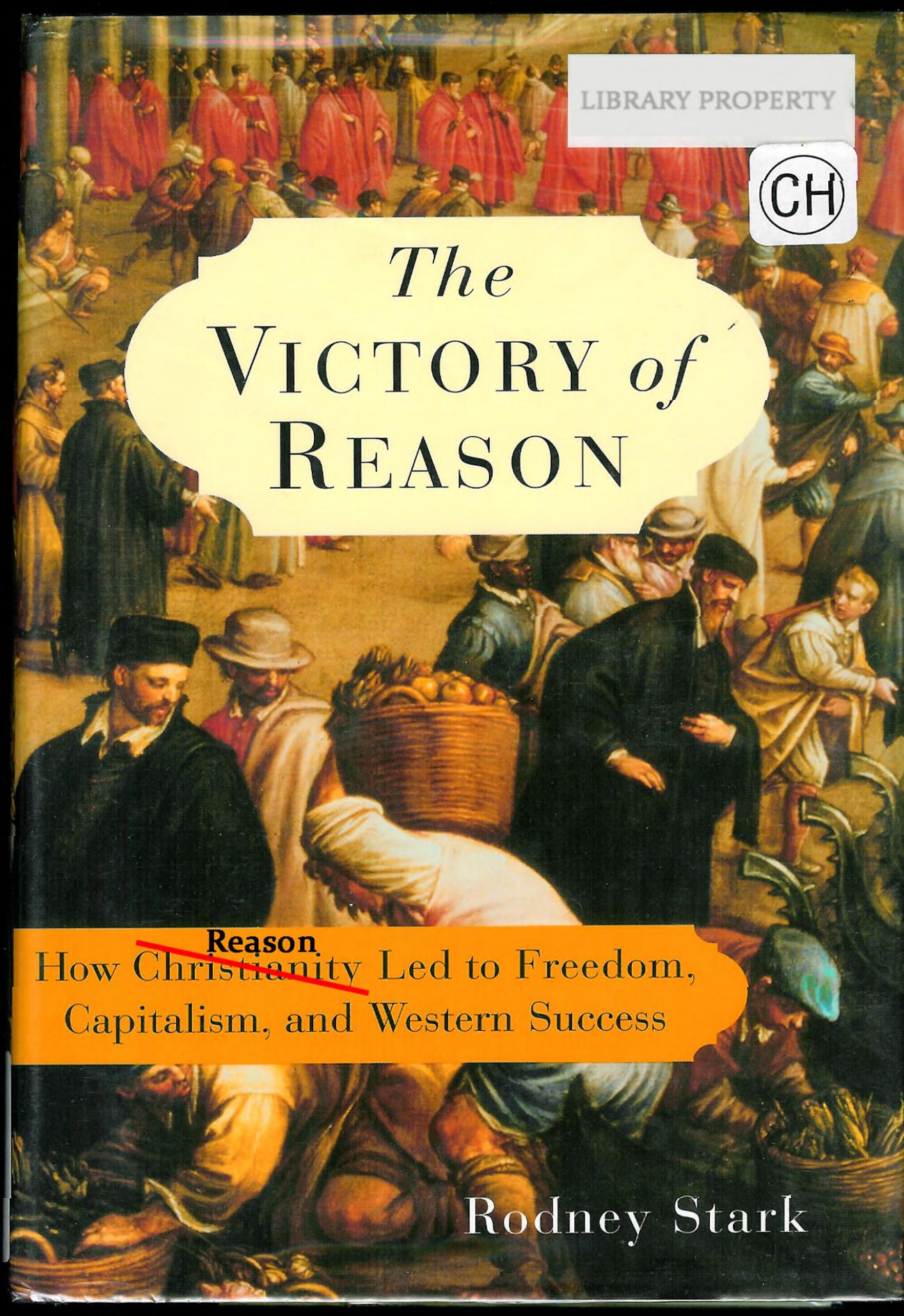
These radical doctrinal changes are a major reason Christians have lost interest in learning the Bible; they no longer think the word of God means what it actually says!

Scroll through and read the highlighted places in the author's well-researched, well-written introduction below to see that:

- Self-based Reason was the foundation for everyday things in our lives such as capitalism, private property rights, separation of church and state, science, and replacing monarchy with Western civilization's democracy.
- Pagan Greek human-based Reason became Christian theology's primary guide (displacing the Bible) to "religious truth."
- Doctrines could "always be modified" – even "radically" – by Reason.
- Reason-based theology was the justification for the West's adoption of things like "equality", "moral innovations", "human rights", and the "freedom" for every man to do that which is right in his own eyes.
- Reason is why Christianity became the only major religion on Earth to reject the Biblical slavery outlined in Leviticus 25 – as covered in *AOR's* chapter D16.

While we've all been sleeping, theologians have been very busy.  
Let them that have ears that hear, hear.

(I have highlighted and underlined some text below for emphasis and for your benefit.)



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*The*  
**VICTORY of**  
**REASON**

~~Reason~~  
How ~~Christianity~~ Led to Freedom,  
Capitalism, and Western Success

Rodney Stark

## *Reason and Progress*

When Europeans first began to explore the globe, their greatest surprise was not the existence of the Western Hemisphere but the extent of their own technological superiority over the rest of the world. Not only were the proud Mayan, Aztec, and Inca nations helpless in the face of European intruders; so were the fabled civilizations of the East: China, India, and even Islam were backward by comparison with sixteenth-century Europe. How had this happened? Why was it that although many civilizations had pursued alchemy, it led to chemistry only in Europe? Why was it that, for centuries, Europeans were the only ones possessed of eyeglasses, chimneys, reliable clocks, heavy cavalry, or a system of music notation? How had nations that had arisen from barbarism and the rubble of fallen Rome so greatly surpassed the rest of the world?

Several recent authors have discovered the secret to Western success in geography. But that same geography long sustained European cultures that were well behind those of Asia. Others have traced the rise of the West to steel, or to guns and sailing ships, and still others have credited a more productive agriculture. The trouble is that these answers are part of what needs to be explained: *why* did Europeans excel at metallurgy, shipbuilding, or farming? The most convincing answer to these questions attributes Western dominance to the rise of capitalism, which also took place only in Europe. Even the most militant enemies of capitalism credit it with creating previously undreamed of productivity and progress. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels proposed that prior to the rise of capitalism, humans engaged “in the most sloth-

ful indolence” and that the capitalist system was “the first to show what man’s activity can bring about . . . [it] has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than all the preceding generations together.” Capitalism achieves this “miracle” through regular reinvestment to increase productivity—through either greater capacity or improved technology—and by motivating both management and labor through ever-rising payoffs.

Supposing that capitalism did produce Europe’s great leap forward, it remains to be explained why it developed only in Europe. Some have found the roots of capitalism in the Protestant Reformation; others have traced it back to various political circumstances.

But if one digs deeper, it becomes clear that the truly fundamental basis not only for capitalism but for the rise of the West was an extraordinary faith in *reason*.

*The Victory of Reason* explores a series of developments in which reason won the day, giving unique shape to Western culture and institutions. The most important of these victories occurred within Christianity. While the other world religions emphasized mystery and intuition, Christianity alone embraced reason and logic as the primary guide! to religious truth. Christian faith in reason was influenced by Greek philosophy. But the more important fact is that Greek philosophy had little impact on Greek religions. These remained typical mystery cults, in which ambiguity and logical contradictions were taken as hallmarks of sacred origins. Similar assumptions concerning the fundamental inexplicability of the gods and the intellectual superiority of introspection dominated all of the other major world religions. But from early days, the church fathers taught that reason was the supreme gift from God and the means to *progressively increase* their understanding of scripture and revelation. Consequently, Christianity was *oriented to the future*, while the other major religions asserted the superiority of the past. At least in principle, if not always in fact, Christian doctrines could always be modified in the name of progress as demonstrated by reason. Encouraged by the Scholastics and embodied in the great medieval universities founded by the church, faith in the power of reason infused Western culture, stimulating the pursuit of science and the evolution of democratic theory and practice. The rise of

### 3

capitalism was also a victory for church-inspired reason, since capitalism is in essence the systematic and sustained application of reason to commerce—something that first took place within the great monastic estates.

During the past century, Western intellectuals have been more than willing to trace European imperialism to Christian origins, but they have been entirely unwilling to recognize that Christianity made any contribution (other than intolerance) to the Western capacity to dominate. Rather, the West is said to have surged ahead precisely as it *overcame* religious barriers to progress, especially those impeding science. Nonsense. 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. Unfortunately, even many of those historians willing to grant Christianity a role in shaping Western progress have tended to limit themselves to tracing beneficial religious effects of the Protestant Reformation. It is as if the previous fifteen hundred years of Christianity either were of little matter or were harmful. Such academic anti-Catholicism inspired the most famous book ever written on the origins of capitalism.

At the start of the twentieth century, the German sociologist Max Weber published what soon became an immensely influential study: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.<sup>1</sup> In it he proposed that capitalism originated only in Europe because, of all the world's religions, only Protestantism provided a moral vision that led people to restrain their material consumption while vigorously seeking wealth. Weber argued that prior to the Reformation, restraint on consumption was invariably linked to asceticism and hence to condemnations of commerce. Conversely, the pursuit of wealth was linked to profligate consumption. Either cultural pattern was inimical to capitalism. According to Weber, the Protestant ethic shattered these traditional linkages, creating a culture of frugal entrepreneurs content to systematically reinvest profits in order to pursue ever greater wealth, and therein lies the key to capitalism and the ascendancy of the West.

Perhaps because it was such an elegant thesis, it was widely embraced despite the fact that it was so obviously wrong. Even today,

*The Protestant Ethic* enjoys an almost sacred status among sociologists,<sup>2</sup> although economic historians quickly dismissed Weber's surprisingly undocumented<sup>3</sup> monograph on the irrefutable grounds that the rise of capitalism in Europe *preceded* the Reformation by centuries. As Hugh Trevor-Roper explained, "The idea that large-scale industrial capitalism was ideologically impossible before the Reformation is exploded by the simple fact that it existed."<sup>4</sup> Only a decade after Weber published, the celebrated Henri Pirenne<sup>5</sup> noted a large literature that "established the fact that all of the essential features of capitalism—individual enterprise, advances in credit, commercial profits, speculation, etc.—are to be found from the twelfth century on, in the city republics of Italy—Venice, Genoa, or Florence." A generation later, the equally celebrated Fernand Braudel complained that "all historians have opposed this tenuous theory [the Protestant ethic], although they have not managed to be rid of it once and for all. Yet it is clearly false. The northern countries took over the place that earlier had been so long and brilliantly occupied by the old capitalist centers of the Mediterranean. They invented nothing, either in technology or business management."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, during their critical period of economic development, these northern centers of capitalism were Catholic, not Protestant—the Reformation still lay well into the future.

From another angle, John Gilchrist, a leading historian of the economic activity of the medieval church, pointed out that the first examples of capitalism appeared in the great Christian monasteries.<sup>7</sup> It also is well established that even in the nineteenth century, Protestant regions and nations on the Continent<sup>8</sup> were *not* significantly ahead of many Catholic places—the "backwardness" of Spain notwithstanding.<sup>9</sup>

Even though Weber was wrong, he was correct to suppose that religious ideas played a vital role in the rise of capitalism in Europe. The material conditions needed for capitalism existed in many civilizations in various eras, including China, Islam, India, Byzantium, and probably ancient Rome and Greece as well. But none of these societies broke through and developed capitalism, as none evolved ethical visions compatible with this dynamic economic system. Instead, leading religions outside the West called for asceticism and

5 denounced profits, while wealth was exacted from peasants and merchants by rapacious elites dedicated to display and consumption.<sup>10</sup> Why did things turn out differently in Europe? Because of the Christian commitment to rational theology—something that may have played a major role in causing the Reformation but that surely predated Protestantism by far more than a millennium.

Even so, capitalism developed in only *some places*. Why not in all? Because in some European societies, as in most of the rest of the world, it was prevented from happening by greedy despots: *freedom* was also essential for the development of capitalism. This raises another matter: *why has freedom so seldom existed in most of the world, and how was it nurtured in some medieval European states?* This too was a victory of reason. Before any medieval European state actually attempted rule by an elected council, Christian theologians had long been theorizing about the nature of equality and individual rights—indeed, the later work of such “secular” eighteenth-century political theorists as John Locke explicitly rested on egalitarian axioms derived by church scholars.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up: the rise of the West was based on four primary victories of reason. The first was the development of faith in progress within Christian theology. The second victory was the way that faith in progress translated into technical and organizational innovations, many of them fostered by monastic estates. The third was that, thanks to Christian theology, reason informed both political philosophy and practice to the extent that responsive states, sustaining a substantial degree of personal freedom, appeared in medieval Europe. The final victory involved the application of reason to commerce, resulting in the development of capitalism within the safe havens provided by responsive states. These were the victories by which the West won.

## OF THE BOOK

*The Victory of Reason* is divided into two parts. The first focuses on *foundations*. It will survey the role of reason in Christianity, in preparing the way for political freedom and for the emergence of

both science and capitalism. The second part recounts the remarkable ways in which Europeans *fulfilled* these foundations.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the nature and consequences of the Christian commitment to rational theology. How did this come to pass? And why did it result in the truly revolutionary notion that the application of reason to scripture will result in *theological progress*? It was a basic axiom of Christian theology that greater understanding of God can be gained over time, that even established doctrines can undergo radical revisions. Having developed the rational and progressive aspects of Christian theology, I turn to examples and implications. First, I demonstrate the absolutely essential role of rational theology for the rise of science, showing the religious reasons why science arose in Europe but failed to do so in China, ancient Greece, or in Islam. Then, attention shifts to important moral innovations achieved by the medieval church. For example, Christianity fostered a very strong conception of *individualism* consistent with its doctrines concerning free will and salvation. In addition, medieval monasticism cultivated regard for the virtues of *work* and *plain living* that fully anticipated the Protestant ethic by almost a millennium. This chapter also outlines the role of early and medieval Christianity in fostering new ideas about human rights. For capitalism to develop, it was essential that Europe ceased to be a collection of slave societies. As with Rome and all other contemporary civilizations, slavery existed everywhere in early medieval Europe. But among all major faiths, Christianity was unique in evolving moral opposition to slavery, and in about the seventh century, serious religious opposition to it began. By the tenth century slavery had disappeared in most of the West, lingering only at the frontiers.<sup>12</sup> That centuries later slavery was reinstated in Europe's New World colonies is a separate matter, although here too it was Christianity that produced and sustained the abolition movements.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter 2 examines the material and religious foundations of capitalism that were laid down during the so-called Dark Ages. It begins by demonstrating that rather than being a period of ignorance and backwardness, the era from the fall of Rome through the Middle Ages was a time of spectacular technological and intellec-

7  
tual progress that erupted when innovation was freed from the grip of Roman despotism. Christian commitment to progress played an important role not only by prompting the search for new technology but by encouraging its rapid and widespread adoption. Moreover, the response of church leaders and scholars to all the progress going on around them resulted in some remarkable theological "revisions." Just as have the other world religions, for centuries Christianity proclaimed the moral and spiritual superiority of asceticism and expressed antagonism toward commerce and finance. But these teachings were resoundingly rejected in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by Catholic theologians who stoutly defended private property and the pursuit of profits. How could this have occurred? Because as new commercial activities began in the great monastic estates, their moral status was "reassessed" by theologians who concluded that previous prohibitions had been based on an "inadequate theology." **[because it was Bible-based rather than Reason-based]**

Chapter 3 begins with a brief sketch of command economies: how despotic regimes squelch innovation and commerce as wealth is hoarded, consumed, or expropriated, but seldom invested. the rise of capitalism required that despotic states be overcome, the remainder of the chapter is devoted to explaining the appearance of freedom in Europe—of small, often surprisingly democratic political units. First, the Christian foundations of Western democratic theory are explored—the evolution of doctrines of individual moral equality, of private property rights, and the separation of church and state. Then, the emergence of relatively democratic rule in some Italian city-states and in northern Europe will be described and explained.

Chapter 4 traces the perfection of capitalism in the Italian city-states—how the management and financial techniques needed to sustain large, rational, industrial firms were developed. Chapter 5 traces the spread of "colonial" Italian capitalist firms to northern cities, most of them located in what is today Belgium and the Netherlands, and shows how the locals soon learned to create their own capitalist firms. The chapter concludes with a long section on how the English developed the most powerful capitalist economy in Europe.

Chapter 6 examines the leading *negative* cases because an adequate explanation of why capitalism developed in some parts of Europe must also explain why it failed to appear (or was destroyed) in other parts. Why was it that Spain, the richest and most powerful nation in sixteenth-century Europe, remained a precapitalist, feudal state? Why did Spanish rule destroy the capitalist vitality of the Italian city-states and the Spanish Netherlands? And then, why did Spain so rapidly become a third-rate power, stripped of its empire? As for France, why did capitalism and liberty languish there too? To answer these questions, I turn again to the stifling economic effects of despotism.

Against this background, Chapter 7 shifts to the New World and to the dramatic economic differences that came to distinguish the United States and Canada from Latin America. Telling this story will also serve as an extensive summary of the book, since the factors involved were essentially a reenactment of the economic history of Europe. Here too, Christianity, freedom, and capitalism played the crucial roles. The conclusion briefly considers whether this is still true. Can globalization create fully modern societies that are not Christian, not capitalist, and not even free?