



Is Rodney Stark Correct on the Reasons for the West's Economic Success?

A Review Essay

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Abstract

In a number of his works but particularly in two books, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity led to Freedom, Capitalism and Western Success* (2005) and *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity* (2014), Rodney Stark makes the case that the most important, indeed decisive, factor for the rise of the West and its enduring supremacy, is Christianity. Stark asks a series of questions that have long been considered fundamental to our understanding of the modern world: Why was it that China, India, and Islam were backward by comparison with sixteenth century Europe? Why did alchemy develop into 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? Stark avers that while other world religions emphasized mystery and intuition, Christianity alone embraced reason and logic as the primary guide to religious truth. Stark further makes the claim that it is quite possible that Christianity remains an essential element in the globalization of modernity. Though there is compelling evidence for the Protestant work ethic as being a key determinant for the rise of Europe, as hypothesized by Weber, there are important objections to Christianity per se being a *sine qua non* for Western success.

Keywords: Rodney Stark, Christianity, Weber, Protestant work ethic, Western success

Introduction

For many years cultural relativism has taken root in Western academia, one important consequence of which is a reluctance to examine in an objective manner the indubitable

dominance of Western countries over the past 500 years. Indeed, to even describe it in such terms has been somewhat of a taboo. This remains the case till the present day though there are exceptions. These include, for example, Gregory Clarke's *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World* (2007) and Niall Ferguson's *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011). Albeit from different perspectives, these two authors have no qualms about asserting the reality of Western dominance and attempting to explain the reasons as to why it is so.

This paper examines the arguments by the sociologist of religion Rodney Stark who has made a distinct contribution to this debate albeit in a most forthright and somewhat provocative manner. In two works, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity led to Freedom, Capitalism and Western Success* (2005) and *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity* (2014), Stark makes the case that the most important, indeed decisive, factor for the rise of the west and its enduring supremacy is Christianity. Although he acknowledges that his views are unfashionable (as attested by the first sentence of the 2014 book "This is a remarkably unfashionable book"), they are, nevertheless, worthy of examination and engagement. Moreover, as a former President of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (he was president between 2003-2004), they are influential.

Unsurprisingly, and as is the norm with views that challenge mainstream thinking and sensibilities, both the form and content of Stark's work have either attracted hostility or been ignored. Stark is certainly confrontational and gives the impression of being on a mission. For example – again on the first page of his 2014 book – he laments the fact that in American universities, courses on Western civilization have largely been dropped on the grounds that they were tantamount to being apologists for Western hegemony and oppression. Stark retorts: "To the extent this policy prevails, Americans will become increasingly ignorant of how the modern world came to be. Worse yet, they are in danger of being badly misled by a flood of absurd, politically correct fabrications, all of them popular on college campuses" (2014: 1).

Hence, sharp criticism or shunning of such a stance is typical in academic circles. An exemplifier of this is the blistering assault on Stark by Michael Carroll in the journal *Religion*:

It appears then that Rodney Stark, at this point in his long career, has embraced a retrograde historiography of religion that very significantly blurs the line between "religious belief" and "the scientific study of religious belief" . . . while Stark's recent work may not have attracted support in the academic community, his work has likely reached a large popular audience . . . If someone like Rodney Stark, who was for decades such a central participant in the organizations and cultural milieu associated with the sociological study of religion in the United States, can so easily revert to a 19th-century social-evolutionary framework whose telos is evangelical Protestantism – then such a worldview is clearly not dead (121).

Carroll is also opposed to Stark's views on Islam – for example, he is most hostile to Stark's assertion that "I think it inappropriate to include Islam in the inspired core of faiths" – arguing again that "underlying his conclusions about Islam is [a] long-standing and distinctively evangelical approach to what religion is all about." He concludes that Stark's work should be taken as an evangelical worldview in modern America (123). In other words, Stark is more a preacher than an academic.

By contrast, in a largely sympathetic review of Stark's work, Jay Richards, while acknowledging that Stark has been criticized for lacking the nuance appropriate to a study of history, nevertheless makes the point that "when trying to pierce a calcified mythology, it is often best to use a sharp spear" (387). Similarly, in a review of *Victory of Reason*, Thomas Woods asserts that despite Stark having a habit of overstating his case and being prone to making extravagant claims he "has much of importance to say in his useful . . . book, his intemperate critics to the contrary notwithstanding" (616).

This essay argues that visceral biases against Stark are not conducive to a better understanding of the world and that, notwithstanding the brazen style and direct prose, Stark's powerful thesis needs to be examined with due diligence, appealing to evidence at hand. Stark certainly takes a firm position that one can disagree with, but it is a misreading to denigrate it as displaying evangelical zeal. Accordingly, our aim is to critique Stark's main thesis by recourse to argument and evidence.

In *The Victory of Reason* Stark asks a series of questions that have long been considered fundamental to our understanding of the modern world: Why was it that China, India, and Islam were backward by comparison with sixteenth century Europe? Why did alchemy develop into 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? (2005: ix). Stark asserts that "[w]hen Christians knew virtually nothing of Greek learning, it was alive and deeply appreciated in Islam . . . But the possession of all enlightenment did not prompt much intellectual progress within Islam, let alone eventuate in Islamic science. Instead Muslim intellectuals regarded Greek learning, especially the work of Aristotle, as virtual scripture to be *believed* rather than pursued" (2005: 21). Stark makes the case that "[t]he rise of science was not an extension of classical learning. It was the natural outgrowth of Christian doctrine: nature exists because it was created by God. In order to love and honor God, it is necessary to fully appreciate the wonders of his handiwork. Because God is perfect, his handiwork functions in accordance with *immutable principles*. By the full use of our God-given powers of reason and observation, it ought to be possible to discover these principles. These were the crucial ideas that explain why science arose in Christian Europe and nowhere else" (2005: 22-23).

Stark avers that while other world religions emphasized mystery and intuition, Christianity alone embraced reason and logic as the primary guide to religious truth (2005: x). What marks Christianity out is that it is an "orthodox" religion, that is, it lays emphasis on correct (*ortho*) opinion or thinking (*doxa*). In contrast, other religions, notably Judaism and Islam are "orthopraxy" religions, concerned with "law to be understood and applied." Accordingly, the stress on thinking is thought to be key to the purportedly inquisitive nature of Christians (2005: 8).

In *How the West Won*, Stark asks "why have so many scholars overlooked Christianity's influence on the rise of capitalism?" and provides one reason as the Bible's condemnation of greed and wealth (2014: 131). But he argues that the Bible does not condemn commerce or merchants. By the middle ages, a religious capitalism had emerged whereby the dynamism of the mediaeval economy was primarily that of the church and that monasteries were akin to modern firms, that is, well administered and quick to adopt the latest technological advances.

Stark makes the claim that the “advent of leisure for clergy and other church officials had a profound impact on the rise of the West . . . in the centuries to come, church officials played key roles in advancing science, economics, and learning . . . Christian theology encouraged the idea of progress, which justified long-term investment strategies, and provided moral justifications for the business practices fundamental to capitalism” (2014: 132, 139).

It is the content of Christianity, irrespective of denomination, that is deemed to have a profound, long term economic consequence as hypothesized by Stark. It would appear that the renowned economic historian Angus Maddison concurs with this view by highlighting profound changes that took place in European society in the early stages of Christianity:

The adoption of Christianity as a state religion in 380AD led to basic changes in the nature of European marriage, inheritance, and kinship. The papacy imposed a pattern that differed dramatically from that which was to characterize the Islamic world. Marriage was to be strictly monogamous, with a ban on concubinage, adoption, divorce, and marriage of widows or widowers. There was prohibition of consanguineous marriage with siblings, ascendants, descendants, including first, second and third cousins, or relatives of siblings by marriage. A papal decision in AD 385 imposed priestly celibacy. The main purpose of these rules was to limit inheritance entitlements to close family members and to channel large amounts to the church which became a property owner on a huge scale. At the same time, they broke down previous loyalties to clan, tribe, and caste, promoted individualism, and accumulation, and reinforced the sense of belonging to a nation state (80).

Such characteristics of the Christian community, in and of themselves, were *prima facie* neutral in regard to economic variables given that the lands of Christendom did not develop appreciably more quickly than other parts of the world. Indeed, a thousand years after Christianity had been embedded in Europe, the continent nevertheless was considered to have entered the Dark Ages. Cumulatively, however, particularly around the time of the Reformation and the rise of Protestantism, they seemed to have become of great import.

Stark (2005: xiii) argues that the rise of the West was based on four victories of reason: the development of faith in progress within Christian theology; faith in progress translated into technical and organizational innovations; thanks to Christian theology, reason informed both political philosophy and practice; and the application of reason to commerce, resulting in the development of capitalism. It was not just the Protestant work ethic, as famously theorized by Max Weber, but a Christian ethic that was linked to capitalism (2005: 62)¹ and that capitalism existed well before the Reformation – from the monastic estates as early as the ninth century and especially after the twelfth century onwards in the city states of Venice, Genoa, and Florence.

Given Stark’s view that capitalism was functioning in monasteries and Italian city states, with advances in technology, production for profit, banking, and credit, it is not surprising that he rejects Weber’s Protestant work ethic thesis on the grounds that the rise of capitalism

¹ Stark accuses Weber of displaying a “smug anti-Catholicism of his time and place” (2005: 239 n. 3).

preceded the Reformation by centuries. He quotes Hugh Trevor-Roper: “The idea that large-scale industrial capitalism was ideologically impossible before the Reformation is exploded by the simple fact that it existed” (2014: 279). Similarly, he argues that the roots of the scientific revolution do not reside in Protestant Puritanism but go back much further (2014: chapters 8, 15) and that Christianity was *essential* to the rise of science, which is why science was a purely Western phenomenon (2014: 304).

But, contrary to Stark, the innovativeness, technological upgrading, and productivity of monasteries and city states did not lead to a significant increase in wealth and living standards; it was only after about the year 1800 that the “income scissors” between North West Europe and the rest of the world sharply opened up at the dawn of industrialization and modernization: what has been termed the “great divergence” (Clark: 2, fig. 1.1; 3) – the root cause of which Weber attributed to the Protestant work ethic.² As to why Catholic Spain, which was the richest and most powerful country in the sixteenth century, soon lost its empire to become a third rate power, Stark argues is rooted in the stifling economic effects of despotism (2005: xvi). But this presents an *aporia* for Stark’s thesis given that Christianity is supposed to engender reason, progress, and innovation – which ought to militate against the entrenchment of despotism. It would lead to the obvious conclusion that the “Catholic ethic” was insufficient to offset stagnation and despotism – precisely the argument made by Weber.

In a manner similar to that of Weber, Tawney argued that the ancient maxim *laborare est orare* (to work is to pray) is adopted with a greater intensity by Puritan moralists. “The labour which he idealizes is not simply a requirement imposed by nature, or a punishment for the sin of Adam. It is itself a kind of ascetic discipline, more rigorous than that demanded of any order of mendicants – a discipline imposed by the will of God, and to be undergone, not in solitude, but in the punctual discharge of secular duties” (240). There must be no idle leisure: “those that are prodigal of their time despise their own souls” (Matthew Henry, cited in Tawney: 241). “If God show you a way in which you may lawfully get more than in another way (without wrong to your soul or to any other) [Matthew 16:26 cautions ‘For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?’, if you refuse this, and choose the less gainful way, you cross one of the ends of your Calling, and you refuse to be God’s steward” (Richard Baxter, cited in Tawney: 241). Tawney concludes that the “Christian life . . . must be systematic and organized, the work of an iron will and cool intelligence” (242).

The injunction to be a steward is considered a core aspect of Christianity whereby wealth is held in trust for others as stipulated by St. Paul: “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). Psalm 24 also hints at stewardship: “The earth *is* the Lord’s, and all that is in it; the world, and those who live in it.” The parable of the talents in Matthew is perhaps clearer: “The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents” (25:16-17). The assumption is that such stewardship implies improving the Lord’s resources, adding to his wealth for his glory; this might be debatable but

² Note that Clark’s data is at variance with Maddison’s, who suggests a significant variation between Europe and the rest of the world occurred from 1500 onwards, but which accelerated after 1800.

is certainly the interpretation of those who locate reason and dynamism of Europe as residing in its being infused with Christian mores, values that supposedly do not exist in other religions.

Stark closes his 2005 book by providing a poignant quote from a leading Chinese scholar as evidence in support for his thesis:

One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. This is why the West is so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubts about this (2005: 235).

Socio-Economic Situation of the Modern Christian World

The above quotation is indeed a striking and powerful endorsement of Stark's thesis, but matters are not as straightforward as attested by the post-colonial era, during which period many Christian-majority countries of the developing world have not fared particularly well no matter which denomination is dominant. Moreover, the countries which have fully made the transition from the third world to the first world are non-Christian – in fact, are largely irreligious – most notably South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; whilst China has experienced the highest growth rates since the mid-1980s. The table below provides Human Development Index (HDI) rankings and labor participation of Christian-majority countries.

Table 1. Data for Christian-majority Countries (2010 estimates)

	% of Christians	HDI Ranking	Labor Force Participation Rate (%)		Importance of Religion (%)	
			Males	Females	Yes	No
Norway	84.7	1	69	61		
Australia	67.3	2	72	59		
Switzerland	81.3	3	75	62	41	57
Netherlands	50.6	4	71	59		
USA	78.3	5	69	56	65	34
Germany	68.7	6	66	54	40	59
New Zealand	57	7	74	62		
Canada	69	8	71	62	42	57
Denmark	83.5	10	66	59	19	80
Ireland	92	11	68	59	54	46
Sweden	67.2	12	68	60	17	82
Iceland	95	13	77	71		
United Kingdom	71.1	14	69	56	27	73
France	63	20	62	51	30	69
Austria	80.4	21	68	55		
Belgium	64.2	21	59	48		
Luxembourg	70.4	21	65	51		
Finland	81.6	24	64	56		
Slovenia	78.4	25	63	52	47	52
Italy	83.3	26	60	40	72	25
Spain	78.6	27	66	53	49	50
Greece	88.1	29	63	44	71	28
Cyprus	73.2	32	71	56	75	24
Lithuania	89.8	35	67	56	42	49
Poland	94.3	35	65	49	75	19
Slovakia	85.3	37	69	51		
Malta	97	39	66	38	86	10
Chile	89.4	41	75	49	70	29
Portugal	93.8	41	66	55		
Hungary	81	43	80	45	39	58
Cuba	59.2	44	70	43		
Croatia	93.4	47	58	45	70	28
Latvia	55.8	48	68	55	39	58
Argentina	85.2	49	75	48	66	33
Uruguay	57.9	50	77	56	41	59
Montenegro	78.1	51	57	43	71	28
Belarus	71.2	53	63	50	34	56
Romania	99	54	65	49	84	12
Bulgaria	82.1	56	59	48		
Russia	73.3	57	72	57	34	60

Trinidad and Tobago	65.9	64	76	53		
Panama	93	65	82	49	88	11
Venezuela	89.3	67	79	51	79	21
Costa Rica	90.9	68	79	47	79	19
Mexico	95.1	71	80	45	73	25
Serbia	92.5	77	61	45	54	44
Brazil	88.9	79	81	72	87	13
Georgia	88.5	79	75	57	81	16
Peru	95.5	82	84	68	84	11
Ukraine	83.8	83	67	53	46	48
Bosnia-Herzegovina	52.3	86	57	34	77	21
Armenia	98.5	87	73	54	73	25
Colombia	92.5	96	80	56	83	16
Jamaica	77.2	96	71	56		
Ecuador	94.1	98	83	55	82	17
Botswana	72.1	109	82	72		
Paraguay	96.9	111	85	56	92	8
Gabon	76.5	112	65	56		
Bolivia	93.9	113	81	64	89	10
Moldova	97.4	114	44	38	72	19
El Salvador	88.2	115	79	48	83	16
Philippines	92.6	117	80	51	96	4
South Africa	81.2	118	61	45	85	15
Guyana	66	121	81	43		
Guatemala	95.2	125	88	49	88	9
Namibia	97.5	127	64	55		
Honduras	87.6	129	83	43	84	15
Nicaragua	85.8	132	80	47	84	15
Ghana	74.9	138	71	67	95	5
Rep of Congo	85.9	140	73	69		
Zambia	97.6	141	86	73	95	5
Kenya	84.8	147	72	62	94	6
Swaziland	88.1	148	72	44		
Angola	98.3	149	77	63		
Rwanda	93.4	151	85	80	95	5
Cameroon	70.3	152	77	64	96	4
Madagascar	85.3	155	91	87		
Zimbabwe	87	156	90	83	88	12
Papua New Guinea	99	157	74	71		
Tanzania	61.4	159	90	88	89	11
Lesotho	96.8	162	74	59		
Uganda	86.7	164	79	76	93	7
Benin	53	165	78	68		
Haiti	86.9	168	71	61		
Ethiopia	62.8	173	89	78		
Malawi	82.7	174	82	85	99	1

Liberia	85.9	175	65	58		
Mozambique	56.7	178	83	86		
Burundi	91.5	180	82	83	98	2
Eritrea	62.9	182	90	80		
C. African Republic	89.5	185	85	72		
DR of Congo	95.8	186	73	71	94	5
Average			74	58		

Note: Excludes countries with a population of less than one million; Labor force participation refers to age 15 and older; the question on importance of religion was phrased as “Is religion an important of your daily life?”

Source: Population figures from Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project; HDI rankings from the UNDP’s *Human Development Report 2014* (pp. 160-63); Labor force data from World Bank *World Development Indicators 2014*, Table 2.2 Labor force structure; Question on religion from a Gallup survey cited in Crabtree.

Within the *Very High Human Development Index* band of 49 countries, all but 10 are Christian majority (the ones which are not are Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Israel, Brunei, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait) and in the 10 countries with the highest HDI ranking, only one (Singapore) does not have a Christian majority. Thus, with the unusual exception of Israel (excluding the occupied Palestinian territories), the only non-Christian majority countries to have truly become developed are four East Asian countries (given that the Gulf economies are heavily reliant on oil exports and do not have the array of capabilities in many other sectors, they cannot be considered as being fully developed).

In the *High Human Development Index* band of 52 countries, all but 15 are Christian-majority (the ones which are not are Libya, Oman, Malaysia, Lebanon, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, Iran, Azerbaijan, Jordan, Fiji, Thailand, Tunisia, Algeria, and Albania). In the *Medium Human Development Index* band (with 41 countries) 14 countries are Christian majority. Finally, in the *Low Human Development Index* band (with 42 countries) 17 are Christian majority – all in Africa with the exception of Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, and Haiti.

Excluding European countries and Australia and New Zealand whose Christian population has declined as a result of secularization, most Christian-majority countries have a Christian population of over 70%. Accordingly, the influence of Christian beliefs and values will inevitably be profound. It naturally follows that if Christianity is conducive to economic development and growth, countries which are predominantly Christian – no matter the denomination – (or were largely Christian prior to secularization) will coalesce in the upper echelons of the development and HDI ladder. Insofar as most developed countries are Christian-majority, this suggests *prima facie* support for this hypothesis. For Stark, this is no accident: the strong correlation is based on causation emanating from Christianity being rooted in reason – the decisive explanatory factor in the rise of Europe and its satellites across the globe.

But the difficulty with this hypothesis arises with respect to the poorest, least developed countries. As noted, while the Very High and High HDI bands have a preponderance of Christian-majority countries, the lower bands also have significant numbers of Christian-majority countries: 14 and 17 in the Medium and Low bands respectively. This suggests that

the supposedly efficacious attributes of Christianity with respect to economic variables are not universal: at most we can hypothesize that while Christianity *may* have been a necessary condition for the early stages of industrial capitalism, it has not been a sufficient condition for many countries that have long adopted the faith. Certainly, in the case of the advanced East Asian countries it has not been necessary.

The advanced countries are a mixture of Protestant, Catholic, and some Orthodox denominations, but these developed long ago and Weber's thesis was an attempt to elucidate why certain aspects of Protestantism were fundamental to the "spirit of capitalism" which led to the advent of industrialization in North West Europe. Once this new mode of production was established, the demonstration effect followed, enabling other non-Protestant European Christian countries also to industrialize, compete, and modernize. A similar demonstration effect, however, has not taken root in many Christian countries in the post-colonial era. Might this be because they did not have a Protestant inheritance? Table 2 provides a breakdown of Protestants and Catholics in Christian-majority countries with a Low HDI, where data is available.

Table 2. Christian-Majority Countries with Low HDI

Country	Protestant (%)	Catholic (%)
Kenya	47.4	23.3
Swaziland	90% Christian	
Angola	n/a	50% approx.
Rwanda	26	57
Cameroon	26.3	57
Madagascar	21.8	28.1
Zimbabwe	59	33
Papa New Guinea	69	27
Uganda	42	42
Benin	10	27
Haiti	10	80
Ethiopia	19	44 (Orthodox)
Liberia	85.6 Christian	
Mozambique	27	28
Eritrea	50% Christian (mainly Orthodox)	
DR of Congo	40	45

Source: International Religious Freedom Report 2014

There is no persuasive case to support the view that Christianity can, in and of itself, propel the least developed countries on an upward developmental path or, for these countries to grow, Christianity must grow – as Stark (2005: 235) suggests “it is quite possible that Christianity remains an essential element in the globalization of modernity.” These are broad brush claims which lack clear evidence; moreover, they do not challenge the secularization thesis that as societies develop, educational and living standards rise, which in turn, leads to the declining role of religion.

Is the Protestant Work Ethic a Necessary Condition?

Having a Christian-majority has not prevented these countries from being some of the poorest in the world. However, proponents of the Protestant work ethic can, with some justification, point to the virtual absence of Protestant majority countries from the Low HDI band. Indeed, in regard to the Americas, Lawrence Harrison asserts that “there is no other satisfactory way to explain the sharply contrasting evolution of the North and South in the hemisphere than culture – the strikingly different values, attitudes, and institutions – that have flowed from the Anglo-Protestant and Ibero-Catholic traditions” (1997: 18). He cites Octavio Paz of Mexico, winner of the 1990 Nobel award for Literature, to support his reasoning: “One, English speaking, is the daughter of the tradition that has founded the modern world: the Reformation, with its social and political consequences, democracy and capitalism. The other, Spanish and Portuguese speaking, is the daughter of the universal Catholic monarchy and the Counter-Reformation” (Harrison 2000:297). Michael Wiarda similarly argues that Latin America’s “culture and religion were orthodox, absolutist, and infused with Catholic-Thomist precepts as contrasted with the religious nonconformity and pluralist precepts of the North American colonies” (cited in Htun: 191). *Ipsa facto*, it was the Protestant ethic that was decisive in the great divergence between these two continents that were colonized by those adhering to different strands of the Christian faith.

In regard to Low HDI countries, the exceptions are Zimbabwe (59% Protestant) and Papua New Guinea (69% Protestant) – why have they not attained the dynamism to break free from the low growth, low development equilibrium? They can simply be deemed outliers, exceptions to the rule, and exceptions that prove the rule. Usually, the reasons proffered do not examine religious and cultural factors but rather focus on the other multitudinous factors affecting all countries of the developing world. There is also recourse to the legacy of colonialism (which Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has frequently appealed to), neo-colonialism and – though now largely in desuetude – dependency theory. The argument is that the drag effects of the colonial past override any putative positive impact of Protestantism. This is an unsatisfactory explanation that provides an alibi for the often incompetent governments, invariably mired in corruption. A counter, admittedly controversial, argument is that indigenous cultural traits and tendencies have suffocated the Protestant work ethic or simply that the form of Protestantism in the developing world lacks the vigorous content of the European prototype and, therefore, does not engender the concomitant work ethic. In other words, this “third world” Protestantism has altered so much that the importance of the “calling” in Calvinism and Puritanism is well-nigh absent; *ipsa facto*, the attendant work ethic and spirit of capitalism has been surrendered.

Daniel Etounga-Manguelle would likely agree with this stark conclusion in regard to Africa. Whilst accepting that there is great diversity in the continent, he forcefully argues:

[T]here is a foundation of shared values, attitudes, and institutions that binds together the nations south of the Sahara, and in many aspects those to the north as well . . . The existence of this common base is so real that some anthropologists question whether imported religions – Christianity and Islam – have really affected African ancestral beliefs or given Africans different ways of understanding the contemporary societies in which they live. Modern

political power has often assumed the characteristics of traditional religious ritual powers; divination and witchcraft have even made their way into courthouses. Everywhere on the continent, the bond between religion and society remains strong. As Felix Houphouët-Boigny, the late president of the Ivory Coast told us: “From African archbishops to the most insignificant Catholic, from the great witch doctor to the most insignificant Moslem, from the pastor to the most insignificant Protestant, we have all had an animist past” (67).

Interesting as these hypotheses may be, it would be most difficult to garner evidence in support of them – for example, why would an animist past so strongly continue to stifle other ideologies that have been implanted for several centuries and which have long supplanted animism as the dominant religion in Africa? Njo and Akiwumi (7) assert that African indigenous ethos preaches against accumulation and has contempt for the accumulation of wealth for its own sake.

Whether Low HDI countries can by virtue of adopting Protestantism engender widespread reforms that drive forward growth and development is a highly contentious – and contested – supposition. For example, Etounga-Manguelle (75) makes the claim that Christianity, rather than putting an end to witchcraft in Africa, has actually legitimized it given that the existence of Satan is recognized in the Bible, thus confirming the existence of sorcerers and other evil persons. But Peter Heslam makes the claim that “the current growth of Christianity is its greatest ever advance and its fastest growing form is Protestantism. Around 80% of Protestantism’s global growth is attributable to Pentecostalism, which in Africa is outpacing other expanding religions and is growing twice as fast as Roman Catholicism and three times as fast as other forms of Protestantism. It amounts to a wide-scale ‘great awakening’ that has social as well as religious repercussions because a conversion to Pentecostal Christianity generally bears with it a cultural revolution, not least in attitudes and behaviors regarding work, leisure, money, health, the status of women, and the nurture and education of children” (361). Heslam concludes that the attitudinal change and behavioral impact (however unintentional) of the EPCM [Evangelical-Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement] stimulates nascent capitalism and its associated upward mobility (362). Peter Berger concurs with this view in a 2010 paper with the striking title “Max Weber is alive and well, and living in Guatemala: The Protestant ethic today,” arguing that “the attitudes and behavior of the new Pentecostals bear striking resemblance to their Anglo-Saxon predecessors” – especially in Latin America with a growing Protestant middle class that is economically productive and politically assertive (4, 5).

For Heslam, key to Pentecostalism is that it is characterized by the sense of being called to Christ – Weber argued that the calling was vital to the Protestant work ethic – and that this is an active individual decision. “With God’s help, it is possible to change one’s life and make a difference in the world – sin and adversity provide grounds not for defeat but for the exercising of faith and perseverance in the sure hope of God’s power” (363, 365). Other characteristics of importance in regard to the work ethic are deferral of gratifications which gives rise to self-control and frugality – what Weber termed “worldly asceticism” – resulting in the avoidance of debt and excess, and which encourage savings and investment (366). Competing vigorously in the Christian marketplace, Pentecostal churches are akin to

businesses with an entrepreneurial flair – which is transmitted to followers so that commercial entrepreneurship is stimulated together with a rational outlook (369). It would appear that EPCM is a reincarnation of Calvinism. But rather than these traits merely having unintended beneficial consequences, the overarching goal of Pentecostal churches is highly ambitious and very much rooted in the modern world. Heslam gives the example of the Watoto Church in Kampala which runs an orphans' program whose explicit aim is to “raise the next generation of African leaders that will stand up to corruption, disease, poverty, and the infringement of human rights and become trailblazers in an African renaissance” (368). Whilst wishing them every success in this most welcome endeavor, the evidence hitherto is rather thin and indeed Heslam does not provide any.

Christianity and Corruption

All religions make great claims for morality with the oft-repeated refrain that religion provides the bedrock for an ethical society without which humanity would descend into chaos and untold misery; and Christianity is no exception in this regard. According to Stark, Christianity's purported emphasis on reason ought to provide robust protection against corruption and, by so doing, assist in the progress of the economy and society. Is this the case?

Transparency International's (TI) research provides a direct link between corruption and development – so that values and norms that act against corrupt practices will aid the development process whilst those that do not will hinder it (2014a). In TI's *Corruption Perceptions Index 2014*, which measures perceived levels of public sector corruption in 175 countries and territories, 17 out of the 20 least corrupt countries are Christian-majority, the exceptions being Singapore (at number 7), Japan (at number 15), and Hong Kong (at number 17). Prima facie, premised on the view that dominant religions profoundly affect values and mores, this suggests that Christianity does indeed have a protective effect on public administration. But 6 of the 20 most corrupt countries are also Christian-majority (DR of Congo, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Angola, Haiti – the only non-African country – and Eritrea). There are, however, oddities. For example, Greece (mainly Orthodox) and Italy (mainly Catholic) are the 2 most corrupt developed countries (both at number 43), but proponents of the Protestant ethic will not find this unduly surprising (TI 2014b).

The Bible makes several references to corruption with the most renowned being what is known as the “golden rule” in Matthew 7:12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” There is also 2 Peter 1:4: “Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature.”

The precise meaning of the term in Christianity is open to interpretation, but at its core a corrupt act is one that goes against the wishes of God, meaning that it is sinful. In regard to the developing world, perhaps the severest form of corruption is that of taking bribes against which practice there is a biblical injunction in Exodus 23:8: “You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.” A similar injunction is found in Ecclesiastes 7:7: “Surely oppression makes the wise foolish, and a bribe corrupts the heart.” Proverbs 19:28 inveighs against the mocking of justice: “A worthless witness mocks at justice, and the mouth of the wicked devours iniquity.”

In line with such Biblical teachings, Christian groups have, in recent years, exhorted Christians to refrain from corrupt practices and to apply pressure on governments to do the same. For example, in 1998 the World Assembly of the World Council of Churches called on its member churches to urge governments to take legislative action against all forms of corruption; in 2002 Pope John Paul II called on Catholics to refrain from engaging in corrupt practices (Marquette: 315-16). But these and other urgings against corrupt practices have not been ubiquitously adopted. It is important to note, however, that those countries in the lower end of the corruption index also tend to be the poorest and also the most religious (see Crabtree).

An extensive survey by Daniel Treisman found that countries with Protestant traditions and those with more developed economies have higher quality governments. In addition, countries with a history of British rule are less corrupt; this stems from the common law system found in Britain and its former colonies being associated with superior government. Why the latter is so relates to how the law is administered, that is, the “legal culture” (Treisman: 401). Of course, Britain has long been dominated by Protestantism. La Porta et al. hypothesize that the greater protections against the state embodied in common law systems improve various aspects of government performance, including reducing corruption (402).

From an avowedly Christian perspective, Theron and Lotter attempt to grapple with the widespread corruption in post-Apartheid South Africa whose Christian population exceeds 80%. “Where there is a ruling elite [which] exercises all power attached to national sovereignty, the state is supreme over civil society and there is usually a lack of the rule of law and accountability.” They point to research on African states which locates the reasons in an absence of liberal democratic institutions, a free press, citizen rights and market forces. “The lack of exemplary ethical leadership facilitates corruption as people’s personal and private interests take precedence over national interests. This is supported by the general sociocultural norms in Africa which cause people in general to be more loyal to their families and friends than to the state” (101).

Clearly, given that corruption is rife in Africa, including in Christian-majority societies, notwithstanding Treisman’s findings regarding the benefits of a Protestant heritage, the biblical injunctions against corruption have been insufficient to mold moral rectitude on the part of the powers-that-be, for whom the golden rule is invariably an alien doctrine. Such a conclusion is supported by Norris and Inglehart:

For the comparison, we take the strictest standard, which is the proportion that regarded certain actions as never justified . . . claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled, avoiding a fare on public transport, cheating on taxes, and someone accepting a bribe during the course of their duties. Comparison across religious cultures shows that Protestant societies proved only moderately ethical on all four scales; usually slightly more ethical than Catholic societies but not displaying the highest ethical standards across all groups; indeed by contrast the Eastern religious cultures showed the highest disapproval of moral infringements. Any argument that today Protestant societies display higher ethical standards that may be conducive to business confidence and good governance is not supported by this analysis (172).

That said, using the World Values Survey, Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales (280) find that Christian religions are more positively associated with attitudes that are conducive to economic growth. The attitudes cited are trust and co-operation, women, the government, the law, the market and its fairness, and thriftiness. In contrast, Islam is negatively associated.

Christianity and Freedom

If Christianity is rooted in reason, does it encourage freedom of thought? Prima facie, there is evidence to support this but it is by no means universal. With respect to freedoms granted to citizens, in the 88 countries that are designated as “free” in the *Freedom in the World 2014* index, all but 8 are Christian-majority (the exceptions are India, Israel, Japan, Mongolia, Senegal, South Korea, Suriname, and Taiwan). Out of 59 countries that are “partly free,” 25 are Christian-majority, and out of 48 that are “not free,” 11 are Christian-majority (Freedom House).³ By comparison, only one Muslim-majority country (Senegal) is classified as “free.” Thus, if the dominant religion has an impact on political rights and civil liberties, there is sufficient cause to believe that it is largely positive in Christian-majority countries, but overwhelmingly negative in Muslim-majority countries. Certainly the freedom to challenge, critique, and criticize the dominant discourse, consensus, long-standing traditions, and customs is an unalloyed positive and essential for increasing efficiency, innovativeness, and economic advancement. That said, a significant minority of Christian-majority countries do not adhere to this assumed causation.

Concluding Remarks

Contra Rodney Stark, in the *Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, Owen Chadwick demonstrates the declining influence of Christianity in Europe during the course of the nineteenth century, but that does not detract from the Weberian thesis that Protestantism, albeit unwittingly, comprised a secular kernel that facilitated a more thoroughgoing secularism whose foundations rested on the intellectual assault of the Enlightenment in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Insofar as Enlightenment thinking pushed back hard against religious authoritarianism, it was necessarily secular and is a defining cause and feature of Europe’s industrialization and rapid transformation; as such, this is a robust challenge to Stark’s thesis. That said, the present author is in agreement with Stark that the advances made by other civilizations and regions of the world simply pale into insignificance. Although it is true that the Enlightenment was most definitely a European phenomenon, it was infused with universal principles (see, for example, Israel).

Furthermore, Paul Hazard argues that there was a significant change in the “European mind” going as far back as the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century:

Never was there a greater contrast, never a more sudden transition than this! An hierarchical system ensured by authority; life firmly based on dogmatic principles – such were the things held dear by the peoples of the seventeenth century; but these – controls, authority, dogmas and the like – were the very things that their immediate successors of the eighteenth held in cordial

³ The ratings are a combination of political rights and civil liberties from “most free” (a rating of 1) to “least free” (a rating of 7).

detestation. The former were upholders of Christianity; the latter were its foes. The former believed in the laws of God; the latter in the laws of nature; the former lived contentedly enough in a world composed of unequal social grades; of the latter the one absorbing dream was equality (xv).

Key to Europe's industrial and social revolution was, in Jonathan Israel's words, "a revolution of the mind." We can aver that the more religiously authoritarian and dogmatic is a society, the less freedom of expression it affords its citizens. Yet, history shows, especially in Western Europe, a loosening of the grip of religion simultaneously increases the scope for freedom of expression; and whilst this certainly includes the freedom to practice different religions, it is non-religious ideas that multiply the most and these include robust critiques of religion, especially of the dominant religion. In turn, this transformation impacts upon the productive aspects of society – all the determinants of growth and development including social advancement, are affected. Such reasoning also conflicts with Stark's position. There is, however, compelling evidence to support Stark's overarching claim about the crucial role played by Christianity in the rise and dominance of the West, albeit it is those countries that adopted Protestantism which have thrived the most.

In conclusion, even if we accept that Christianity as a whole or the Protestant work ethic in particular, was a decisive factor in the origins of the West's success, that is of little relevance now. Other, non-Protestant, non-Christian societies have also attained high levels of economic development – especially in East Asia – by acquiring requisite institutions and skills. This has entailed the overcoming or even rejection of their non-productive legacies. In other words, such countries and societies, and cultures therein, have markedly changed and, importantly, have achieved remarkable progress without recourse to the adherence of Christianity.

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