

# For the Glory of God, by Rodney Stark

reviewed by [Daniel L. Pals](#) in the [November 15, 2003](#) issue

This volume completes an ambitious two-part study of monotheism in Western culture that began with *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton University Press, 2001). As with the previous effort, Rodney Stark's aim is to show that belief in one God--a supreme, personal and perfectly good Being--has exerted a definitive shaping influence on certain events and institutions in the West.

The reason for this impact lies in the unique character of monotheism, which differs fundamentally as a religious axiom from the chaotic, immoral polytheisms of primitive and classical cultures, as well as from the impersonal, godless Asian systems--Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist--that construe the divine as an amoral supernatural essence. Unlike these creeds, monotheist faith shows "immense capacities to mobilize human action," especially in the intellectual quest for truth and the moral pursuit of justice.

Whereas in volume one Stark underscored certain traits characteristic of the monotheist mind--such as zeal for missions and the will to coerce when in power--his discussion here centers on four major historical episodes. Allegiance to the idea of the one God's one true church propelled recurrent drives toward reform, culminating in the momentous revolt of Protestantism. Trust in the luminous rationality of the Creator inspired the rise of science. And faith in divine justice fired the modern crusade to end slavery. Paradoxically, that same faith, linked to a vivid belief in satanic possession, also brought the West to one of its darkest moments--the age of hunts for witches. Stark devotes a healthy mix of explication and analysis to each of these developments, appositely adducing results of recent research and fashioning a brisk, readable narrative.

The rationale for this project is intriguing. It springs partly from the author's quarrel with his own academic field.

Although a professor of sociology as well as comparative religion, Stark insists that social science has been led badly off track by one of its foremost pioneers--Émile Durkheim. Writing early in the last century, Durkheim contended that religion is a matter not of belief but of ritualized social action; beliefs and ideas are merely reflections of society's pressures on the individual. So when monotheists announce their faith in one God, what they actually affirm (unknowingly) is a social bond to their clan or group. Stark thinks this principle deeply misguided. He insists that beliefs shape society and not the reverse--as historians are more apt than sociologists to understand. If monotheism's influence is to be properly grasped, therefore, social science needs to be transposed into the key of old-fashioned social and intellectual history.

Most friends of religion will welcome this conversion from reductionistic social science to humanist history of ideas. But asserting that "ideas matter" is of course only a beginning. If monotheism did shape the West decisively, that theorem needs demonstration from the evidence.

Stark welcomes this challenge, and his labors are laudably intense, but it is not wholly clear just what the task is. Consider the discussion of the antislavery movement. In a quite substantial chapter, he explains how, from about 1700 forward, successive fervent appeals to Christian moral ideals played a pivotal role in pressuring governments to end slavery in its entirety. This point is well taken; few who know the names of Samuel Sewall, William Wilberforce and William Lloyd Garrison would disagree. But in what way, precisely, was Christian monotheism, rather than broadly Christian moralism, integral to this process? Stark does not tell us. No testimony specific to the point is cited from original sources (is there perhaps a sermon titled "One God, One Humanity"?). Nor is there any search for specific hidden connections.

To be sure, all of Christian morality is monotheistic in that it derives from scriptures given by God, but that is self-evident. Surely, Stark must intend to claim more. Yet if so, it is unclear what substantive, specific monotheistic influences he has in mind. In addition, there is a comparative case to address. Islam, though also monotheistic, produced nothing similar to the abolitionist enterprise, ending its practice of slavery only in response to initiatives from the West. Nor, for that matter, did Islam generate anything comparable to Christendom's age of witch-hunts or its flowering of science.

In fact, of the four major developments adduced for discussion, three occurred in one monotheistic culture, but not in the other. Why? Are there perhaps different kinds of monotheism? Were other factors more decisive? Is monotheism perhaps even irrelevant? We do not have answers to consider because these intriguing questions are not substantively addressed. Full chapters deal with the Christian West; only a few pages, sometimes mere paragraphs, address Islam.

At one point, Stark suggests that monotheism is best seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition to explain the developments he considers. But even "necessary" is a large causal claim, requiring entry into another set of comparisons--with nonmonotheistic religions and their cultural effects. The first volume attempted such a comparison by trying to link monotheism with missions, but it had to contend with a troubling reversal: monotheistic Judaism has had noticeably less interest in making converts than nontheistic Buddhism. The present volume consigns to the periphery any serious comparative study of religious ideas across traditions.

Whatever the claims of the subtitle, then, this project does not substantively engage the issue of monotheism, whether in one form or in several cross-culturally compared. It is not centered even on Christian monotheism, at least as an isolated doctrine. It offers instead a wide-ranging discussion of Christianity broadly construed as a cultural system (of which the monotheist axiom is one, indirectly relevant feature). What Stark seeks to explain--in the main persuasively--is how the entire Christian religious complex, both institutional and theological, exerted its influence upon certain crucial developments in Western history. Passages that comment specifically on monotheism or nod toward cross-cultural comparison are mostly marginal to this effort.

That issue clarified, thoughtful readers will find much to appreciate in these pages, which are often rich in details of church history, vigorously analytical, and especially instructive on underappreciated themes and connections. To cite a few examples: Stark makes several efforts to frame general principles of religious action, such as the rule that "religious conflict will be maximized where . . . a few powerful particularistic religious organizations coexist." Valid or not, this idea prods debate. He offers a perceptive assessment of John Calvin that rightly stresses his work as organizer of secret Protestant missionary agents--a side of the Reformer's career too often overshadowed by the imposing theological achievement of the Institutes. A reappraisal of medieval universities draws on the latest scholarship to suggest they be seen as early nurseries, rather than adversaries, of modern science. An

instructive comparison of English, French and Spanish slave codes shows that inhumanity too has its degrees and differences.

Misconceptions also get corrected. To the surprise of some who are familiar with the famous T. H. Huxley-Samuel Wilberforce debate on evolution in 1860, Stark notes that the well-worn tale of the bishop humbled by Darwin's bulldog is historically tenuous, and that Darwin himself judged Wilberforce's published review of *The Origin of Species* to be among the most telling of the critiques he encountered.

It is true that in getting to these nuggets, one needs to show patience with mannerisms that can easily annoy. Topics get introduced with tightly compressed summaries of earlier scholarship that end with ritually brusque dismissals: "All false"; "Not so!"; "Nonsense and outright fabrication." Further, in Stark's prickly reckonings, indictments rain on liberals and secularists, while religious conservatives routinely walk free. Along with Freudians, Marxists and advocates of political correctness, the index of the highly disfavored includes all rationalists who lived in, or now admire, the age of Enlightenment, all scholars with biases too pro-Protestant and progressive or prejudices too anti-Catholic, all secular humanists, theological liberals, moral relativists, scientific atheists, confident Darwinians and sundry similar voices among religion's cultured despisers. It is, to say the least, odd that an author so alert to the partisan motives of others should extend a different courtesy to himself, curtly announcing from the outset that "my personal religious views are of concern only to me."

Irritations aside, this study offers much that followers of the Christian story in both the academy and the churches can draw upon with real profit, so long as they also read with critical eyes. To summarize things in theological terms, there may be only one Professor Stark, but he appears to exist in three persons: the sociologist who resigned on principle at the start of the project; the comparative religionist who signed on but then declined to compare; and the church historian who conscientiously shouldered most of the work. All credit then to the historian, who works hard and well to discern the Christian soul of the cultural West--and mostly succeeds in finding it.