

text of its writing, is the process by which the prayer came to be attributed to the sixteenth-century pietist theologian F. C. Oetinger through the casual plagiarism of the German scholar Theodor Wilhelm, who used the prayer in a book on politics, which he published pseudonymously (and inexplicably) under the name “Friedrich Oetinger.” Sifton notes wryly that “the German subplot of the Serenity Prayer story was truly bizarre” (343). Even more bizarre was Wilhelm’s carelessness in correcting the mistake when the true author of the prayer was identified to him.

The Serenity Prayer has taken on a life of its own, and traveled considerably beyond the small town of Heath where it had its birth. Surely Reinhold Niebuhr could never have expected that his short prayer for grace, courage, and wisdom would have become a foundation stone for the self-help movement. Sifton notes his very mixed feelings as his prayer found its way onto a broad array of kitsch (much of which was sent to him through friends). Yet, in *The Serenity Prayer* Sifton gives an honorable accounting of the true history and meaning of this prayer. By recapturing its historical context and its theological essence, Sifton reinvigorates the power of its words. She rightly notes that “the Serenity Prayer is not just a familiar, agreeable cliché. After all, its instructions are tremendously difficult and puzzling to follow” (11). But prayer at its best, and public prayer in particular, *should* challenge us and puzzle us. Otherwise, prayer simply becomes the enforcement of mediocrity through recitation. The Serenity Prayer, as Niebuhr prayed it in Heath and as Elizabeth Sifton tells its tale, helps us to understand the motivating and disruptive power of prayer.

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Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 496 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 0-691-11436-6. Hardback.

For the Glory of God is Professor Rodney Stark’s second book in a two-volume work devoted to the social history of monotheism in shaping the modern western world. Together, the two volumes represent an exhaustive body of research that chronicles both the positive and negative role of religious belief in an engaging and accessible historical narrative. In addition, there is a further stated intention to these works, which is, as Stark explains in the Postscript to volume 2, “to understand why Gods were long ago banished from the social scientific study of religion” (367). Thus, throughout the book, Stark engages in a series of debunkings with regard to the prevailing scholarly wisdom within the subdiscipline of sociology of religion in service of his larger argument that “Gods are the fundamental feature of religion” (376), and that Gods rather than rituals are the primary influence on morality.

As the subtitle of the book suggests, Stark is not shy in attributing great power and social influence to religion. Nor is he shy about stating his thesis in a clear and direct fashion. This is indicated in the opening epigraph to the Introduction, which states that “Uncommon things must be said in common words,” and which is followed by Stark’s own claim “that *monotheism* may well have been the single most significant innovation in history” (1, emphasis his). In support of this claim, Stark devotes a chapter each to the direct causal influence of monotheism on reformations, the rise of science, witch-hunts, and the abolitionist movement.

Chapter 1 on reformations, which is entitled, “God’s *Truth*,” [his italics] does not simply chronicle the sixteenth-century period of religious upheaval and transformation known as

the Protestant Reformation, but identifies a pre-existing reforming dynamic that was at work throughout the Middle Ages and that is central to understanding the relationship of monotheism to religious diversity. Stark identifies at least two keys to understanding the efficacy of this reforming dynamic. The first relates to any religious organization's capacity to sustain a monopoly, which is dependent upon the state's use of coercive force on the religious monopoly's behalf. The second is the distinction between what he calls the "two Churches," the one being the "Church of Power," and the other the "Church of Piety." According to Stark's analysis, ever since the founding of the Church of Power with the "conversion" of Constantine, the Church of Piety was able to maintain the original, dynamic and grassroots elements of early Christianity, and thus represents a sustained effort by the Church of Piety to reform the Church of Power. The secret of Luther's success, therefore, was not due to his originality of insight, but rather the changing political and cultural dynamics, which made for a fertile and relatively safe ground for the message of the Church of Piety to take root and spread.

Chapter 2, on the religious origins of science, which is entitled, "God's *Handiwork*," [his italics] argues that not only was there "no inherent conflict between religion and science, but that *Christian theology was essential for the rise of science*" (123, emphasis his), and further, that "the rise of science was not an extension of classical learning. It was the natural outgrowth of Christian doctrine" (157). The proof for Stark is the fact that modern science emerged only once in history, and that was in the seventeenth century in Western Europe. The question that Stark asks is why was this development unique to Europe, and he answers with what he calls "the Christian difference": "Christians developed science because they *believed it could be done, and should be done*" (147, emphasis his).

Chapters 3 and 4 on the witch-hunts and the abolitionist movements continue along this same strain of thought, demonstrating how such large-scale and influential social phenomena are made possible only by the distinctive logic of a monotheistic faith. And, more specifically, how it was Christian theology, more so than Judaism or Islam, that made the difference.

This last point is an important one, for while Stark claims to be writing a social history of monotheism, the great bulk of his analysis remains exclusively focused on Christianity, in relation to which Judaism and Islam repeatedly stand as negative cases. For instance, consider his argument about Christian theology being essential to the rise of science. This seems to disregard the great technological achievements and cultural blossoming of the early Islamic civilization under the Abbasid Caliphate. Further, it is common knowledge that Christian Europe was reintroduced to many of the classics of Greek philosophy only through the more advanced Islamic learning. And further still, as Stark admits, "It would seem that Islam has the appropriate God to underwrite the rise of science. But," Stark concludes, "that's not so" (154). Instead, there arose within Islam a "major theological bloc" to genuine scientific inquiry, which, for Stark, must combine both organized efforts to formulate explanations of nature and be subject to revision through systematic observations. Therefore, while "Islamic scholars achieved significant progress," this progress was "only in terms of specific knowledge...that did not necessitate any general theoretical basis" (156). Likewise with Stark's explanation of monotheism's contribution to the end of slavery, after explaining how "Christian theology was unique in eventually developing an abolitionist perspective" (292), Stark then contrasts this Christian contribution with what he terms "the Islamic exception." Thus explaining how even though the logic of monotheism gives rise to antislavery doctrines, Islam itself could not overcome the fundamental problem "vis-à-vis the morality of slavery that *Muhammad bought, sold, captured, and owned slaves*" (338).

My problem with this privileging of Christianity is that rather than being a genuine and comprehensive social history of monotheism writ large, this book is instead a defense of the superiority of the specific moral vision of Christianity, and, more broadly, the divine sanction of Western civilization. Put otherwise, Stark is too selective, and one suspects that his real agenda is revealed by what is left out of his analysis. When analyzing the history of the Protestant Reformation, for instance, Stark simply states that he will not examine the Peasants' Revolt or the radicalization of the reforming dynamic as embodied by the Anabaptist movement. This makes for a clean and coherent sociological theory, perhaps, but renders suspect his triumphalistic tone. Similarly, when discussing the Christian difference in the rise of science, whereas he cites Alfred North Whitehead's linking of modern science with medieval Christian theology, he fails to give equal attention to the second half of Whitehead's claim—namely, that the rationality of Greek philosophy was equally significant for the development of science. Here, Stark is guilty of the myth of monogenesis. The result is that too often the work reads less like an argument and more like a counter-assertion. As such, it is an important and impressive corrective to much of the prevailing scholarly wisdom, but it is doubtful that it will persuade or compel those who think differently.

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