

Atheist Myths and Scientism

Steve Cable



Steve Cable exposes some atheist myths and the false ideology of scientism, all designed to destroy people's faith.

A Two-Pronged Attack Against Christianity



Atheist attacks against American Christianity are gaining more traction in our society. Their success can be readily seen in the growth of the number of American young adults who do not profess to be Christians. Tracking recent trends, around 50% of American Millennials fall in this category, with most of those identifying as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. More identify as nothing in particular than as atheist, but the atheist attacks certainly have a role to play in their ambivalent feelings about Christianity.

What have atheists done to create a cultural milieu that is drawing more and more young Americans away from Christianity? In this article, we will focus on two prominent prongs of the attack against Christianity. Those prongs are:

1. Fabricating myths around the premise that Christianity and modern science

are enemies of one another and have been so since the advent of modern science, and

2. Promoting the philosophy of scientism as the only way to view science.

First, the myths are an attempt to cause people to believe that the Christian church and a Christian worldview were and are anti-science. They want us to believe that the findings of science are counter to the make-believe teachings of Christianity and the Bible. They want us to look back at history and believe that the church was actively opposing and trying to suppress scientific knowledge. As Michael Keas tells us in his 2019 book *Unbelievable*, “These stories are nothing but myths. And yet some leading scientists . . . offer these stories as unassailable truth. These myths make their way into science textbooks . . . (and) enter into popular culture, whereby the myths pass as accepted wisdom.” [\[1\]](#)

However, many historians and philosophers have correctly pointed out that the Christian worldview of an orderly universe created by an involved God produced the mindset that gave birth to the scientific revolution. In his book *How the West Won*, sociologist Rodney Stark states, “Christianity was essential to the rise of science, which is why science was a purely Western phenomenon . . . science only arose in Christian Europe because only medieval Europeans believed that science was possible and desirable. And the basis of their belief was their image of God and his creation.” [\[2\]](#) In this article, we consider the key figures who propagated this myth and some of the falsified stories they have foisted upon us.

Second, they want us to accept scientism as the only valid way to view the role of science in our understanding of the universe. What is scientism? In his 2018 book *Scientism and Secularism*, professor of philosophy J. P. Moreland defines it this way: “Scientism is the view that the hard sciences provide the only genuine knowledge of reality. . . . What is crucial to scientism is . . . the thought that the scientific is much more valuable than the non-scientific. . . . When you have competing knowledge claims from different sources, the scientific will always

trump the non-scientific.” {3}

But scientism “is not a doctrine of science; rather it is a doctrine of philosophy . . . (In fact,) scientism distorts science.” {4} This philosophical doctrine came into favor among the public not because of scientific results, but rather as the result of proponents presenting it in popular ways as if it were the undisputable truth. As Moreland points out, “It is not even a friend of science but rather its enemy.” {5}

Myths about Christianity and Science

Atheists want to create stories to demonstrate that Christians are and have been the enemies of scientific exploration and discovery. Why this drive to recreate the past? They want to encourage people to turn away from Christianity as an enemy of science and weaken the faith of believers.

As Michael Keas makes evident in *Unbelievable*, this thinking is not based on reality. Instead, historical myths have been created to bolster their position either as a result of ignorance of the actual history or intentional deceit. After creating these myths, they use the educational system and mass media to ingrain these myths into the thinking of the masses.

Keas specifically looks at seven myths used for this purpose which we find embedded in our textbooks and proclaimed by popular television programs. To understand the nature of these myths, let’s consider two of the ones discussed by Keas.

Many of you learned of the Dark Ages, a period of time between A.D. 500 and 1500 where textbooks have claimed that science and the arts were stifled by the control of the church which opposed scientific understanding. In truth, this view is not supported by historical evaluations of that time. As reported in Stark’s revealing book, *How the West Won*, “Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Dark Ages myth is that it was imposed on what was actually “one of the great

innovative eras of mankind.” During this period technology was developed and put into use on a scale no civilization had previously known.[{6}](#) Keas found that this myth first appeared in textbooks in the 1800s but did not surface with an anti-Christian slant until the 1960s. Carl Sagan, and later Neal deGrasse Tyson, would help promulgate this myth on television through their *Cosmos* series.

Another myth exploded by Keas is that “Copernicus demoted humans from the privileged ‘center of the universe’ and thereby challenged religious doctrines about human importance.”[{7}](#) In fact, Copernicus as a Christian did not consider his discovery that the earth orbited the sun a demotion for earth or humans. What Copernicus saw as unveiling the mysteries of God’s creation over time began to be pictured as a great humiliation for Christians. In the 1950s some scientific writers began using the term “the Copernican principle” to refer to the idea “that the Earth is not in a central, specially favored position”[{8}](#) in the cosmos. As one Harvard professor has noted, “This is the principle of mediocrity, and Copernicus would have been shocked to find his name associated with it.”[{9}](#)

Keas also documents how this atheist strategy also pretends that many early scientists were not Christians. Johannes Kepler, known for his discovery of the three laws of planetary motion, is cited by Sagan in *Cosmos* as someone who “despaired of ever attaining salvation,”[{10}](#) implying that Kepler always felt this way. Sagan leads one to believe that in his astronomical discoveries Kepler was somehow freed from this concern. Yet from Kepler’s own writing it is very clear that he was a Christian, telling people shortly before his death that he was saved “solely by the merit of our savior Jesus Christ.” And speaking of his scientific endeavors he wrote, “God wanted us to recognize them [i.e. mathematical natural laws] by creating us after his own image so that we could share in his own thoughts.”[{11}](#)

Much of the reported relationship between science and Christianity is a myth made up to strengthen the atheist position that science repudiates Christianity and makes it superfluous and dangerous in today’s enlightened world. Nothing

could be further from the truth, as a Christian worldview was foundational for the development and application of the scientific method.

Methodological Naturalism: A Farce

What about the prevalence of scientism, a belief system claiming that the hard sciences provide the only genuine knowledge of reality?

When considered carefully, the whole concept of scientism is a farce. Why? Because as philosopher J. P. Moreland points out, “Strong scientism is a philosophical assertion that claims that philosophical assertions are neither true nor can be known; only scientific assertions can be true and known.”^{12} So the premise is self-refuting. They are saying that only scientific facts can be objectively true. Thus, the statement that only scientific facts can be true must be false because it is a philosophical assertion, not a scientific fact.

Another example of the faulty philosophy behind scientism comes in their insistence on adopting methodological naturalism as a criterion for science. Methodological naturalism is “the idea that, while doing science, one must seek only natural causes or explanations for scientific data.”^{13} This idea immediately demotes science from being the search for the truth about observable items in this universe to being the search for the most plausible natural cause no matter how implausible it may be.

Although they appear to be unsure as to whether to apply the concept uniformly to all forms of science, its proponents are sure that it definitely should be applied to the field of evolutionary science. They make the *a priori* assumption that life as we know it originated and developed by strictly impersonal, unintelligent forces. No intelligence can be allowed to enter the process in any way. This approach to trying to understand the current state of life on earth is certainly an interesting exercise leading to a multitude of theories and untestable speculations. It is a challenging mental exercise and is valuable as such. However, scientism does not

stop there. They declare that their unsupported (and I would say unsupportable) theories **must be the truth** about our origins, at least until replaced by another strictly naturalistic theory.

This approach seems to be an odd (and unfruitful) way to go after the truth due to at least three reasons. First, many other areas of science which include intelligent agents in their hypotheses are respected and their results generally accepted, common examples being archaeology and forensic science. Second, the current state of evolutionary science primarily appears to be tearing holes in prior theories, e.g. Darwinian evolution, rather than closing in on a plausible explanation. And, third, scientists are continuing to find evidence supporting a hypothesis that intelligent actions were involved in the formulation of life on earth.

If the sum of the available evidence is more directly explained by the involvement of some intelligent agent, then it would be reasonable to accept that potential explanation as the leading contender for the truth until some other answer is developed that is more closely supported by the available evidence. This is the attitude embraced by the intelligent design community. They embrace it because so much of the evidence supports it, including

1. the inability of other hypothesis to account for the first appearance of life,
2. the complexity of the simplest life forms with no chain of less complex forms leading up to them,
3. the relatively sudden appearance of all types of life forms in the fossil record,
4. the fine tuning of the parameters of the universe to support life on earth, and
5. the emergence of consciousness within humans.

In contrast, those supporting theistic evolution appear to do so in order to conform to the methodological naturalism of their peers. They claim to believe

that God does intervene in nature through acts such as the miracles of Jesus and His resurrection. But they claim that God did not intervene in the processes leading up to the appearance of mankind on this planet. In my opinion, they take this stance not because the evidence demands it, but because methodological naturalism does not allow it. As Moreland opines, “Methodological naturalism is *one bad way* to put science and Christianity together.” [{14}](#)

Things Science Cannot Explain / God of the Gaps

As we have seen, scientism is a philosophy that says the only real knowledge to be found is through application of the hard sciences and that no intelligence can be involved in any of our hypotheses. So, they believe hard science must be capable of explaining everything (even if it currently doesn't).

In this section we will consider some very important things that science cannot now nor ever be able to explain. In his book, *Scientism and Secularism*, J. P. Moreland lists five such things for us.

First, the origin of the universe cannot be explained by science. Why? Science has been able to identify that the universe most likely had a beginning point. But as Moreland points out, “Science can provide evidence that the universe had a beginning; it cannot, even in principle, explain that beginning; that is, it cannot say what caused it. . . No real thing can pop into existence from nothing.” [{15}](#) He points out three specific logical reasons science cannot address this issue:

1. A scientific explanation cannot be used to explain the universe because scientific explanations presuppose the universe.
2. Science cannot explain the origin of time and without time no explanation can be considered.
3. Coming-into-existence is not a process which can be reviewed and

explained because it is an instantaneous event. Something either does or does not exist.

Second, the origin of the fundamental laws of nature. All scientific explanations presuppose these laws. We can conceive of a universe where these laws might be different resulting in a different reality, but we cannot explain how our universe came into being with the laws we see active around us.

Third, the fine-tuning of the universe to support life. As far as science is concerned the parameters of the forces within this universe can be observed but we cannot know what caused them to assume the values they do. However, in recent years it has been discovered that our universe “is a razor’s edge of precisely balanced life permitting conditions.”[{16}](#) Over one hundred parameters of this universe, such as the force of gravity, the charge of an electron, the rate of expansion of the universe, etc., must be precisely balanced or there could be no life in the universe. Science cannot answer the question of why our universe can support life.

Fourth, the origin of consciousness. In this context consciousness is the ability to be aware of oneself and entertain thoughts about things which are outside of oneself and possibly outside of one’s experience. From a naturalist point of view, “the appearance of mind is utterly unpredictable and inexplicable.”[{17}](#) However, God may choose to create conscious beings; beings that are capable of asking about and discovering the works of their creator.

Fifth, the existence of moral laws. As the late atheist philosopher Mackie admitted, the emergence of moral properties would constitute a refutation of naturalism and evidence for theism: “Moral properties constitute so odd a cluster of properties and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events without an all-powerful god to create them.”[{18}](#)

These five important questions can never be answered if scientism’s flawed premise were true. However, Christian theism answers each of these questions

and those answers are true if God is the real creator of the universe.

Integrating Christianity and Science

Scientism claims that you cannot integrate Christianity and science. Instead, they claim all theology is nonsense and only science exists to give us the truth. As Moreland points out, “One of the effects of scientism, then, is making the ridicule of Christianity’s truth claims more common and acceptable (which is one of scientism’s goals).”[{19}](#)

If this view is clearly wrong, how should we as Christians view science and its relationship with Christianity and the Bible? First, we need to understand that the topics addressed by science are in most cases peripheral to the topics covered in the Bible. The Bible is primarily concerned with God’s efforts to restore people from their state as enemies of God back into eternal fellowship with Him.

One area of significant interaction is the question of how this universe came to exist in its current state. How one views that interaction (i.e. as adversarial or as complementary) depends on whether they are clinging to the unsupported myth of unguided evolution or to the new science of intelligent design. As Moreland states, “Science has done more to confirm the Christian God’s existence than to undermine it, and science has provided little or no evidence against belief of theism. Science has, however, raised challenges to various biblical texts, and Christians need to take those challenges seriously.”[{20}](#)

Moreland suggests there are five ways to relate issues in science and Christian philosophy. Let’s consider two of those methods. One is the complementarity model. In this model, two disciplines are addressing the same object or feature but from different, essentially non-overlapping perspectives. “Neither one purports to tell the whole story, but both make true claims about reality.”[{21}](#) This is the model used by advocates of theistic evolution who take as gospel the latest claims of evolutionary science while saying of course God kicked off the

whole process including us in His plan for the universe.

Another way to interact is called the direct interaction model. In this model, theories from theology and from science may directly interact with one another on some topic, either positively or negatively. One area might raise rational difficulties for the other. This approach has the most potential for bringing information from different fields together into a fuller picture of truth. Intelligent design is an area where this model is applied as it questions the validity of eliminating intelligence from the options considered in understanding the development of life on earth.

Since scientism swears that science is the only source of truth, even when scientists cannot agree as to what that scientific truth is, they want to discount inputs from any other source no matter how helpful. So the direct interaction model is a difficult road to take. What are the rational criteria for going against the experts? Moreland suggests there are four criteria for Christian theologians to decide to take this road.

1. Make sure there is not a reasonable interpretation of the Bible that resolves the tension.
2. There is a band of academically qualified scholars who are unified in rejecting the view held by a majority of the relevant experts. In this way, we know that there are people who are familiar with the details of the majority view, who do not believe that it is true.
3. There are good non-rational explanations for why the expert majority holds the problematic view. For historical, sociological, or theological reasons, the majority is not ready to abandon their position rather than because their evidence is overwhelming. "For example, the shift from creationism to Darwinism was primarily, though not exclusively, a shift in philosophy of science."[\[22\]](#)

Given the large amount of evidential support for a Christian worldview, any view that is counter to central components of a Christian worldview should be rejected precisely for that reason. Any view meeting the first three criteria that also attempts to undermine key parts of a Christian worldview will be overwhelmed by the significant rational support for a Christian worldview.

As followers of the God of real truth, Christians need to realize that the so-called truths being taught to justify science over theology are in fact myths and/or self-refuting statements. Every Christian needs to be able to address these fallacies in today's popular science culture. Equip your young adults with this understanding and more by attending our summer event called Mind Games Camp. More information can be found at probe.org/mindgames.

Notes

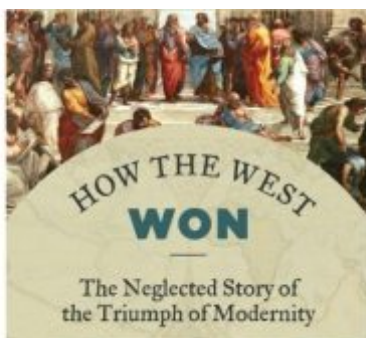
1. Michael Keas, *Unbelievable: 7 Myths About the History and Future of Science and Religion*, ISI Books, 2019, 2.
2. Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*, ISI Books, 2014 p. 304, 315.
3. J. P. Moreland, *Scientism and Secularism: Learning to Respond to a Dangerous Ideology*, Crossway, 2018, 26 and 29.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
6. Stark, p. 76.
7. Keas, p. 4 and Chapter 6.
8. Herman Bondi, *Cosmology*, Cambridge University Press, 1952.
9. Owen Gingerich, *God's Universe*, Belknap Press, 2006.
10. Sagan, 1980 *Cosmos* TV series, episode 3.
11. Kepler, letter to Herwart von Hohenburg, April 9/10, 1599.
12. Moreland, p. 52.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

15. Ibid., p. 138.
16. Ibid., p. 146.
17. Ibid., p. 151.
18. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford, 1982, p. 115.
19. Moreland, p. 31.
20. Ibid., p.174.
21. Ibid., p. 184.
22. Ibid., p. 192.

©2019 Probe Ministries

The Development of Modern Culture - Critical Role of Christianity Downplayed

Steve Cable

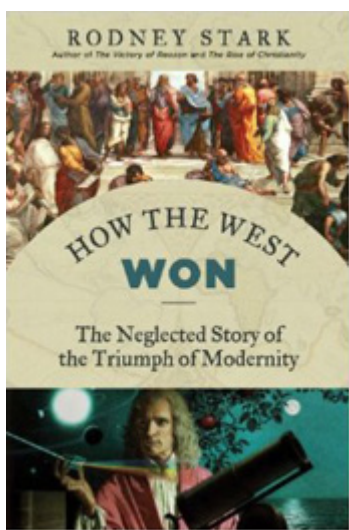


Steve Cable explodes 5 myths about history, showing Christianity's true critical role in the progress and development of culture.

Is our history really what you have been taught in school? For at least the last five decades in schools across this nation, most of us have digested a similar litany of facts about the development of the Western world. Among these commonly accepted facts are these five:



1. The Roman Empire introduced and maintained a period of relative peace in which innovation and free thought could flourish.
2. The Dark Ages, coming after the fall of the Roman Empire, was a period of over 500 years during which the European world languished in feudalism and ignorance.
3. The Protestant Reformation, fueled by the invention of the printing press, introduced a new era of religious freedom.
4. The Scientific Revolution was the result of Europe casting aside religious “superstitions” during the so-called Enlightenment.
5. Protestant missionaries were a negative, colonizing influence on the non-Western world.



In his recent book, entitled *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*, Rodney Stark, Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University, questions these “historical facts” from our childhood along with many others. His premise, based on the current state of historical data and analysis, is that the conventional wisdom about the history of the western world was tainted by the prejudices and lack of knowledge of the early historical writers. His view is backed up by the research and writings of many contemporary scholars. He clearly points out that what is

taught in our schools lags far behind the common knowledge held by top researchers in the field. It is interesting to note that this phenomenon is very similar to the difference between high school textbooks on the evolution of man and the current state of research into the origins of life.

Stark concludes that contrary to the conventional wisdom of high school textbooks, the worldview that developed as a result of following after the God revealed in Christian scripture was critical to the advent of our modern age. Only a society steeped in the message of an all-powerful, loving, creator of this universe was postured to take on the scientific and societal endeavors which are crucial to our society today. According to Stark, our modern world is not the result of key people freeing themselves from the chains of religious intolerance to pursue knowledge and truth, but rather the result of people seeking to better understand this universe created out of nothing into an orderly something by our Lord and God.

In the remainder of this article, we will look at these five key concepts of our history still taught to our students today and see how contemporary research has significantly modified or completely discredited them.

The Impact of Greece, Judaism, and Rome

Apart from periods of Jewish history, most of the world before 600 B.C. was controlled by systems of government that awarded the elite few at the expense of the rest of society. In China, India and Egypt societies had this common theme: "Wealth is subject to devastating taxes and the constant threat of usurpation; the challenge is to keep one's wealth, not to make it productive." [\[1\]](#) Their rulers strived to make it so. Stark pointed this out: "As Ricardo Caminos put it about the ancient Egyptians, 'Peasant families always wavered between abject poverty and utter destitution.' If the elite seizes all production above the minimum needed for survival, people have no motivation to produce more." [\[2\]](#)

Beginning around 600 B.C., the Greek city-states prior to the reigns of Phillip of Macedonia and his son, Alexander the Great, were the first to offer a different economic model on a large scale. “The major benefit of Greek democracy was sufficient freedom so that individuals could benefit from innovations making them more productive, with the collective result of economic progress.” {3} This unprecedented freedom was partly the result of Greece having an unfavorable geography with an abundance of mountains, no abundance of natural resources, and no large navigable river. This geography helped to promote the large number of small, independent city states. “Thus, having an unfavorable geography contributed to the greatness of Greece, for disunity and competition were fundamental to everything else.” {4} Once Greece was under the rule of the Macedonians and later the Romans, the scale of innovation in the areas of democracy, economic progress, the arts, and technology slowed dramatically.

Unlike other peoples near the cities of Greece, the Jews were greatly impacted by the Greek philosophers. Why? The God the Jews worshipped was “conscious, concerned and rational” {5} and as such the Jewish theologians were committed to reasoning about God from the things God revealed through Scripture. At this time the vast majority of Jews lived in the Diaspora outside of Palestine. And so, like the Apostle Paul, these Jews were exposed to Greek thought filtered through their understanding of Scripture.

Of course, the early Christians accepted this view of God but also added the idea that our knowledge of God and of his creation is progressive. {6} Understand that our early Christian fathers did not wholeheartedly embrace Greek ideas, choosing to show how Christian doctrines were much more rational. But they did embrace the ideas of reason and logic which were behind Greek philosophy. This train of thought by our Christian fathers set the stage for the development and advances of science. As Stark notes, “The truth is that science arose only because the doctrine of the rational creator of a rational universe made scientific inquiry plausible.” {7}

The rule of the Roman Empire provided centuries of relative peace and free travel throughout the Mediterranean area. This *pax Romana* facilitated the spread of Christianity across the Mediterranean world and thus played an important role in the growth of Christianity. However, Stark suggests that “the Roman Empire as at best a pause in the rise of the West, and more plausibly a setback.” [\[8\]](#)

Most of us probably view the Roman Empire as an expanded version of the great age of Greece where advancements were common in philosophy, commerce and technology. Stark points out that as a large, centrally controlled empire, Rome had plenty of labor and a large distance between the privileged few and the laboring masses. Consequently, the art and literature of the Roman period was fundamentally Greek. There were very few technological innovations developed during this period. In fact, “the Romans made little of no use of some known technologies, e.g. water power.” [\[9\]](#) They preferred to use manual labor rather than employ labor saving devices.

Stark suggests that two events during the period of Roman control were important to the development of our modern culture: the Christianization of the empire and the fall of Rome. “It was Rome that fell, not civilization. . . the millions of residents of the former empire did not suddenly forget everything they knew. To the contrary, with the stultifying effects of Roman repression now ended, the glorious journey toward modernity resumed.” [\[10\]](#)

The Not-So-Dark Ages

My understanding of the Dark Ages as a student from the 1970’s is probably similar to yours. It was pictured as a time in which European culture took a step backward from the advances of the Roman Empire and made little or no progress in advancing culture, economics, philosophy, or technology. It was a time characterized by wars and the stultifying oppression of the Catholic Church. Many historians of the past wrote that the fall of Rome cast Europe into this dismal age, aided by Christianity which celebrated poverty and urged

contentment.

Stark, along with most modern historians, take a far different view of this period of Western history. Stark puts it this way: “The fall of Rome was, in fact, the most beneficial event in the rise of Western civilization, precisely because it unleashed creative competition among the hundreds of independent political units, which, in turn resulted in rapid and profound progress.”[{11}](#)

In this culture of independent political units, trade developed and expanded rapidly, the average person ate better and grew larger than in the past because the people could now put to personal use the wealth Rome had previously squeezed from them. “Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Dark Ages myth is that it was imposed on what was actually ‘one of the great innovative eras of mankind.’”[{12}](#) During this period technology was developed and put into use “on a scale no civilization had previously known.”[{13}](#)

One of the strongest influences during this period came from the Scandinavians, the Vikings. “The Viking merchants traveled a complex network of trade routes extending as far as Persia. . . (The) Vikings had excellent arms, remarkable ships, and superb navigational skills . . . Their boats were far superior to anything found elsewhere on earth at that time.”[{14}](#) Our history lessons, however, placed an emphasis on great empires rather than movements impacting our way of life. “Not only have they continued to regret the fall of Rome, but they remember Charlemagne as the man who almost ‘saved’ Europe. In fact, the Scandinavians were as civilized as the Franks, while William the Conqueror was certainly as able as Charlemagne, and considerably more tolerant.”[{15}](#)

One of the major events during this period was the rise of capitalism as an economic driver. Capitalism can only exist in societies with free markets, secure property rights and the right of individuals to work where they wish. The Christian West, out from under the yoke of the Roman Empire, was the only society where this move was possible. As Stark explains, “Of the major world

faiths, only Judaism and Christianity have devoted serious and sustained attention to human rights, as opposed to human duties. Put another way, the other great faiths minimize individualism and stress collective obligations. They are . . . cultures of shame rather than cultures of guilt. There is not even a word for freedom in the languages in which their scriptures are written.” {16} Counter to the position of earlier historians who put the advent of capitalism much later in history, capitalism not only thrived during this period but had been fully debated by theologians who on the whole gave it general approval.

You may remember being taught that during these Dark Ages that Islamic scholarship and technological innovation kept society moving forward in the areas of science and technology. In fact, Stark points out, “The ‘Golden Era’ of Islamic science and learning is a myth. Some Muslim-occupied societies gave the appearance of sophistication only because of the culture sustained by their subject peoples - Jews and various brands of Christianity.” {17} In fact when they later cleansed their society of these other people, they soon fell back into a state where any technology was bought from the West and in many cases had to be operated by Westerners. One area where this was revealed on multiple occasions was in the area of military strategy and technology. In numerous battles between A.D. 1200 and 1600, Western forces on land and on the oceans typically inflicted casualties upon their Muslim foes at a rate ranging from 10 to 1,000 Muslim casualties for every casualty among the Western forces.

“Despite the record of Muslim failure against Western military forces, far too many recent Western historians promulgate politically correct illusions about Islamic might, as well as spurious claims that once upon a time Islamic science and technology were far superior to that of a backward and intolerant Europe.” {18}

“In 1148 all Christians and Jews were ordered to convert to Islam or leave Moorish Spain immediately, on pain of death. . . . And as (they) disappeared, they took the “advanced” Muslim culture with them. What they left behind was a

culture so backward that it couldn't even copy Western technology but had to buy it and often even had to hire Westerners to use it." [\[19\]](#)

What we had been taught were Dark Ages of no progress were actually a period of great progress in the development of individual freedom and the concept of capitalism.

The Reformation and Religious Freedom

Martin Luther, the catalytic figure of the Reformation, asserted that salvation is God's gift, freely given, and gained entirely by faith in Jesus as the redeemer. Each person must establish his or her own personal relationship with God. This new emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility was certainly consistent with the key aspects of Western modernity. But the way these ideas played out in society were a different matter.

The popular view promulgated by English and German historians was that the Protestant Reformation, which roughly occurred between A.D. 1515 and 1685, was facilitated by the printing press and the spread of literacy, resulting in a "remarkable revival of popular piety and the spread of religious liberty." You were probably taught that this new view of piety, placing the responsibility of a relationship with God squarely on the shoulders of the individual rather than on the intervening work of the Church, created a new environment of religious tolerance and personal piety. This environment was invigorating to the concepts of scientific and economic progress. However, the real situation was far different from this idealistic view promulgated by English and German historians. Far from introducing religious liberty to the masses, the Protestant Reformation was more about switching one monopoly religion for another.

Stark points out three ways in which earlier historians and sociologists have misrepresented what went on in the spread of the Protestant Reformation. These historians and probably your high school history textbook, taught the following

about the Reformation:

1. The Reformation introduced an era of religious freedom in Europe
2. The Reformation was able to spread rapidly because of the newly invented printing press
3. The Reformation's spread was partially a result of its attractiveness to the common man.

On the first point, rather than introducing an era of religious freedom, the Reformation produced competing monopoly religions. Depending upon the area in which one lived, the pressure to conform to the religion adopted by that region was immense. So what determined whether your region would be Catholic or Protestant? If the area's current Catholic hierarchy was not operating under the rule of local rulers or councils, the rulers were very likely to convert to a Protestant view, thereby removing the influence of the Catholic Church in their domain. Importantly, it allowed them to loot church property in the name of religion. As Stark point out, "It is all well and good to note the widespread appeal of the doctrine that we are saved by faith alone, but it also must be recognized that Protestantism prevailed only where the local rulers or councils had not already imposed their rule over the Church. Pocketbook issues prevailed." [\[20\]](#)

Was it the printing press that allowed the Reformation to spread rapidly? If so, one would expect that cities with printing presses producing Luther's pamphlets and his Bible, would be most likely to align with Protestantism. Yet what we find is a negative correlation between towns with printers who had published Luther's Bible and those towns which had converted to Protestantism. The printing press was certainly a factor in spreading Luther's theology, but if it was the dominant factor we should see a strongly positive correlation, not a negative one. "Indeed, assessments of the impact of printed materials on the success of the Lutheran Reformation too often overlook a critical factor: no more than five percent of Germans in this era could read." [\[21\]](#)

Finally, a widely held belief is that the Lutheran Reformation touched the hearts of the masses, resulting in a huge revival in personal faith and piety. However, most people were not personally impacted by the theological arguments between Catholicism and Protestantism. The common man in Germany at that time was, at best, semi-Christian. As Stark points out, “Eventually even Martin Luther admitted that neither the tidal wave of publications nor all the Lutheran preachers in Germany had made the slightest dent in the ignorance, irreverence, and alienation of the masses. Luther complained in 1529, “Dear God, help us! . . . The common man, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about Christian doctrine; and indeed many pastors are in effect unfit and incompetent to teach. Yet they all are called Christians, are baptized, and enjoy the holy sacraments - even though they cannot recite either the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed or the Commandments. They live just like animals.”

The Scientific Revolution and Christianity

The term “Scientific Revolution” was coined, referring to the period in the sixteenth and seventeenth century beginning with Copernicus and ending with Newton, when the rate of scientific advancement was thought to have increased dramatically. However, modern historians say that no such revolution occurred, although the role of science definitely matured during that period of time. Many of us remember being taught three aspects of this so-called revolution that we want to consider:

1. Most key scientific contributors had freed themselves from the rigid dogmas of faith.
2. The Protestant Reformation had freed society from “the dead hand of the Catholic Church,” thereby making real scientific thinking possible.
3. Real science could not occur in universities controlled by the churches.

However, Rodney Stark points out that current evidence indicates that all of these

claims are false, stating, “Indeed, Christianity was essential to the rise of science, which is why science was a purely Western phenomenon.” [{22}](#)

Of the 52 most prominent contributors to scientific advancement during this period, we find that 60% of them were devout believers in Christianity. Only one of them was a skeptic toward the message of Christianity. And the rest were classified as conventionally religious. So, the idea promoted by contemporary philosophers that scientific advancement was the result of freeing themselves from belief in the dogmas of the faith could not be further from the truth.

Of these 52 leaders of the scientific community, 26 were Protestant and 26 were Catholic. This equal distribution belies the common wisdom that the Protestant revolution allowed real scientific thinking to begin to take root. It appears that prior advances in scientific thought had prepared the minds of these individuals to advance the frontiers even further, regardless of whether they were Protestant or Catholic. Both faiths believed in God as the Intelligent Designer of a rational universe, and a rational universe was one that could be understood through the application of the scientific method.

As noted earlier, most modern historians sided with the statement, “Not only were the universities of Europe not the foci of scientific activity . . . but the universities were the principal centers of opposition for the new conceptions of nature which modern science constructed.” [{23}](#) Actually, 92% of these leaders in scientific research spent an extended period of time of ten years or more in the universities. Nearly half of them served as university professors during their careers. In fact, the distinguished historian of science Edward Grant stated, “The medieval university laid far greater emphasis on science than does its modern counterpart.” [{24}](#)

Stark wrote, “Science only arose in Christian Europe because only medieval Europeans believed that science was possible and desirable. And the basis of their belief was their image of God and his creation.” [{25}](#) As the distinguished

mathematician and scientist, Johannes Kepler stated, “The chief aim of all investigations of the external world should be to discover the rational order and harmony imposed on it by God and which he revealed to us in the language of mathematics.”[\[26\]](#) Thus, the so-called scientific revolution occurred not in spite of Christianity but rather directly because a Christian worldview beckoned them to study the nature of our world more closely.

Protestant Missionaries and the Rise of Western Democracies

Protestant missionaries are often portrayed as the villains of imperialistic expansion. They have often been portrayed as having a greater interest in converting their charges to Western culture than introducing them to eternal life through Jesus Christ. However, their personal and public publications do not support this negative view. On the contrary, “Missionaries undertook many aggressive actions to defend local peoples against undue exploitation by colonial officials.”[\[27\]](#)

Beyond correcting this distorted view of missionary purpose, modern historians have discovered an interesting impact. A recent study has shown that the rise and spread of stable democracies in the non-Western world can be attributed primarily to the impact of Protestant missionaries. According to a study by sociologist Robert Woodberry,[\[28\]](#) the impact of these missionaries far exceeds that of fifty other control variables such as gross domestic product and whether or not a nation was a British colony. One would think that having a healthy amount of production per individual would be one of the biggest factors leading to a stable democratic government. But the data shows that it has been much more important to have the teaching and leadership development provided by Protestant missionaries.

In addition, the greater number of Protestant missionaries per capita in a nation in 1923, the lower that nation’s infant-mortality rate in 2000. In this case, the

effect of having Protestant missionaries was more than nine times as large as the effect of current GDP per capita. In other words, having a history of Protestant missionaries is much more important than having a large amount of money in determining a low infant-mortality rate.

Conclusion

Many of us have been given the impression by educators that the scientific, governmental, and societal advances we enjoy are the result of enlightened people taking off their religious blinders and thinking more clearly about these topics. Sociologist Rodney Stark presents compelling data, arguing that in fact it was the unique worldview of Christianity that created societies in which new ideas could foment and flourish. This Christian worldview was fundamental to the advances in economics, science and government common in our current world. Understanding the worldview that fueled the advances making up our modern world is important if we are to continue to move ahead responsibly.

Notes

1. Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*. Wilmington DE: ISI Books, 2014. 12.
2. Stark, 11.
3. Stark, 19.
4. Stark, 15.
5. Stark, 33.
6. Stark, 33.
7. Stark, 40.
8. Stark, 47.
9. Stark, 53.
10. Stark, 66.
11. Stark, 69.
12. Gimpel, Jean, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle*

Ages. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.

13. Stark, 76.

14. Stark, 95.

15. Stark, 118.

16. Stark, 125.

17. Stark, 43.

18. Stark, 283.

19. Stark, 302.

20. Stark, 272.

21. Stark, 270.

22. Stark, 304.

23. Westfall, Richard S. *The Construction of Modern Science* New York: Wiley, 1971. 105.

24. Grant, Edward. "Science and the Medieval University" in James M. Kittelson and Pamela J. Transue, eds., *Rebirth, Reform, and Resilience: Universities in Transition, 1300-1700* . Ohio State University Press, 1984. 68.

25. Stark, p. 315.

26. Bradley, Walter, "The 'Just So' Universe: The Fine-Tuning of Constants and Conditions in the Cosmos" in William Dembski and James M. Kushiner, eds., *Signs of Intelligence: Understanding Intelligent Design*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001. 160.

27. Stark, 366.

28. Woodberry, Robert D. "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, 2012. 106:1-30.