

DEBUNKING HISTORY

ANTI-CATHOLIC

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Rodney Stark, *Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History* (Templeton Press, 2016)

In the world of religious scholarship, few men are as respected as Rodney Stark. He is a sociologist by training, and now co-director of Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion.

Among his best-known works are *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (1996), *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity led to Freedom, Capitalism and Western Success* (2005), *America's Blessings: How Religion Benefits Everyone, Including Atheists* (2012), and last year's *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious Than Ever*.

As one might infer from these titles, Stark has invested a great deal of time and energy exploring the benefits of mainstream religion—especially Christianity—which he sees as influencing civilization in a unique and unrivalled way.

As far ranging as his work is, however, Stark has never published a book exclusively about the Roman Catholic Church, until now. *Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History*, is Stark's latest work, and it is as important as anything he has ever written.

Bearing False Witness examines ten alleged sins of the Church: creating anti-Semitism; suppressing secret Gospels; persecuting pagans; fostering the "Dark Ages"; launching immoral Crusades; sponsoring the Inquisition; obstructing science, sanctioning slavery, embracing authoritarianism, and opposing modernity.

Employing the best modern research, and heavily documenting all his points, Stark shows that every one of these charges is either false or seriously exaggerated—often maliciously so.

Stark's mastery of the topic is displayed in his opening chapter, where he thoroughly dismantles the claim that the Catholic Church gave birth to anti-Semitism, fostered it, and then turned a blind eye to its millions of victims during the Holocaust.

In fact, anti-Semitism emerged in the pagan world, well before the beginnings of the Catholic Church, which was a minority sect during its early existence, without the ability to dominate anyone.

After the Catholic population grew, and its leaders did obtain power, they treated those with opposing viewpoints with far greater charity than pagans ever had. Christ's command to love one another had a profound impact upon Catholic behavior, especially toward the long-suffering Jewish community. Not surprisingly, when Jews became targets of fascist and Nazi militants, in the early twentieth century, the Catholic Church, far from remaining "silent," was among the first to come to their defense, as records from the fascist-Nazi era amply demonstrate.

More importantly, the Church's defense of persecuted Jews wasn't restricted to words; Catholics everywhere, led by the heroic Pope Pius XII—who was involved in three separate plots to overthrow Hitler, and denounced as a "mouthpiece of the Jewish war criminals" by the Nazis—backed those words up with concrete actions, saving hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives.

At one point, the Nazis decided to kidnap and possibly even kill Pius XII, but he never left Rome, despite being urged to do so, and continued his life-saving activities from Vatican City. As just one of many interventions, Stark notes that the

pontiff “used his summer home, Castel Gandolfo, to shelter thousands of Jews during the War, providing them with kosher food and turning his private apartment into an obstetrical ward.”

Jewish communities graciously thanked Pius XII for his leadership and rescue efforts during the War; and no amount of anti-papal revisionism will ever be able to erase the truth and sincerity of those tributes, without doing violence to history itself.

Stark’s takedown of anti-Catholic polemicists who have tried to depict the Church of Pius XII as complicit with Nazism marks a real turning point, for what it proves is that the best and most respected scholars of our time have now repudiated the claim that the Church posed an existential threat to the Jewish community, and that Pius XII remained aloof and indifferent toward their persecution during the Holocaust. “The Roman Catholic Church,” concludes Stark, “has a long and honorable record of stout opposition to attacks upon Jews. And Pope Pius XII fully lived up to that tradition.”

Batting away the charge that the Catholic Church was anti-Semitic sets the stage for Stark’s ensuing chapters, which expose equally disreputable myths.

Confronting the claim that the Church suppressed alternative and equally valid “Gnostic Gospels,” a favorite theory of certain academics, Stark demonstrates just the opposite: there were no “alternative” forms of legitimate Christianity at that time—and the “Gnostic Gospels” were no more validly Christian than science fiction or the *Da Vinci Code*. The Gnostic sects and their writings eventually collapsed because of their own lack of credibility and incoherence, not because of any Church conspiracy to cover-up supposed secrets about Christ and His apostles.

The oft-heard claim that the Church ruthlessly crushed paganism is equally off the mark. While the coming of Christ, and the establishment of His Church, clearly marked a break from pagan living, the early Christians tried to incorporate whatever was good and honorable in pagan civilization, while rejecting its destructive parts—and even then, most often and successfully did so through persuasion and Christian witness. Brute force and coercion were not the hallmarks of the early Church.

That being so, is it not at least true that the Church routinely resorted to force and wicked cruelty during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and slavery?

Stark answers each question honestly and comprehensively, and the short answer is “Yes, and No”—with an emphasis placed on the “No.” While the very concept of an inquisition resorting to physical punishment is objectionable, the Spanish one led by Catholics was usually much less severe than other forms of justice then being meted out. Indeed, when those suspected of wrongdoing learned they would face investigation—and might have to pay mightily for their actions—they invariably preferred placing their fate with the Church, rather than secular regimes, realizing they would receive a much fairer hearing among committed Catholics.

This is not to rationalize a procedure which never should have existed in the first place, only to point out what its actual record was, in comparative terms, and in a world filled with miscarriages of justice. And it should be noted that the Spanish Inquisition often exonerated people, particularly those accused of witchcraft, who were burned at the stake by many non-Catholic governments.

Yet, it is the Spanish Inquisition which is constantly singled out for unspeakable and unique acts of cruelty. Stark contends that this is a consequence of rival religions and cultures: “The standard account of the Spanish Inquisition is mostly a

pack of lies, invented and spread by English and Dutch propagandists in the sixteenth century during their wars with Spain, and repeated ever after by the malicious or misled historians."

The practice of slavery is also indefensible, but, like anti-Semitism, it wasn't begun by Christians, and Stark proves that slaves were treated considerably better by Catholic masters than Protestant ones. This may be because Popes strongly and repeatedly condemned the practice, ameliorating its evils, even as they did not always have the power to enforce their teachings. Had temporal rulers and ordinary believers fully obeyed the Holy See, the slave trade would have ended much sooner than it did.

Having already written a book on the Crusades, boldly entitled, *God's Battalions: The Case for the Crusades* (2009), Stark challenges a whole body of polemical literature which condemns the Crusades unequivocally. He shows that, contrary to popular belief, they were not launched to ruthlessly conquer non-Christians, but to defend Christian people already under ferocious attack by Islamic warriors.

Stark's history of Catholic-Muslim conflict is jolting and politically incorrect, but it is based on a careful, dispassionate reading of history, and Stark's conclusion is striking: "The Crusades were not unprovoked. They were not the first round of European colonialism. They were not conducted for land, loot or converts. The Crusaders were not barbarians who victimized the cultivated Muslims. The Crusades are not a blot on the history of the Catholic Church. No apologies are required."

Stark's exposé of anti-Catholic mythology reaches a crescendo when answering those who invented the idea of the Catholic "Dark Ages." No reputable historian who writes about the years in question, roughly 500-1500 AD, believes they were backward or superstitious, at least in comparison to what came before

them. If anything, these were Catholic ages of progress and enlightenment—in education, the arts, and scientific advancement; and the Middle (not “Dark”) Ages also marked the beginnings of a rudimentary free-market system.

According to Stark, the whole narrative of the “Dark Ages” was an act of intellectual pride perpetrated by seventeenth-century atheists and rationalists who were determined to prove that their age was the first of “Enlightenment,” and that the Catholic Church was uninvolved in the advance of modernity. They could not be more mistaken. Not only was the Church involved in the best aspects of modernity, it laid its very foundations.

The same is true today, when it is the Roman Catholic Church, more than any other institution on earth, which defends human life and dignity against violence, abortion, euthanasia, human trafficking and pornography, to mention only a few of the many evils which now surround us.

In marshaling peer-reviewed research and unassailable evidence on the Church’s behalf, Stark does not commit the opposite mistake of whitewashing Catholics who have truly done wrong. Stark knows—and we all know—that there have been individual Catholics, both religious and lay, past and present, who have violated the Gospel, and he makes no excuses for them.

“But no matter how much importance one places on these negative aspects of Church history,” he writes in his introduction, “it does not justify the extreme exaggerations, false accusations and patent frauds in the chapters that follow. Faced with this enormous literature of lies, I have heeded the words of Columbia University’s Garret Mattingly (1900-62), ‘Nor does it matter at all to the dead whether they receive justice at the hands of succeeding generations. But to the living, to do justice, however belatedly, should matter.’”

Actually, I believe that the unjustly maligned, now in Heaven,

do appreciate historical justice, however late its arrival; and those now living, still dealing with the slings and arrows of anti-Catholic bigotry, should be even more appreciative to Rodney Stark—a non-Catholic, independent and conscientious Christian scholar—for writing this courageous and exceptional work.

William Doino Jr. is a contributing editor to Inside the Vatican magazine, and an online contributor for First Things. Known for his research and writings on Church history, his 80,000-word annotated bibliography on Pope Pius XII and the Second World War appears in the anthology, The Pius War: Responses to the Critics of Pius XII.