

Swinging too far to the other side

I would like to make a few comments on Michael J. Oard's review of Rodney Stark's book *Bearing False Witness: Debunking centuries of anti-Catholic history*.¹ While the paper was well-written with good intent, it goes too far and comes across as a sort of unwarranted apologetic for the Roman Catholic Church. The author correctly dispels myths about certain forms of anti-Semitism, anti-scientism, and the Crusades, yet portrays the Dark Ages in a one-sided manner, or even downright perpetrates myths about the Inquisition itself. While it is incorrect to glibly believe everything that secularists say about the Roman Catholic Church, still we must remember that the Roman Catholic Church is made up of fallen people, who are sensitive about upholding a positive image of their church.

Regarding the Dark Ages, this was an era of the gradual accumulation of different heresies in the Roman Catholic Church. Such heresies would have obviously affected the morals of society. Thus, the Reformation would have led to revival, since it freed people from the practical consequences of false teachings. This was a time when the papacy was very unstable, and under the control of rival aristocratic factions. Popes reigned for short periods of time, some for even just months or days. Popes murdered each other, and bought and sold ecclesiastical offices for money, and public illiteracy and immorality were high.² It is not too much of a stretch to suppose that the Roman Catholic Church had devolved into immorality during this period, just as Israel had done during the time of the prophet Elijah.

It may be true that capitalism first appeared in Roman Catholic monasteries in the ninth century, as Oard's book review states. However,



Figure 1. Medal struck by Pope Gregory XIII to commemorate the massacre of the French Huguenots on St Bartholomew's Day in 1572. The inscription reads "VGONOTTORVM STRAGES 1572" (Massacre of the Huguenots, 1572).

as opposed to this, the present pope, Francis I, is also quite well known for his socialistic ideology, including social justice.

As to the number of people killed in the Inquisition, the author states that "the total amount of executions over the few hundred years of the Inquisition in all of Europe was less than 3,000!" There was no reference to verify this statement in Oard's article, but even a cursory calculation can disprove this conjecture. By some accounts, the Inquisition was *officially* held to have lasted from 1203 until 1834, a period of 631 years. If only 3,000 people were killed during the Inquisition, this equates to *a mere five people killed per year*. Such a small number hardly requires an entire ecclesiastic judicial apparatus to search for and root out heresy. In *Summa Theologica* (available online), Thomas Aquinas writes:

"With regard to heretics two points must be observed: one, on their own side; the other, on the side of the Church. On their own side there is the sin, whereby *they deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be severed from the world by death* [emphasis added]."³

The number of people killed during the Inquisition could well be

even greater than what we expect. This is because many records from the Inquisition may have been destroyed since the Middle Ages. This number is likely in the millions,⁴ since a similar number of Jews were killed in the Holocaust in less than ten years. If we unduly deflate the number of people killed during the Inquisition, we would be dishonouring these victims by denying their having been murdered by Rome.

The Roman Catholic Church would obviously try to play down the number of people killed during the Inquisition. It might be argued that the church itself did not persecute heretics, only the state did. This argument is faulty in that during the Middle Ages the popes held both ecclesiastical and temporal power. According to Pope Boniface VIII's bull, *Unam Sanctam*, where he explains his theory of the two swords, the church has both ecclesiastical as well as temporal power.⁵ In this manner popes put whole countries, such as England, under interdict, and humiliated Henry IV, Holy Roman Emperor at Canossa in the year 1077.²

According to some historians, people such as the Waldenses and the Bogumils were held to be heretical groups by the Roman Catholic Church prior to the official beginning of the Inquisition. Even Roman Catholic sources readily acknowledge that up to 10,000 French Huguenots were murdered during the St Bartholomew's Day massacre on 23–24 August 1572, and the following days in Paris and other parts of France.^{2,6} Figure 1 depicts a medal struck by pope Gregory XIII after the massacre commemorating this horrible act.

In summary, while it is wrong to falsely accuse someone out of malicious intent, defending the same party must also be done in an accurate manner.

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» Michael Oard replies:

Matthew Cserhati brings up some valid points, and I certainly agree with his last sentence, that we need to be accurate. I must first say that neither Rodney Stark nor myself are Roman Catholics. Second, we both are well aware of the historic problems within the Catholic Church. I believe Dr Stark wrote this book because he was interested in the truth, which is also the reason I wrote the book review. I am just the messenger, Cserhati's issue is with Stark. Stark has written other books that are strongly critical of some aspects of the Catholic Church. He has a record of doing dispassionate, unbiased historical research and did so for thirty years at the University of Washington, where he also taught.

Stark points out that early in his career he had believed what the popular culture said about the Catholic Church. He only discovered all the misinformation in the culture by accident in his historical research on various aspects of historical Christianity (he has written many books and research articles on this topic). I will add that Stark often goes to original records for his information, or to historians that use original records, unlike many scholars today. I will now address some of the objections made by Cserhati's.

Cserhati's makes the claim that the 'Dark Ages' were really dark, and in many ways that is true, such as the politics and corruption within the Catholic Church and the governments in general. My one-sided manner was simply reporting what Stark discovered that counters the one-sided belief of the culture. The Dark Ages were so named by the purveyors of the Enlightenment and were inspired by their bias against Christianity. Since the Catholic Church was the only expression of Christianity to have a public presence at the time, the propaganda is directed against the Catholic Church. The point Stark makes is that culturally the Middle

Ages were not dark. Stark documents his contention with a wealth of data. Of course, it was not a golden age. In regard to heresies, the Middle Ages were not much different from any other age. Heresies began soon after Jesus' ascension, which was recorded in the New Testament and early Church history. Heresies have always existed, as they do even to this day.

Capitalism was first introduced by Catholic monks during the Dark Ages. Pope Francis's lean toward socialism does not change this fact.

Probably the main point of disagreement with Cserhati is the number of people killed by the Inquisition. He thinks it likely millions were killed during the inquisition, agreeing with many in the culture, both layman and scholars alike. Recently translated original sources, however, have laid that to rest.

The term inquisition can have many meanings, but the formal Inquisition was an ecclesiastical court of the Catholic Church established by the pope to root out heresy. Its goal was to correct and teach Catholics and their converts. It strayed from this goal at times when its power was used to forcibly coerce people and also to steal land. Among the atrocities were the 'informal inquisitions' against the Cathars and Waldensians, starting in France in the middle of the 1200s. There were others which poorly related to the Inquisition, such as witch hunts, which were mainly caused by secular hysteria.⁷ My review focused on what is considered the worst of the Inquisitions, the Spanish Inquisition. It is the one about which Stark goes into depth in his book.

In regard to this Inquisition, I also was surprised by the low number of deaths. I had heard the low numbers before, but did not believe them until Stark supported them with evidence. Anti-Catholics through the centuries have used the Inquisition to accuse the Catholic Church of maleficence by declaring that huge numbers of people

(even millions) were killed during it. The general population believes this is true. Stark, in his search for truth, starts his analysis of the Spanish Inquisition by stating what he discovered after careful study:

"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 ... Astonishing as it may seem, the new historians of the Inquisition have revealed that, in contrast with the secular courts all across Europe, the Spanish Inquisition was a consistent force for justice, restraint, due process, and enlightenment."⁸

Stark has used sources that have examined recently revealed archives on the Spanish Inquisition between 1540 and 1700:

"Subsequently, they [historians Carlo Ginzburg, Henry Kaman, E. William Monter, and John Tedeschi] have read the careful records made of each of the 44,674 cases heard by these two [Argon and Castile] Inquisitions between 1540 and 1700. At the time they were written, these records were secret so there was no reason for the clerks to have misrepresented the actual proceedings. In addition, these historians have done an immense amount of more traditional research, pouring over diaries, letters, decrees, and other old documents. The results are solidly undeniable."⁹

Interestingly, of these 44,674 cases, only 826 people were executed.

The Spanish Inquisition was implemented in 1478 by the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. Before 1540 records were poor, but the historians that have examined the period closely agree that this was the most bloody period, with as many as fifteen hundred people executed.⁹ This brings the total to 2,336 people killed

by the Spanish Inquisition between 1478 and 1700. I did err in my review when I said there were less than 3,000 Inquisition deaths in all of Europe, a figure for only Spain.

Looking online at inquisitions in other countries reveals that fairly good records were kept of the Portuguese Inquisition in which, between 1536 and 1794, 1,183 people (3.76% of those brought before the courts) were executed.¹⁰ The Roman Inquisition is probably the only other significant inquisition. It began in 1542 and lasted into the mid-1700s. Of 51,000 to 75,000 cases, 1,250 people were executed.¹¹ So, the number executed during the formal Inquisitions is in the thousands and not millions.

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