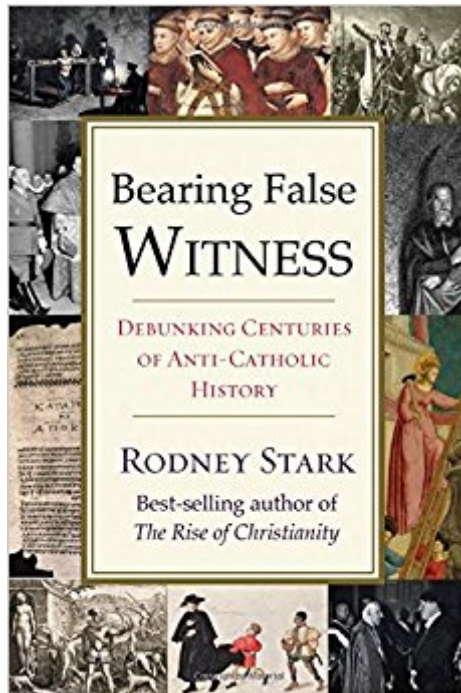


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Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries Of Anti-Catholic History



Synopsis

As we all know and as many of our well established textbooks have argued for decades, the Inquisition was one of the most frightening and bloody chapters in Western history, Pope Pius XII was anti-Semitic and rightfully called "Hitler's Pope," the Dark Ages were a stunting of the progress of knowledge to be redeemed only by the secular spirit of the Enlightenment, and the religious Crusades were an early example of the rapacious Western thirst for riches and power. But what if these long held beliefs were all wrong? In this stunning, powerful, and ultimately persuasive book, Rodney Stark, one of the most highly regarded sociologists of religion and bestselling author of *The Rise of Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco 1997) argues that some of our most firmly held ideas about history, ideas that paint the Catholic Church in the least positive light are, in fact, fiction. Why have we held these wrongheaded ideas so strongly and for so long? And if our beliefs are wrong, what, in fact, is the truth? In each chapter, Stark takes on a well-established anti-Catholic myth, gives a fascinating history of how each myth became the conventional wisdom, and presents a startling picture of the real truth. For example, Instead of the Spanish Inquisition being an anomaly of torture and murder of innocent people persecuted for "imaginary" crimes such as witchcraft and blasphemy, Stark argues that not only did the Spanish Inquisition spill very little blood, but it was a major force in support of moderation and justice. Instead of Pope Pius XII being apathetic or even helpful to the Nazi movement, such as to merit the title, "Hitler's Pope," Stark shows that the campaign to link Pope Pius XII to Hitler was initiated by the Soviet Union, presumably in hopes of neutralizing the Vatican in post-World War II affairs. Pope Pius XII was widely praised for his vigorous and devoted efforts to saving Jewish lives during the war. Instead of the Dark Ages being understood as a millennium of ignorance and backwardness inspired by the Catholic Church's power, Stark argues that the whole notion of the "Dark Ages" was an act of pride perpetuated by anti-religious intellectuals who were determined to claim that theirs was the era of Enlightenment. In the end, readers will not only have a more accurate history of the Catholic Church, they will come to understand why it became unfairly maligned for so long. *Bearing False Witness* is a compelling and sobering account of how egotism and ideology often work together to give us a false truth.

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Customer Reviews

"Rodney Stark gives the last acceptable prejudice a sound thrashing and clears up a lot of confused history along the way. Give this fine book to anyone you know who's been subjected to social studies. —[George Weigel](#), Distinguished Senior Fellow, Ethics and Public Policy Center —"Growing up Catholic in the United States is to hear a constant stream of stuff that, one's experience shows, is just not true. Still I have always trusted that some unbiased non-Catholic scholar would one day look at the evidence (even its simple logic) again. Little did I imagine that this expected dispassionate historian would be so deeply informed, lucid, thorough, and blunt. Rodney Stark has done justice to neglected historical truth, and I am deeply grateful for his steady toughmindedness. His aim was to honor the truth, so now it remains for historians to look again, face his challenges, and come refreshed to their own verdicts. —[Michael Novak](#), winner of the Templeton Prize (1994), author of *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* —"A majestically argued, gorgeously written, and essential book by one of the truly indispensable minds of our time. Bearing False Witness is one more gift to history from Rodney Stark. It should in turn be given to and read by students and professors everywhere, whatever their beliefs. —[Mary Eberstadt](#), author of *How the West Really Lost God and It's Dangerous to Believe* —"An elegantly written and lucid overview of the myths and fables produced by what has been described as America's oldest prejudice. —[Directors of adult education groups](#) should run out and buy this book. —[Mark Massa SJ](#), dean, School of Theology and Ministry, Boston College —"If ever there was a book that was going to stir up controversy among historians, scholars of religion, sociologists, and politicians, then Bearing

False Witness is it. In it, Rodney Stark rebuts, with his usual mastery of sources and mature judgment, the widespread black legends about Catholic violence, bigotry, intolerance, and rejection of modern science. Regardless of whether one agrees with all of his arguments, this book will be a most useful resource for educators and scholars alike, and due to its engaging and lucid style it is a must have for every history lover.

• Ulrich L. Lehner, author of *The Catholic Enlightenment* “Those trapped by convention will bristle at Stark’s book, but those who attempt to deconstruct their own stance will find here much that resonates. Written in a lively style, Stark’s book will appeal to those interested in the history of Western civilization, Christianity, and culture.”

• CHOICE “Roman Catholics have gotten a bad reputation: they’re responsible for the Dark Ages, the Crusades, and the Inquisition. They’re anti-science, anti-Semites, and anti-freedom. Each of these accusations is an oversimplification that perverts history.”

• “According to a new, groundbreaking book by sociologist and historian Rodney Stark, the truth is far more friendly to the Catholic Church, and those who say otherwise are overlooking important developments in the study of history. In *Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History*, Stark rebuts 10 historical myths that reflect badly on the Catholic church.”

• Tyler O’Neil, PJ Media “Even if you are not Catholic, to understand today’s culture wars, you must understand Catholic history. [T]his book has my highest endorsement for everyone from Catholics to atheists who appreciate brave truth-telling on important topics.”

• FrontPage Magazine, Danusha Goska, author of *Save Send Delete* “The fallout from these anti-Catholic myths has been extensive and damaging. Stark sets the record straight.”

• Kathleen A. Mulhern, Patheos “Stark writes as an historian, not an apologist; but the truth is not only good history, but also the best defense of the Church.”

• Gerald J. Russello, National Catholic Register “In each chapter, Stark takes on a well-established anti-Catholic myth, gives a fascinating history of how each myth became the conventional wisdom, and presents a startling picture of the real truth.”

• *Supremacy and Survival* “In *Bearing False Witness*, Stark crushes anti-Catholic myths one by one with clarity and well-researched scholarship.”

• Klaus Vella Bardon, Times of Malta “Stark has done the Catholic Church a great service in presenting a thorough dismantling of many anti-Catholic narratives, as well as offering analysis as to how and why this happened. Even those outside the parameters of the Catholic Church should welcome this study, as it enables

us to move beyond the usual sniping characteristic of so many church history debates, and pursue a more thorough, historically faithful ecumenical dialogue. • Casey Chalk, Call to Communion “Bearing False Witness by Rodney Stark is a generous book – though more importantly, a judicious one. Stark is a Protestant who grew up believing many anti-Catholic myths, including that old canard from Washington Irving that Columbus’s voyage had been discouraged by the Church because of her belief that the world was flat. Stark dismantles this quaint piece of ahistorical folklore in his Introduction, then sets his sights on the whole panoply of Black Legends maliciously promulgated throughout history to justify bigotry towards Catholics, first by rival denominations (English and Dutch Protestants invented the lurid, baseless cartoon we picture when we hear Spanish Inquisition) and then by secular forces (I learned here that it was Soviet propagandists who started the lie that Pius XII was Hitler’s Pope). the book is an across-the-aisle attempt to right some wrongs of Christian historiography. • Alexi Sargeant, First Things

Rodney Stark is the distinguished professor of the social sciences and codirector of the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University and honorary professor of sociology at Peking University in Beijing. He is the author or coauthor of a number of books in 17 different languages, including the best-selling *The Rise of Christianity*. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997)

Bearing False Witness by Rodney Stark I’ve been addressing anti-Catholic tropes on the internet for the last twenty years. When I started, I honestly believed that these accusations were supported by fact, or, even, if not totally accurate, were substantially accurate. My particular forte of late has been the slander that the Catholic Church supported Hitler and the Nazis. By going past the books that everyone is reading into the books written by those involved in the “Church Struggle,” I have established that the modern view is a total distortion of the facts. Germans, Europeans and the world knew that the Catholic Church was completely opposed to National Socialism for a variety of reasons, including its exaltation of nation and race over God as the supreme good. I have newspaper articles from the New York Times that demonstrate that the German Catholic bishops repeatedly condemned National Socialism from 1923 through 1945. The German Catholic Bishops excommunicated Nazi party members. Catholic electoral districts did not vote for the Nazis at anywhere near the rate of Protestant districts. The Nazis lumped “political Catholicism” in with international Bolshevism and international Judaism as one of its three great enemies. These points are not opinions or

apologetics; they are facts. Yet, I repeatedly am shown pictures of purported Catholic priests who are often Lutheran performing the Hitler salute which was required on penalty of imprisonment - and told that Catholics made National Socialism possible. Needless to say, my interlocutors are as ignorant as a box of rocks, and yet they are arrogant with the arrogance that only indoctrination into an unshakable belief can give. Weird and insidious. Stark's recent book is an effort to shake this modern faith. This is not a work of Catholic apologetics. Stark is not a Catholic. It is, rather, a different kind of apologetics. It is a work of historical apologetics. Stark reveals as his conclusion that his purpose is nothing less than to defend history, which has become distorted by ignorance and political ideology, and encrusted generations of bigotry, to create the "perfect storm" of ignorance, and a dangerous ignorance since rejecting Catholic history effectively paves the way for rejecting Western History and Western values. Stark's approach is to state the conventional wisdom of Catholic duplicity or evil and then point out with simple facts how false the conventional wisdom is in root and branch. Candidly, for a reader who has read Stark's other books, much of this is a rehash, but this book is useful in collecting the many false tropes in one source, and he does offer additional and new insights. The topics that Stark covers are Antisemitism, the non-canonical gospels, persecution of pagans, the Dark Ages, the Crusades, the Inquisition, religion and the rise of science, slavery, the Catholic Church and fascism, and the Catholic Church's alleged social stagnation. In very simple and clear statements of data, Stark debunks the myths. This is not to say that Catholicism has never done anything wrong, but Stark absolves it of guilt for the grossest crimes it has been repeatedly accused of. This book should be required reading at a high school or college level simply out of fairness for the years of defamation. Also, it would advance the project of knowing the truth, which education supposedly has as its goal. The lay reader would undoubtedly have one of two reactions. The reaction of many, unfortunately, would be denial because the facts don't fit the myths. The second, more hopeful reaction, might be "mind-blowing" as the imagined past is replaced by the actual past. For someone who has mastered the facts, the more interesting question is "why?" Why is it that in the space of 80 years, Catholicism went from the undisputed opponent of the Nazis to its putative handmaiden? Stark points to a number of factors. One factor is the burden of history. Protestantism, particularly Protestant England, waged a "cold war" against various Catholic powers, including Spain and France, and made much use of the "black arts" of propaganda.

Once the “Black Legend” had been launched into the universe, it has been impossible to eliminate from the essentially Anglophone world. This traditional Protestant propaganda has merged with an ideological stream that is either anti-religious or secular leftist. Although Gibbon was one of the very first “distinguished bigots,” he is in excellent company • the list of celebrated, anti-Catholic scholars (some of them still living) is long indeed. We will meet scores of them in subsequent chapters, some of them many times. Worse yet, in recent years some of the most malignant contributions to anti-Catholic history have been made by alienated Catholics, many of whom are seminary dropouts, former priests, or ex-nuns, such as John Cornwell, James Carroll, and Karen Armstrong. Normally, attacks originating with defectors from a particular group are treated with some circumspection. But, attacks on the Church made by “lapsed” Catholics are widely regarded as thereby of special reliability! Stark doesn’t mention the theory of the former Romanian spy chief, General Ion Mihai Pacepa, that Soviet Union engaged in its own “black arts” of propaganda in crafting its own “Black Legend” that indoctrinated millions into believing that Pope Pius XII was a Nazi sympathizer. [See *Disinformation: Former Spy Chief Reveals Secret Strategies for Undermining Freedom, Attacking Religion, and Promoting Terrorism*.] For all of his interest in Sociology, Stark doesn’t offer an explanation as to why these streams have merged, endured, and been accepted by so many. It may seem obvious to Stark, who grew up breathing in anti-Catholicism with his Lutheran mother’s milk, but it does seem that modern anti-Catholicism is different from the prior kind insofar as it has such an appeal to Catholics, who may be finding themselves identifying more with ideology or nation than faith. The hopeful sign is that the pressure from the outside, from the “distinguished bigots” who more and more are not distinguishing between Catholic and Protestant, is pushing Catholic and Protestant closer. Stark points out that the ecumenism in his own university, Baylor • a traditionally Bible-Belt Baptist institution • has grown to an extent unimaginable when he started teaching. For myself, I will offer my own sociological insight: I think that traditionally anti-Catholic Protestants have learned that anti-Catholicism is a luxury they can no longer afford. It was once possible to enjoy a book that depicted Catholicism as corrupt and criminal, but when Dan Brown’s execrable “The Da Vinci Code” came out and provided pop pabulum history that a basic Christian doctrine like the divinity of Jesus had been adopted by a vote on the slimmest margin • a

lie. As Protestants began to understand that the Catholic limb they had been sawing on was the limb they were sitting on. Likewise, Protestants have seen attacks on the Crusades turned into attacks on Western Christianity generally. The dark art of propaganda is easily turned. And, then, there has been the intellectual damage done to scholarship as propaganda becomes the coin of the academic realm and scholarship is judged by how it fits the narrative rather than how it fits the facts. Let's hope that Stark is successful in his project.

Like most American Protestants and secularists, I grew up believing that the Catholic Church was single-handedly responsible for 90% of the bad things that have happened since Jesus ascended... Anti-Semitic Behavior? Check. Pushing Europe into the Dark Ages? Check. Leading the Crusades? Check. Starting an Inquisition? Check. Hindering Scientific Progress? Check. This isn't exactly the kind of resume that any organization, much less a church, wants to have. And yet it's been common knowledge that, had the Catholic Church never come on the scene, Europe would have experienced much more peace and prosperity over the past two-thousand years. But what if none of that is true? In his latest book, *Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History*, Rodney Stark argues that things are not at all as they seem to be. But wait! Before you brush all of this off as a piece of revisionist history from an overly-enthusiastic Catholic historian, you should know that Rodney Stark is neither Catholic nor part of any Catholic university. He grew up as a Lutheran (he never describes his current religious beliefs) and teaches at one of the largest Southern Baptist Universities in the world. Stark is no Roman Catholic apologist. As he writes in the introduction, "I am not a Roman Catholic, and I did not write this book in defense of the Church. I wrote it in defense of history." The thesis-thread that Stark weaves throughout this work is rather simple: Much accepted history has been written by opponents of Catholicism in particular, and religion in general, as a result, they've cherry-picked much of their history to make Roman Catholicism appear much worse than it actually was. Rather than write a narrative that works through the entire history of the church, correcting errors where they've previously been reported, Stark attempts to debunk ten myths (or truth-stretching) regarding the Catholic Church's role in history. These include: a history of anti-semitism, the suppression of other gospels, persecuting peaceful pagans out of existence, leading Europe into the Dark Ages, crusading to line the coffers of the church, the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions, executing scientific heretics, looking the other way on (and even sanctifying) slavery, supporting authoritarian governments, and holding Europe back from entering modernity. Each chapter begins with the conventional history, complete with Catholicism (or perhaps the pope or some bishop) as the villain. Once the traditional telling has

been recounted, Stark turns it on its head by examining the evidence (some of which has only recently been discovered or closely inspected) and showing the reader that often, that traditional telling has been very wrong. Each chapter also includes a list of leading scholars whose work influenced Stark's arguments. This is incredibly helpful for anyone who wants to fact-check Stark and trace his arguments to their sources. In addition, there are 21 pages of notes and bibliography/recommended reading - that's nearly 10% of the entire book. It should be obvious that Stark has done his homework. As I read, there were a number of things that utterly shocked me. For example, did you know that the era known as the Dark Ages is a complete myth? According to his research, "serious historians have known for decades that this scheme is a complete fraud - 'an indestructible fossil of self-congratulatory Renaissance humanism.'" Many of the leading voices of the Enlightenment were both anti-Catholic and anti-religion. They worked to paint the progress that took place during their era as being birthed due to religion's shackles being thrown off. But the facts simply don't back that up. Many advances were made during the so-called Dark Ages in a variety of fields and Stark gives a brief overview of them. The so-called Enlightenment was an outgrowth of what had been going on for generations in Catholic monasteries and universities. Likewise, you may be surprised to find out that the Spanish Inquisition led to relatively few deaths and "maintained unusually decent prisons." Or you may find it hard to believe that the Crusades were a series of wars that were largely fought to protect Christian pilgrims as they made their way to the Holy Land. Or it may be shocking to learn that the Church helped abolish slavery in Europe (for the first time) in the eleventh century. I know, I know. Some of you are probably thinking that I've drunk the kool-aid of Catholic propaganda. But it isn't so. Neither I nor Stark believe that the Catholic Church has been without her sins. Stark recognizes that there have been very bad popes, bishops, cardinals, and Catholics. His argument is not that the Catholic Church is a church without spot or wrinkle. His argument is simply that much of the history we've imbibed regarding Catholicism has been poisoned by opponents of religion and Catholicism. With that said, I do feel as though there are places where Stark may be doing the same thing he accuses his opponents of doing - focusing on the good of Catholicism with only a brief paragraph or two about her sins. But this could be because this work is seeking to provide balance to a very one-sided argument. Over all though, the evidence seems to point to Stark's thesis being true. Like Stark, I'm not a Catholic and I'm not interested in defending the Catholic Church. But I am interested in defending and believing the truth. And the truth will stand up to scrutiny no matter what opposition it faces. It's time we examine the evidence more closely regarding what sins Catholicism may or may not be guilty of - lest we find ourselves guilty of Bearing False Witness. May we seek the Truth above all.

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