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*. 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. 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,
During the Inquisition could well be, Thomas Aquinas writes: *Summa Theologica* (available online), to search for and root out heresy. In the entire ecclesiastic judicial apparatus, a small number hardly requires an entire country. Such a number is hardly 5,000 people killed per year. This is because many records from the Inquisition may have been destroyed since the Middle Ages. This number is likely in the millions, 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. 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.

According to some historians, people such as the Waldenses and the Bogunils 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. 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...
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 Catholic monks during the Dark Ages. Inquisitions between 1540 and 1794, 1,183 people (3.76% of those brought before the courts) were executed. 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. So, the number executed during the formal Inquisitions is in the thousands and not millions.

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