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Falling Birthrates, Empty Cribs, and Collapsing Worldviews

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What really explains the disastrous fall in European birthrates? The collapse of birthrates in Europe covers almost the entire continent and has left many observers scratching their heads in puzzlement. Writing in *The Weekly Standard*, Steve Ozment, Professor of History at Harvard University argues that the contemporary German vision of the good life, for example, simply does not include kids. Children are prime life-style interrupters, and today's Germans, as one leading German politician argues, increasingly look for a life of constant fun.

Ozment, author of *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People*, points to the bleak future of a Germany kept operational only by an influx of young Muslims. He argues that Germany could soon become "religiously if not yet politically, a mixed Muslim state within a quarter-century."

He warns:

In Germany's large Muslim communities, speaking German and mastering the German Basic Law are proving to be effective tools not only for immigrant assimilation to German culture, but also for the ascendancy of immigrant culture over German. With the continuing growth of these communities, and the construction of mammoth mosques within them, will come increasing demands by the inhabitants to govern by sharia law rather than by German Basic Law.

How could this happen in Germany, the very cradle of the Lutheran Reformation? Ozment notes that Germany's theological heritage and tradition should have armed the nation with a worldview that would recognize the Islamic threat. In his words:

One might have expected that Germans, who have been historically Europe's most theologically literate people, would have rediscovered and reembraced the lessons and resources of their own Catholic and Protestant heritage in coming to terms with European Islam. The misdeeds and shortcomings of those Christian churches in the 20th century do not merit their present oblivion. This is especially true in light of Christianity's vital historical contributions to European law, culture, and polity, without which Germans might still today be wandering across Germania in search of an Arminius.

Despite some countervailing evangelical straws in the wind, Germans today have hardened their agnosticism and atheism against established religion, apparently believing, counterintuitively, that the sermons of Luther and Bonhöffer are a less mighty fortress against Germany's gnawing problems (low native birth rates and bleak existentialism) than the old tin drums of Günter Grass and Jürgen Habermas. It is a good German question to ask today: Which of the two are more likely to assist new mothers with child-care and child-rearing and keep Germans' sunny-side up?

Ozment's point is clear, Germany was once a bastion of biblical and theological literacy, but today's German culture is overwhelmingly secularized. The cradle of the Reformation has become the crib of secularism. As Ozment observes, Germans have become hardened in their atheism and agnosticism in recent decades.

This leads to two related developments. First, these secular worldviews do not encourage large families. Second, this weakening of the family among non-Muslims comes as immigrant Muslims re-assert their commitment to the traditional

family and multiple children. An Islamic domination of the culture is just a matter of time.

It is interesting that Ozment draws such attention to the collapse of Christian content within the contemporary European worldview. Biblical Christianity honors children as gifts to be welcomed and affirms procreation and the raising of children as central functions of marriage as an institution.

Ozment cites the explanation offered by Matthias Platzeck, Minister-President of Brandenburg. As Platzeck sees it, Germans couples have fewer babies (or none at all) because today's Germans want "a fun-filled life in the moment." This desire, Ozment observes, is at odds with having children, because children make demands upon parents. A desire for constant fun undermines parenthood as gift and obligation. In Ozment's words: "For both good reasons and bad, the typical German wants an untrammled life, which child-rearing in every age and culture makes impossible."

Ozment concludes by asserting that a nation without children "is a society without a future." Those are sobering — and prophetic — words.

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