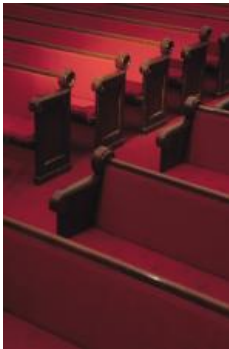


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Is This How the West Really Lost God?

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Does worldview determine behavior or does behavior determine worldview? In the end, the process must certainly work both ways. An individual's basic worldview surely determines moral choices and behaviors. But habits of life and moral context can also lead to modifications in worldview.

Mary Tedeschi Eberstadt of the [Hoover Institution](#) looked closely at this question in her recent *Policy Review* article, "[How the West Really Lost God](#)." Eberstadt argues that decisions about family structure and children can determine how secular individuals and societies become. Her argument points to the central role of the family in the formation of worldviews.

The traditional theory of secularization holds that as a society becomes more secular it also experiences lower commitment to marriage and lower rates of childbearing. The statistical link between these factors is undeniable, but what about causation?

According to the dominant theory of secularization, as persons become more secularized they lose or modify the commitment to marriage as an institution and have fewer children. The rationale behind this dominant theory is clear and understandable — as God is displaced by other authorities and influences, the idea of marriage as a divinely-ordained institution also recedes, as does the belief that couples are to have children as a part of their marital responsibility.

Eberstadt argues that the dominant theory just doesn't explain the whole picture:

And therein lies a real defect with the conventional story line about how and why religion collapsed in Western Europe. For what has not been explained, but rather assumed throughout that chain of argument, is why the causal relationship between belief and practice should always run that way instead of the other, at least some of the time. It is as if recent intellectual history had lined up all the right puzzle pieces — modernity, belief and disbelief, technology, shrinking and absent families — only to press them together in a way that looks whole from a distance but leaves something critical out.

This essay is a preliminary attempt to supply that missing piece. It moves the human family from the periphery to the center of this debate over secularization — and not as a theoretical exercise, but rather because compelling empirical evidence suggests an alternative account of what Nietzsche's madman really saw in the "tombs" (read, the churches and cathedrals) of Europe.

In brief, it is not only possible but highly plausible that many Western European Christians did not just stop having children and families because they became secular: At least some of the time, the record suggests, they also became secular because they stopped having children and families. If this way of augmenting the conventional explanation for the collapse of faith in Europe is correct, then certain things, including some radical things, follow from it.

Mary Eberstadt offers some interesting evidence for her argument. For one thing, she points to the fact that changes in family formation preceded changes in religious belief. She argues that family decline appeared in Europe before a marked decline in commitment to Christianity. Similarly, she argues that the preservation of the traditional family helps to explain the preservation of high religious commitment in nations such as Poland.

As she sees it, her most important argument is that the reversal of the dominant theory of secularization helps to explain the delay of secularization in a nation like the United States.

Secularization theory holds that as a society becomes more technologically advanced and modern, belief in God and patterns of religious belief quickly recede. This has certainly been the case in much of Europe, but not so much in the United States. This nation has experienced some considerable degree of secularization, but most Americans claim to believe in God and church attendance here dwarfs that of western Europe.

American “exceptionalism” points to this fact — that has remained highly religious even as it has led the world in so many dimensions of modernity. The dominant theory argues that this exceptionalism explains the greater percentage of traditional families and rates of childbirth in the U.S. Mary Eberstadt argues that the preservation of the family has delayed the loss of faith.

This is more than an academic argument, of course. If Eberstadt is right, the weakening of marriage as an institution will lead to an decrease in those who believe in God.

She also suggests that this explains regional worldview differences within the United States:

Consider as subsidiary evidence this tantalizing fact: Differences in fertility rates within the United States itself also track broadly with differences in religiosity. The Northeast pattern closely resembles that in Western Europe, whereas the South and border states are correspondingly higher. And the rate is also high among the well-educated and well-off population of Latter-Day Saints.

At this point, the reader may be tempted to rejoin that such is exactly what one would expect; after all, religious people tend to have larger families; so what? But look carefully at that common formulation, because it contains the same hidden assumption as that of secularization theory — i.e., it assumes that because people are more religious, therefore they have larger families. But where is the evidence for putting things in that order? It is at least as plausible — in fact, given the evidence, it is more plausible — to assume the opposite: that something about having larger families is making people more religious, at least some of the time.

In truth, the dominant theory of secularization must surely explain at least part of the reality we see — perhaps the largest part. As Richard Weaver famously insisted, ideas do have consequences. One of the consequences of the secular worldview is a fundamental change in family structure. But Mary Eberstadt is also surely right. Her theory helps to fill out what the dominant theory fails to explain.

Just as important, her version of the theory underlines the importance of preserving family structure and high rates of childbirth in light of spiritual commitments. The experience of getting married, staying married, having children, and raising them, seems to support habits of belief in God and participation in organized religion.

Mary Eberstadt has offered a model of the quality of careful thinking needed for our times. The Christian church should take a careful look at her argument, and ponder what this implies about a transformation of priorities within our congregations — and within our families.

