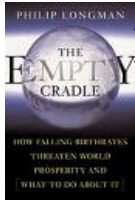


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Of Babies and Believers

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Philip Longman of the [New America Foundation](#) was interviewed by W. Bradford Wilcox of the [University of Virginia](#) in the current issue of *Books & Culture*. Longman is the author of *The Empty Cradle*, a look at the long-term impact of falling fertility rates worldwide.

In the interview, Longman presses many of the arguments he has made elsewhere and, as always, he offers fascinating facts. Were you aware that air quality in America is now far better than in the 1940s, even as the population has grown by many millions? Or, did you know that there are fewer children aged 5 and under today than in 1990?

As Longman explains:

How can this be? Mostly it is because of the massive global decline in birthrates. Now, in literally every region outside of sub-Saharan Africa, the average woman no longer bears enough children to replace the population. For now, world population continues to grow, though at a slower and slower rate, primarily because of the enormous increase in the numbers of elderly people. But many countries, such as Russia and Japan, are already shrinking in absolute size, and on current trends, global depopulation will occur within the lifetime of today's young adults.

The society eventually experienced by many young people living today will be a society of the old, dependent upon shrinking numbers of the young. This is not an optimistic forecast.

But Longman is especially insightful when dealing with the relationship between fertility and religious belief:

The high incidence of childless and single-child families in the West has one big implication many overlook. It means a very large proportion of the children that are being born are being produced by a small subset of the current population. And who are the people who are still having large families today?

The stereotypical answer is poor people, or dumb people, or members of minority groups. But birth rates among American racial and ethnic minority groups are plummeting. The more accurate answer is deeply religious people.

To be sure, religious fundamentalists of all varieties are themselves having fewer children than in the past. But whether they be Mormons, Orthodox Jews, or Islamic or Christian fundamentalists, devout member of these Abrahamic religions have on average far larger families than do the secular elements within their society.

In Europe, for example, the fertility differential between believers and nonbelievers has recently been estimated at 15-20 percent. Though children born into religious families often do not become religious themselves, many do, especially if they themselves go on to have children. Meanwhile, of course, the childless stand no chance of passing along their values to their progeny.

The faithful thus begin to inherit society by default. The West's total population may fall or stagnate, perhaps for quite awhile; but those who remain will be disproportionately committed to God and family, whether they be Christians, Muslims, Jews, or members of new pro-natal faiths.

The faithful inherit the society by default? An obvious point to observe here is that fertility drives destiny when it comes to societies. Those who do not reproduce become, by default, less influential in the society. Meanwhile, those who

do reproduce have the opportunity to inculcate their own worldview within their children.

Longman's most self-evident sentence is this: *Meanwhile, of course, the childless stand no chance of passing along their values to their progeny.*

Worldviews always matter, and we eventually live out our most basic commitments, beliefs, and convictions, and this is especially true when we come to the question of having babies. The statistical patterns speak for themselves.

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