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Review: How the West Really Lost God, Part 1

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 2, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Mary Eberstadt has written an important book.

How the West Really Lost God is also a frustrating book.

While Eberstadt's central thesis is provocative and causes us to think about secularization in new and interesting ways, the book also evidences a disturbing trend in academia in which professors, like MSNBC or Fox News anchors, only speak with people who already agree with them. The result is a book that could have been better if Eberstadt had thought to allow herself to be challenged, rather than confirmed, in her biases.

The central thesis of the book is simply stated and immediately recognizable as a significant contribution to the discussion of secularization:

"[This book's] argument, in brief, is that the Western record suggests that family decline is not merely a *consequence* of religious decline, as conventional thinking has understood that relationship. It also is plausible -- and, I will argue, appears to be true -- that *family decline in turn helps to power religious decline*." (Emphasis in original)

In short, while many scholars have agreed that lower levels of religiosity result in smaller families, Eberstadt wonders if the causal relationship between family life and religion is not a two-way street, or a "double-helix," as she suggests, in which it is the experience of family life itself that invites greater levels of religious devotion in Western culture.

Before presenting her argument in its full expression, Eberstadt considers other theses about the causes of secularization. She does so for the most part critically but sympathetically. The tour of contemporary literature on secularization that Eberstadt brings the reader on spans several chapters and is well worth the time in part because she is never dismissive of others' findings and tries, with varying degrees of success, to address the issues these other theorists raise.

For example, she acknowledges the insight of British sociologist Grace Davie that even while Europeans today are less religiously observant than their forebears, they still pay taxes to fund their churches, tend to identify as Christians no matter whether they attend church services, and seem to like the values Christianity proposes, even if they can't or don't live up to those values. And Europeans, like many Americans, insist they are spiritual even if they are not religious. But Eberstadt also cautions that such observations do not obstruct the brute fact that in Europe, religion has declined, not merely morphed, and that much of the morphing involves the abandonment of key Christian ideas in favor of "nebulous forms of 'spirituality' " that lead Eberstadt to bracing questions: "How many doctrinal particulars can be jettisoned before any given individual can fairly be called un- or even anti-Christian, un- or antireligious? At what point would St. Paul, say, find this modern syncretic 'Christianity' altogether unrecognizable?"

Eberstadt confronts the secularization theory that "people stopped needing the imaginary comforts of religion,"

a meme that is especially popular with atheists old and new. She acknowledges that the Christian religion promises eternal life and that "the promise of more life is a weighty consolation" and therefore attractive. "But that attractiveness," she writes, "... is outweighed by something that those who think along these lines have not thought to emphasize, because it undermines their argument, namely, the heavy stings attached to that same offer of ultimate salvation, as verified by a quick checklist of Judeo-Christianity's other and profoundly burdensome claims on those same individuals." Here, the reader begins to get suspicious. The observation Eberstadt makes is spot-on, but there is no such thing as "Judeo-Christianity" outside of conservative political talking points, and the word "checklist" betrays a strange, and uniquely modern, understanding of the nature of faith claims.

The suspicions only grow when, a few pages later, Eberstadt confronts the thesis that Christianity has weakened in the West because of our growing prosperity, what she deems the "fat-and-happy argument." She notes that sociological data actually demonstrate that people who are wealthier tend to be more, not less, religiously observant. She also notes that Christianity did just fine amidst the opulence of ancient Rome and Renaissance Florence and in many of today's wealthy U.S. suburbs. And she notes that religious observance in the U.S. remains significantly higher than in Europe despite our comparative levels of material prosperity.

All of this is undeniably true. It is also undeniably true that the Gospel is good news for the poor, and so perhaps at a deeper cultural level, our wealthy ears have trouble hearing it anymore or twist it to make it more palatable. The other night, I watched the movie "Auntie Mame," in which Dwight Babcock of the Knickerbocker bank pledges to "make a decent, God-fearing Christian out of this boy [young Patrick] if I have to break every bone in his body." Babcock was, of course, a bigot, a banker, and mean to boot. Yet, for how many people, such as the fictional Babcock, is religion a sign of social propriety covering a multitude of sins, with little or nothing to do with the Gospel?

Eberstadt's biases unfortunately are found throughout the book and they obscure, not help, her core thesis. For example, she writes on page 16, "Alternatively, as the state has expanded to take on duties once shouldered instead by those nearest and dearest, the incentives to do the hard work of keeping a family together have increasingly elicited the tacit response, *why bother*? ... In this way, once can argue, the expanded social welfare state competes with the family as the dominant protector of the individual -- in the process undercutting the power of the family itself." Here is standard neo-con fare, but it involves a leap in logic and an ignorance of history. The causal connection between the growth of the welfare state and the decline in family life is asserted, not proven. And the welfare state was not intended to destroy the family, but to meet needs that actual families were incapable of meeting. Certainly the vast advances in modern medicine would be out of reach for most family budgets, and not every family has a doctor capable of performing heart surgery, or a team of nurses to help with recuperation.

On pages 109ff, Eberstadt examines historical studies of the decline of the family and religiosity in 18th-century France and 19th-century Britain. These studies illustrate the link between family and religion, to be sure, but they undercut one of the dominant memes of the book, that everything went to hell in the 1960s. On page 131, she titles a subsection thus: "The Family Factor helps explain something that comes up repeatedly in the scholarly literature, which is the mystery of why 1960 or thereabouts is such a pivotal year in secularization." So between p. 109 and p. 131, the earlier centuries are forgotten? Surely those earlier studies of earlier centuries should invite a bit of scholarly humility before making assertions about the uniqueness of the present moment.

The most problematic, and unfortunately emblematic, of Eberstadt's chapters is chapter 6, in which she blames doctrinal laxness in mainstream Protestantism for creating "Assisted Religious Suicide." I am no fan of mainstream Protestantism, to be sure, but it is as obvious to me as day that the problem with religion in America, a problem that attaches to Eberstadt as much as to mainstream Protestantism, is that it reduces religion to ethics. For the left, the reduction boils down into social justice. For the right, it boils down into sexual

Jansenism. In both cases, what was lost long before the 1960s was the idea that the Christian religion is fundamentally about a series of outrageous claims about the supernatural, based upon the revelation of Jesus Christ. This had to be set aside as a consequence of the Reformation, which was not a secular event. In America, the necessity of living in a pluralist society has forced religion into this role of an ethical authority since the Founding. When preachers stopped preaching the empty tomb of Jesus Christ, that is when the laity, who came seeking the living, found themselves amongst the dead.

Tomorrow: Part II

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