

Response to Mary Eberstadt's "Is Secularization Inevitable?"

Baylor University Institute for Studies of Religion Symposium, "Does the Family Matter?"
7 April 2014

Somebody famous once quipped, "I've written you a long letter because I didn't have time to write a short one." Don't be alarmed, I'm not going over my eight minutes—but I should warn you that I've written an overtly Christian response because I didn't have time to write a covertly Christian one. I'm not considering even rhetorically the question, "Since Christianity is a lie, what causes some people to fall for it?" Instead, I'm starting from the premise that Christianity is true, and that every shred of evidence—historical, scientific, psychological, sociological, you name it—confirms that truth. The primary question Mrs. Eberstadt's thesis raises, then, is this: *Why does not* having a family make people more likely to reject Christianity, while having a family makes them more likely to accept it?

Before I address this, let me comment quickly on a point Mrs. Eberstadt mentions in passing. As an educator, I'm obviously pleased that there seems to be a correlation between more education and more God. Certainly, that was true for me; my conversion in college arose partly through being confronted, as a Classics major, with the world in which Jesus lived. I would submit that *another* reason the West lost God was because the West lost Latin, a little-noted but important casualty of the '60s. Most modern young people, for whom "ancient history" means yesterday's tweets, simply have no awareness of the Greco-Roman world that for almost two millennia was a vibrant shared reality for all educated people. Just as the child who grows up without a father has no intuitive conception of a paternal God, so the child who grows up without our cultural fathers, so to speak, has no intuitive sense that an event from 2000 years ago could possibly be real or important. Just sayin'.

But back to the topic. On one level, of course, the reasons people reject Christianity are the same as always: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Yet these temptations take different forms in different eras, and our challenge is to identify the strategy that the father of lies has adopted in modern America and Western Europe. Mrs. Eberstadt's book provides a stunningly simple yet compelling answer for why religiosity plummeted in the '60s: the pill. This technology allowed people easily to separate humanity's greatest pleasure from its purpose, which is, as the Church has always taught, to seal an exclusive, permanent, and at least potentially fertile bond between a man and a woman. If sex with no strings attached is readily available, then one of the primary incentives for, especially, men to assume the risks and limitations and heartaches of marriage evaporates: In the words of the immortal Benny Hill, "Why buy a book when there's a splendid lending library in town?" Little wonder, then, if people hate the Church for spoiling their fun.

It's easy to see why extramarital sex drives people away; but why, as Mrs. Eberstadt felicitously puts it, do children drive their parents *to* church? Certainly, there are lots of practical reasons for parents to seek the support of such a community; but a good secular support group could theoretically provide it as well. Mrs. Eberstadt rightly suggests that the powerful primal love and sense of transcendence experienced by parents put them in a religious frame of mind. I would amplify this suggestion: pregnancy, in a mystical but real sense, is what Christianity *is*. Mary's *fiat mihi*, "let it be done to me," was the dawn of the second creation, just as God the Father's *fiat lux*, "let there be light," was the dawn of the first. She became in that moment the new Jerusalem, the bride of God the Holy Spirit, in a consummation of perfect intimacy. She

became the new Eve, the mother of God the Son and of all who live in him, reversing with her obedient “yes” the disobedient “no” of our first mother that brought death into the world. And each Christian is called to do what she did: to say, as best we can, “Be it unto me according to thy word.” As Pope Benedict explains in *Saved in Hope* (7), “faith is the substance of things hoped for” because through faith there exists within us, “in embryo,” invisible yet real, “the whole, true life.” So is it surprising that women, and especially mothers, are universally more inclined to Christianity than men?

Mrs. Eberstadt closes her reflections with some rays of hope: that rather than a consistent downward trend in religious observance we see a pattern of fluctuations and revivals; that people do, amazingly enough, occasionally learn from their mistakes; that Christianity has historically demonstrated a (to the atheist) baffling resilience, *especially* when it’s persecuted. To quote *Jurassic Park*, “life finds a way”—and so do truth and love. My husband and I were both children of divorce and had no idea what parents who loved each other would even look like; and yet that shared experience led to a greater understanding and intimacy between us, as well as a determination to make our marriage the magnum opus of our lives. In C.S. Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength*, when the forces of evil try to corrupt Mark by assaulting him with images all somehow perverted and askew, their plan backfires: “As the desert first teaches men to love water, or as absence reveals affection, there rose up against this background of the sour and the crooked some kind of vision of the sweet and the straight” (p. 299). Along with the disastrous economic consequences of shrinking birthrates, the *spiritual* sterility, dreariness, and loneliness of a solitary secular existence may ultimately drive people back into families—and to church.

It’s also worth noting that, whatever our forecasts, we don’t actually have the slightest idea what God has in store. We do know that his strength is made perfect in weakness, that his sense of irony is exquisite, and that his plans are always better than anything we could have come up with. Look at the Incarnation, Death itself sucker-punched by a poor Jewish girl alone in her bedroom: I like to imagine the persons of the Trinity chuckling among themselves, “Bet they didn’t see *that* one coming!” When on the road to Emmaus Jesus the master detective rereads for the disciples the narrative of salvation history, pointing out all the clues that led inexorably to his crucifixion and beyond it, they find, as will we, that the mystery of life turns out to have a supremely satisfying solution after all.

In her book, Mrs. Eberstadt asks, “How—apart from the Holy Spirit—could Christianity thrive and prosper [at a time when the natural family is receding]?” (p. 173). The good news is that there *is* no “apart from the Holy Spirit.” I’ll close with the sestet of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ sonnet “God’s Grandeur,” a poem that finds hope and beauty even in post-industrial ugliness, and in which the word “West” is ironically appropriate to our discussion today:

And, for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.