

HOW THE WEST REALLY LOST GOD

How the West Really Lost God

A New Theory of Secularization

Mary Eberstadt



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“How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us
the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?”

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, “The Parable of the
Madman,” *The Gay Science*, 1882

“It is in my lifetime that the people have forsaken formal
Christian religion, and the churches have entered seemingly
terminal decline. It matters that we understand why.”

—CALLUM G. BROWN, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 2001



For Frederick, Catherine, Isabel, and Alexandra



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HOW THE WEST REALLY LOST GOD

Introduction

MOST BOOKS have their origin in some kind of enduring mental distraction that has grown so large and ungainly in the author's mind that only hammering it out at book length will fully exorcise the thing. The volume you are reading on your screen right now or holding in your hands is no exception. The particular puzzle that started this effort happens to be—at least to some people—one of the most interesting questions in all the modern world. It is this: *How and why has Christianity really come to decline in important parts of the West?*¹

Note that use of the word “really,” which is also in the book's title. In some contexts, it is a freighted term suggesting that a nefarious plot is afoot to conceal the truth about something or another. But such is not its meaning here. In choosing that qualifier “really,” I do not mean to question the good intentions of other curious armchair theorists pushing around the pieces of this same puzzle during the past hundred and twenty-five years or so. Quite the contrary. The list of scholars and other thinkers who have prophesied, studied, decried, celebrated, and otherwise sought to explain what they saw as the decline of Western Christianity is a monumentally long and impressive one—in part a roll call of the greatest minds of modernity, including Karl Marx and Charles Darwin, Auguste Comte and Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, and many more. Also running in that distinguished pack, of course, is the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose parable of the madman in the marketplace foretelling the death of God remains the paradigm

through which many sophisticated people understand secularization right down to this day.

Far from ignoring them, I hope in this book to do some brief justice to preceding attempts to explain what really happened to the “Sea of Faith,” as the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold immortalized the Christianity of yesteryear. Once, he wrote, that sea was swollen and full; but today it has retreated far and seemingly permanently from the high-water mark.² Some time back, the great majority of people living in what can still broadly be called Western civilization believed in certain things: *God created the world; He has a plan for humanity; He promises everlasting life to those who live by His Word*; and other items of faith that Judeo-Christianity bequeathed to the world. Today—especially, though not only, in Western Europe—no great majority continues to believe in all such particulars. To judge by the evidence of one’s senses, including extensive survey data, both belief and practice are diminishing among Christian populations in almost every European country—and not only in Europe; the percentage of people who claim no faith at all has also risen steadily in the United States.³ Religious stories and music and rituals honed for millennia, studied generation after generation by believers both literate and illiterate, have become for many modern people of the West artifacts as remote as the cave paintings of Lascaux—of some enduring aesthetic and historical interest, to be sure, but having no more bearing on the present day than Paleolithic art.

What happened? Why was belief in the Christian God and his churchly doings apparently taken for granted by most Europeans, say, six hundred years ago—whereas today merely alluding to the *possibility* of the existence of that same God is now guaranteed to provoke uneasy dissent in some sophisticated quarters and savage ridicule in others? How much did the Enlightenment and rationalism and scientific thinking have to do with this enormous

transformation—this sea change from a civilization that widely fears God, to one that now often jeers him? How much did various historical influences figure into this reshaping of our shared civilization—factors like technology, the world wars, politics, church scandals, the changing social status of women, and more?

These and other large questions will be considered in the pages ahead—including, at the outset, the radical question raised by some scholars, which is whether Western Christianity has even declined in the first place.

It is the contention of this book that just about everyone working on this great puzzle has come up with some piece of the truth—and yet that one particular piece needed to hold the others together still has gone missing. Urbanization, industrialization, belief and disbelief, technology, shrinking population: yes, yes, and yes to all those factors statistically and otherwise correlated with secularization. Yet, even taking them all into account, the picture remains incomplete, as chapter 2 goes to show. It is as if the modern mind has lined up all the different pieces on the collective table, only to press them together in a way that looks whole from a distance but still leaves something critical out.

This book is an attempt to supply that missing piece. It moves the human family from the periphery to the center of this debate over how and why Christianity exercises less influence over Western minds and hearts today than it did in the past. Its purpose is to offer an alternative account of what Nietzsche's madman really saw in what he called the "tombs" (read, the churches and cathedrals) of Europe.

Its 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. And if this way of augmenting the conventional explanation for the collapse of Christian faith in Europe is correct, then certain things, including some radical things, follow from it, as we shall see.

The pages ahead amount to an argument in three parts. The first section gives an overview of the present intellectual scene, including the conventional explanations for secularization and the various problems with those explanations as they stand (chapters 1 and 2). In other words, those chapters amount to a brief about why our current understanding of secularization is insufficient. The second part of the book puts forth evidence for an alternative theory of what has happened (chapters 3 through 7). It argues that (a) the alternative theory is consistent with the historical fact that family decline and Christian decline have gone hand in hand; and (b) that the alternative theory has the added attraction of “solving” certain problems that the existing theories cannot solve. Chapter 7 concerns broad matters of religious anthropology. It asks—and attempts to answer—why this theory works: i.e., just what the mechanisms might be that make family and faith so intricately bound together.

The concluding chapters change gears once more and take on the practical question of why anyone should care about the exact mechanism of secularization in the first place—including speculation about what this new theory might suggest about the future of both Western Christianity and the Western family. The conclusion makes the case that contrary to what many seem to think, everyone has a dog of one kind or another in the fight over secularization—ardent secularists and pious churchgoers alike.

Let us begin by stepping back for a moment and putting these two essential pieces of the puzzle side by side, in part simply to introduce them and to contemplate their enormity: the decline of Christianity

in parts of the advanced West on the one side, and the decline of the natural family—meaning the family built on irreducible biological ties—on the other.⁴

The dramatic decay of Christian belief and practice, notably though not only in Western Europe, is by now both familiar and much remarked upon—so much so that it has even become common intellectual practice to refer to parts of the Continent as “post-Christian.” As the data from the European Values Survey (cited in endnote 3) go to show, people across Europe go to church less, believe in the Christian creed less, and believe in God himself less than they did even eighteen years ago.

In addition to being “post”-Christian, some parts of this landscape are also notably *anti*-Christian—as a lengthening list of public events disfigured by aggressive atheist or secular protests goes to show. Some observers have even used the term “Christophobic” to capture the vehemence with which some Europeans, including high-ranking public figures, have come to renounce the influence of Christianity on the Western present and past.⁵

This religious turnaround in the former heart of Christendom itself in turn has had massive consequences for the way most people in those countries now lead their lives. For Western Europeans, the waning of religious belief has transformed practically every aspect of life from birth to death: their politics, laws, marriages (or lack thereof), arts, education, music, popular culture, and other activities from the sublime to the prosaic that were once influenced and even dominated by the church—and are no more. In some countries, laws that once discriminated in favor of Christians now actively discriminate against them.⁶ A growing number of Western individuals greet the milestones of life with no religious framework at all. They are born without being baptized; they have children without being married; they contract civil marriages instead of religious ones.

They darken church doors infrequently, if ever, and upon dying their bodies are incinerated and scattered to the winds, rather than prayed over whole in the ground as Christian ritual and dogma had hitherto commanded.

It is true, as is sometimes noted, that there are exceptions to this general rule of Western religious decline.⁷ As is often pointed out, for example, certain evangelical Protestant denominations are apparently thriving despite the secular trend. Not only that, but some strikingly powerful renewal movements have meanwhile sprung up within both Catholic and Protestant ranks. Other signs of Christian life also abound for those who look for them—including in societies where atheism and aggressive secularism are flourishing too, and have inadvertently generated movements of religious counterculture.

Evangelical renewal within the Anglican community in Britain, to take one example of such itinerant vitality, has led to a newly popular program in Christian education called the “Alpha course.”⁸ It has been taken by over seventeen million people, according to the group, and is now being used by a range of other Christians outside of Great Britain as well as in it, including Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Baptists, and Methodists. In another measure of ongoing religious devotion, Catholic pilgrimages continue to attract millions each year across Europe, and some, such as Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, have lately grown extraordinarily.⁹ Within or around the Catholic church, for its part, some potent renewal movements have sprung up precisely as a response to modernity, including Opus Dei and *Comunione e Liberazione* (Communion and Liberation), both of which have spread from Europe to other parts of the world. And to repeat—as the latter two examples suggest, and as hopeful clerics and believers who are also scholars in these matters like to point out—in many places outside

the advanced nations, Christianity both Protestant and Catholic remains vigorously on the march.

Nevertheless, to keep our eyes fixed on Europe and important swaths of the rest of the West—particularly elite swaths, like secular higher education—is to understand that many people in these places now judge the churches to be mere artifacts, including embarrassing and sometimes despised artifacts of what is thought to be a regrettable past riddled with corruption, oppression, religious wars, and the rest of the dark side of the historical record. From once-devout Ireland over to Germany, former seat of the Holy Roman Empire; from thoroughly secular Scandinavia on down to the former Christian strongholds of Spain and France and even Italy; in sum, across Western Europe today, the religion symbolized by the cross appears to many informed people to be an endangered historical species—where indeed it is not already extinct.

Then there are the human faces of this massive change, just a handful of which we might briefly contemplate here. Across the Continent, elderly altar servers shuffle in childless churches attended by mere handfuls of pensioners. Tourist throngs in Notre Dame and other cathedrals circle ever-emptier pews roped off for worshippers. Former abbeys and convents and monasteries find themselves remade into luxury hotels and sybaritic spas. Churches shuttered for decades become apartments or discos—sometimes even mosques. The Church of England, to take one significant example of the collision between religion and real estate, closed some 1,700 structures between 1970 and 2005—10 percent of the total across the land; and in London, some five hundred churches of varying denominations have been transformed since 2001.¹⁰ The emptiness of the churches makes the bustling of the mosques more noticeable; not surprisingly, a number of books pondering the decline of Christianity and the rise of Islam have lately been added to the shelves.¹¹

In one more measure of its seismic effects, the waning of Christian influence in Europe has also led to a markedly different public atmosphere across the Continent than the starchiness of the phrase “Old Country” would seem to suggest. Famously liberal and libertine capitals like Amsterdam and Berlin sport some of the leading sex districts of the world. The transformation in public mores filters down to the most mundane venues. Pornography is openly displayed on newsstands far more commonly than in the United States, nudity is a commonplace of fashionable beaches, and among sophisticated politicians and intellectuals and celebrities, denigration of relative American “puritanism” is a parlor sport of choice—as any Yankee traipsing around the Continent soon discovers.

Also as part of this same sea change, open hostility to religion—especially Christianity—appears to be at an all-time postwar high. A few years ago, best-selling books by leading atheists rode the antireligious wave to remarkable commercial success, in the process seeming to compete with one another for worst-case accounts of Christian beliefs and Christian history.¹² Even so, these bracing manifestos seem positively genteel compared to some other developments.

As events of the past few years have also gone to show, for example, ceremonial visits to other nations by the pope or other high-ranking Catholic officials have become reliable lightning rods of anti-Christianism. Once upon a time occasions of intense public veneration, such trips are now guaranteed to produce public demonstrations from Madrid to London to Berlin, to take a few examples from the recent past—and for that matter even at Sapienza University, in the Vatican’s very own backyard of Rome.¹³ Not only the fact of these demonstrations, but also their characteristically vituperative tone, speak to a deep festering within secularism itself—a seeming inability to desist from opening and reopening what are perceived to be the wounds inflicted by religious history and reli-

gious belief. In fact, so hostile and obscene are some of these protests that tolerant people might be expected to criticize them—if the object of their hatred were anything *but* Christianity, that is.¹⁴

Such are just a few of the visible faces of the Continent's dramatically changed human landscape, sketched here to give the merest sense of the scope and speed of religious change there.

Now let us set aside those faces to look briefly but intensely at the shape of the second great decline of our times: that of the natural family, which has also occurred across the advanced West.¹⁵

Like the collapse of Christianity in many of the same places, the collapse of the natural family has reshaped the known world of just about every man, woman, and child alive in the Western world today. For years now, secular sociologists have debated the meaning of the changes that have diminished the hold that the natural family once had over an individual's life. Divorce, single parenthood, widespread use of contraception, legal abortion, the sharp drop in the Western birthrate: these are just some of the prodigious transformations in family structure on which experts train their sights. And while scholars as well as nonscholars take sides on the question of whether these are good things or bad things for society, no one seriously suggests that radical family change hasn't *happened* across the Western world. Obviously, it has.

Consider for starters the most obvious of these changes: the ongoing decline in the birthrate. According to Eurostat, the most authoritative source for European statistics, between 1960 and 2010 the birthrate dropped in every single country and plunged in most.¹⁶ One does not need to be a statistician (I certainly am not) to grasp the overall direction of this social change concerning babies. Blips aside, births have obviously dropped dramatically. As Eurostat notes, despite the fact that the numbers have trended slightly upward of

late, “The total fertility rate declined steeply between 1980 and 2000–2003 in many Member States, falling far below replacement level.”

Much has been written lately about the implications of this demographic revolution, and some of the relevant experts will appear later on. For now, however, let us limit ourselves to a single uncontroversial point: *the drop in the Western birthrate is one demographic fact that has radically remade the families of today and tomorrow.*¹⁷

Add to that some other changes: historically high rates of both divorce and out-of-wedlock births. These family phenomena too have increased sharply in the West during the same years that the birthrate has been falling. Let us confine ourselves to the out-of-wedlock measure, again for the years 1960–2010 and again using Eurostat’s numbers. During that time, the proportion of births outside marriage—what was once called bastardy, then illegitimacy—rose steadily in every European country (as well as in the United States).¹⁸ It does not take an expert here, either, to grasp the overall direction of this change in the world to which many Western children are now born.

Once again, our purpose here is not to militate for or against any of these changes. Neither is it to split academic hairs over any particular chart or graph or timeline. What we want instead is merely to observe that these large shocks ripple out into society in a great number of ways. How could they not?¹⁹ For decades scholars have struggled to understand the larger fallout of this new familial world, and their thoughts too will make appearances in the chapters ahead.²⁰

For now, though, it’s enough to establish that these large trends—fewer babies, more divorce, more homes with unmarried parents—are in themselves uncontroversial even among scholars, because they are so empirically clear. To say that the family has “declined,” to repeat, is not to say that relatives love one another any less than

they used to, or that children will ever stop wanting bedtime stories, or that an “end to men” or “end to women” is upon us, or any other reductionist formulation. It is rather to observe that—exactly as in the case of Christianity, and its simultaneously diminished role in the West—the family *as an institution* obviously has less power over its individual members than it used to have.

Underlying that loss of familial power is not only demographic reality but also the fundamental issue of identity—i.e., the fact that what were once considered by most people to be fixed and immutable ties are now frequently in flux.

Once upon a time, for example, whoever married your sister became your brother-in-law for life. Today, he remains your brother-in-law only so long as he and/or your sister decide to stay together—and if they divorce, many other brothers-in-law or significant-other brother-in-law-like people might theoretically take his place. At some point in the not-so-distant Western past—to put the matter conversely, from his point of view—whoever that person was had no option *but* to remain your brother-in-law once he married your sister (just as he would simultaneously remain your sister’s husband, and your father’s son-in-law, and your daughter’s uncle, and so on, for life). Today, of course, every one of those identities that were once considered permanent can change according to his intentions or his wife’s.

This is just one example of how the collision between the family and the modern world has resulted in a radical redefinition of the family. One can easily think of others. In the movie *The Godfather II*, protagonist Michael Corleone’s mother consoles him in a moment of marital trouble, telling him firmly that it is impossible to lose your family. Such was true in her native, traditional-minded Sicily, perhaps; but as Michael knows, and Mamma does not, such is not the case in the modern West. Precisely because the family can now be

redefined according to what its members decide to do—particularly its most powerful members—it is possible indeed to “lose” one’s family as it never was before. Biological ties, and only biological ties, remain immutable.

Hence kinship, to repeat, does not define modern men and women as it once did our ancestors; for many people, “family” is instead, at least in part, a series of optional associations that can be and sometimes are discarded voluntarily depending on preference. To put it lightly, when measured against the sweep of human history, this is rather a new and potent sociological fact.

As with the decline of Christianity, however, who really needs sociology to convince us that the family is weaker than it once was? For most of us, personal or vicarious experience alone will suffice. It is family decline that powers, say, the steady parade of dysfunction on Western airwaves; think of televised divorce courts, televised paternity tests, televised breakups, and the rest of the inadvertently illuminating shows that exploit the weakened hearth to the hilt. If family decline didn’t exist, reality TV would have to invent it.

Or, to offer a more consequential example of how the family has imploded, witness the economic crisis now threatening welfare states across the advanced world—the demonstrations that have made headline news on and off since 2008 from Athens to Madrid, London to Barcelona, and back again. For years now, financial markets have been racked by fears that Greece/Italy/Spain might collapse/default and bring the rest of the European Union down with them. Nor is this anxiety about what is called “contagion” a matter of financial accounting only. Picture-postcard Europe now sports bonfires, mobs, and gas masks—and rates of unemployment topping 25 percent in some countries. Why?

As does not seem to be well understood, at least as yet, this smol-