

FAITH AND FAMILY

Mary Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God*. West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2013.

Mary Eberstadt is a social commentator, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, and a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. She has authored *Adam and Eve after the Pill* and *Home-Along America*, and her most recent work is *How the West Really Lost God: A New Theory of Secularization*. In it she notes that in Plato's *Republic* it is opined that an ideal society would see the family dissolved in favor of having children be raised by the state. The impartial, rational state could ensure that the best citizens possible would be raised up by providing only the best education and training. In our modern society it might be argued that we are edging closer to Plato's ideal. We are witnessing the voluntary abandonment of the natural family by the culture at large, while the state certainly seems to be growing more and more comfortable taking upon itself duties that have traditionally been the prerogative of the family. As a challenge to the common assumption that this decline of the family is a result of the decline of Christianity, Eberstadt asks whether the cultural trend might instead be having an adverse effect on Christianity. She argues that it does, and if her argument obtains, this change is obviously one aspect of the ambient culture that the Church must not accommodate.

The heart of Eberstadt's book is beautifully illustrated in a couple of passages from another recent release which also touches on the relationship between faith and the family. In the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* Pope Francis writes: "In the family, faith accompanies

every age of life, beginning with childhood: children learn to trust in the love of their parents. This is why it is so important that within their families parents encourage shared expressions of faith which can help children gradually to mature in their own faith.” Further on, the Holy Father says: “Absorbed and deepened in the family, faith becomes a light capable of illuminating all our relationships in society. As an experience of the mercy of God the Father, it sets us on the path of brotherhood.” We see here how closely connected are Christianity and the family. The family is the soil in which faith takes root and flowers, and faith likewise illumines the relationships within the family and throughout society. The Church, a constant and staunch promoter and defender of the family, has long understood the family’s importance both for society and for the propagation of the faith. Eberstadt has articulated this important link between Christianity and the natural family in the form of an intriguing new social theory. She characterizes faith and family as being the “double helix” upon which Western society is based. They are “two spirals that when linked to one another can effectively reproduce, but whose strength and momentum depend on one another” (22).

The opening premise of *How the West Really Lost God* is that there is something lacking in current theories of Western secularization. Eberstadt sets out to discover the “missing piece of the puzzle” in the explanation of why Christianity has lost much of its influence in the West. She finds it in what she terms the “Family Factor.” After first explaining why no current theory of secularization is completely satisfactory, she examines the evidence for this hitherto unnoticed connection (at least in the world of social theory) between faith and the family. Using demographic records and sociological studies ranging from late 18th-century France to present-day Ireland, she makes the case that family size and form, rather than being simply the results of religious belief, can also be “conduits” to it. In other words the natural family can be a catalyst to people’s attending church. Children, she says, seem



WILLIAM CONGDON - NATIVITÀ

to “drive” their parents to the practice of religion. If this is true, argues Eberstadt, then we should revisit the common theories explaining why faith and the family are in the state that they are in today. In short, she says that the decline of the family “is not merely a consequence of religious decline” but rather “family decline in turn helps to power religious decline” (5-6). In Chapter 7 and in the Epilogue, Eberstadt offers a few reasons why this might be so. She claims that contrary to the assumption of some (notably

Nietzsche), Christian belief is not often an “atomistic decision” made by individuals. Rather, faith seems to involve a natural and “holistic response to what is evidently a profound desire to tether family life to something transcendent” (214). Furthermore, the tenets of Christianity are often expressed through the language of the family and familial relationships. God, for example, relates to the human person as “Father.” If someone grows up without a loving father in the home, it seems that he would be at a disadvantage in coming to understand this language describing God as Father.

Once Eberstadt finishes building her case for the “Family Factor,” she turns an eye in the last couple of chapters to the future of our society and discusses whether or not there is any hope of recovery for faith and the family. Then in the Conclusion, she puts forward a case for why anyone should be concerned about this future at all and argues that both of the institutions at stake are important for society. She cites such apologetic evidence as donations to charity, health, and longevity, in defense of Christianity. Regarding the natural family, she says that, contrary to the insistence of such theorists as Friedrich Engels and Sigmund Freud, it is integral to a healthy society. To support this assertion, she draws from research on the development of children in various living arrangements showing that they are better off in stable families where there is a married mother and father.

Although Eberstadt cites an array of sociologists in support of her work, the amount of data she actually presents and her particular use of it are perhaps too light for *How the West Really Lost God* to be taken seriously by many of the experts in sociology. I say this because in the book itself she anticipates and readily admits that her work could be vulnerable to the critique that “correlation does not prove causation” (105). In other words, she expects that some will complain that just because she can show that the family and Christianity have declined concomitantly she has not necessarily proven that familial decline causes religious decline or

vice versa. The reasoning described above, though, is compelling enough to give serious consideration to Eberstadt's interpretation of the data. Furthermore, her claim that the "Family Factor" is one of several factors that explains secularization is more mild than revolutionary. She does not wish to deny that other theories of secularization are valid and helpful, nor does she absolutely deny the common account that family decline is due to religious decline. Interestingly she even explains how the "Family Factor" might fit in with some of the other theories.

The retired Resurrectionist priest who taught my high school Latin class once commented that the family was the seedbed of vocations. He said that it is in the family that children learn how to make sacrifices, and that, where there is no willingness to sacrifice, there will be a dearth in vocations. He was speaking of priestly and religious vocations, but the same holds true of the vocation to marriage as well. Where the family dissolves, the upcoming generation will be ill-prepared for any vocation, and society and religion will dissolve right along with it. Eberstadt's book contributes to getting this bit of common sense into the sophisticated realm of social theory.

Joachim Kenney entered the Order of Preachers in 2010.

Image Credits:

William Congdon

Natività, 1960

© The William G. Congdon Foundation, Milan-Washington

www.congdonfoundation.com