

ESSAYS

THREE GENEALOGIES OF SECULARIZATION

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The increasing number of Western people who reject belief in anything transcendent is indeed “unprecedented in the history of the world.” - Mary Eberstadt

The secularization of the West is interesting not only as the background for “the culture wars” but also in its own right—as a major shift concerning the most fundamental of issues, viz., the issue of God. It gets even more interesting when we consider that secularization is primarily a Western phenomenon. The culture that is supposedly the most forgetful of God is also the culture that has most richly proclaimed the Incarnation of God. Which prompts what may be a naïve question: Is there something about Christianity (as opposed to an all-religions-are-equal mentality) that makes it unsurprising that Christians should turn away from God? To put the question more pointedly: Is there something about the closeness of the Incarnation that prompts people to back away from God to an even greater distance than before? It is not my intention to answer this question. Instead, I want to examine some recent work on secularization, in order better to understand both how the West has handled and mishandled the Christian tradition and what ought to be done in the face of the growing rejection of that tradition.



PAVEL FILONOV - FORMULA OF THE COSMOS

Within the last decade, the question of the causes of secularization has been the subject of three books by important Catholic thinkers: *A Secular Age* (2007) by Charles Taylor, professor emeritus of philosophy at McGill University; *The Unintended*

Reformation (2012) by Brad Gregory, professor of early-modern European history at Notre Dame; and *How the West Really Lost God* (2013) by Mary Eberstadt, senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. The theories that these authors offer, while significantly different, are more complementary of each other than exclusive.

IRONIES OF THE REFORMATION

For Gregory, secularization underwrites the overwhelmingly wide array of contemporary answers to the “Life Questions”: “How can one be happy?” “Where have we come from, and where are we going?” “What is the meaning of life?” The very multiplicity of answers to these questions cheapens them and gives rise to rampant relativism, what Gregory calls “the Kingdom of Whatever.” This languid pluralism, according to Gregory, can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation. The principle of *sola scriptura* led to a variety of incompatible theologies, of which two—Lutheran and Reformed (including the Church of England)—happened to secure long-term political protection within confessional regimes. After more than a century of fruitless debates and constant conflict between these regimes, wearied secular agents initiated a massive “changing of the subject.”

Modern philosophers tried unsuccessfully to provide a social consensus on the basis of reason alone (*sola ratio*). More immediate success was had by the Dutch Republic, which tolerated a plurality of confessions while simultaneously promoting what some have called “the industrious revolution”—described by Gregory as a passionate pursuit of “more and better stuff.” Thus, the Dutch set the agenda for the rest of Europe: “stop arguing about religion, and go shopping.” Gregory makes much of this shift, not only because he thinks that such consumerism is still dominant today, but also because of its opposition to the traditional condemnation of avarice. He writes, “practices once regarded as dangerous and immoral . . . have in a dramatic reversal been redubbed the very

means to human happiness and the best sort of society.” Meanwhile and into the twentieth century, just as acrimonious confessional disputes had sidelined Christianity from political life, so did the supposed subjectivism of religious truth-claims fail to meet the demands of science for universality and objectivity that became regnant in universities.

THE IMMANENT FRAME

Taylor’s book is more difficult to summarize, not only because it is twice as long (776 pages), but also because he relies less on a single historical phenomenon to drive the process of secularization. What follows can be only a sketch—or better, “an outrageously simplified potted history,” as Taylor describes one of his own synopses.

By “secularization” Taylor means not so much the recession of religion from the public square or the decline in church attendance as a drastic alteration of the outlook of the general public. The central question is this: How did we get from a condition in the year 1500 in which it was almost impossible not to believe in God to our present situation in which it is very easy for many? Like Gregory, Taylor gives an answer that begins with a reform movement. But this time the reform takes place from within Catholicism. The goal of this Catholic reform was to discourage the perceived superstition of certain popular practices (e.g., Rogation Days, Carnevale) and to diminish the discrepancy between the religion of the laity and that of the ecclesial “elite,” viz., clergy and religious (Taylor cites Lateran IV’s universal requirement of annual confession). In order to carry out this campaign, leaders adopted a more managerial style of governance and demanded more self-discipline from their subjects. They also stressed the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, thus effecting a “disenchantment” of the world for the sake of exalting God and purifying worship. Simultaneously, with the rise of the mendicant orders and “realist” painters like Giotto, popular devotion was beginning to fixate on Christ in

his humanity. This society-wide effort to reform religiosity—that is, more fully “to live the incarnation,” and in a “disenchanted” world—led people to invest ordinary life with a new worth. As the pious excesses of the community began to fade, society came more and more to consist of self-possessed and self-esteeming individuals. “The irony,” Taylor explains, “is that just this, so much the fruit of devotion and faith, prepared the ground for an escape from faith, into a purely immanent world.”

The resultant political order (theorized by Grotius, Adam Smith, and Locke) aimed primarily at the mutual benefit of individuals. The new order relativized hierarchical regimes and tended to limit the scope of divine providence to civic reform. God’s influence was minimized even further, when in the late seventeenth century a way of thinking emerged that Taylor calls “Providential Deism.” On this view, God, instead of being active in the world, is merely the artificer of its immutable, impersonal structure. Whereas traditionally the grace of Christian life was thought to be the beginning of a process of divinization culminating in heaven, Deism relegated life with God (grace) to the next world and denied the need for divine help here and now (also grace). The point was rather to discern and prosecute the plan God had already provided—a project powered by the new Cartesian-Baconian evaluation of knowledge. Thus what is possible in the world began to seem sufficient for the highest of human aspirations. This immanentization was ratified by the heroic image of the disengaged scientist, the “master and possessor of nature,” working tirelessly for the good of mankind—an image made nobler by contrast with the religious enthusiast who disturbs the political order with the demands of transcendence.

It was a short step from Deism to atheism—or, more precisely, to what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism,” a kind of altruistic atheism. Between exclusive humanism and the orthodoxy it opposed, there arose a range of worldviews—of reactions and counter-reactions—of “ever-widening variety.” This explosive pluralization Taylor calls

“the nova effect.” At first the middle ground was a kind of no man’s land, but as middle positions multiplied, the zone expanded, and the no man’s land became a habitable neutral zone. At the same time, disbelief was deepening. Reality seemed to be plunging in all directions into the unknown—into the macro- and the micro-, eons back in time and evolving into the future. These developments did not disprove orthodoxy, but they disturbed the imaginative world in which it had been received. Hence the demurral by much Romantic poetry and music to make metaphysical commitments. Their “subtler languages” mined traditional moral resources without accepting their theoretical context. But Romanticism also rebelled against a flattening of the world by science and industry, and Nietzsche advanced this rebellion. By the middle of the twentieth century, a three-point framework—orthodoxy, Enlightenment humanism, and Nietzsche’s counter-Enlightenment—had become the framework of the general public. Middle positions continued to proliferate. The nova went supernova.

According to Taylor, we are now living in “the immanent frame”—a default way of life, based on common practices and outlooks, that avoids reference to the transcendent. The immanent frame, though not positively closed to transcendence, is in fact constricted by historical accounts that dominate elite society, notably, the academy. The standard narrative is a coming-of-age story. Mankind has outgrown the comforts of divine benevolence; science has found no trace of God in nature, and human ingenuity promises to satisfy our real needs. Or, in the Nietzschean version: human beings must face down the meaningless cosmos and take responsibility for creating their own meaning. Such ethically driven construals work to keep the immanent frame closed.

FAMILIES AND RELIGION

Whereas Taylor and Gregory trace the development of intellectual history, Eberstadt focuses on the family and makes much of sociology. It is a sociological axiom that religious

people are more likely to have large families. And this axiom is usually interpreted to mean that religion causes people to have more children. Eberstadt, however, thinks the causality is mutual. For her, religion and strong families form a “double helix.” And she provides many reasons why family life should give rise to religion. Men are much more likely than women to fall away from church attendance when living on their own. Parents want the church to provide to their children a moral or religious compass. Young parents look for other couples who, like themselves, are learning to navigate family life. Families, moreover, hand on their religious heritage, even at birth, e.g., Jewish ethnicity and Christian baptism. And the experience of having children typically produces in parents a profound sense of gratitude and wonder—passions readily transposed into a religious key. Indeed, familial bonds are already exalted by religion itself, especially Christianity. Think of the Madonna and Child, the Holy Family, the Pietà, the Father and the Son.

Eberstadt also brings her thesis to bear on certain unresolved problems in sociology, such as the exact manner in which industrialization and urbanization contributed to secularization in the nineteenth century. She furthermore helps to explain why organized religiosity plummeted in the 1960s. While acknowledging common explanations such as the general weakening of authority, Eberstadt points to the approval in 1960 of the birth-control pill, which tended to discourage commitment before and after marriage. Divorce rates and illegitimacy soared. In America in 1950, fewer than 20% of marriages ended in divorce. Today, divorce is the likely fate of over 40% of first marriages. Between 1970 and 2009 the percentage of American births that took place outside of marriage increased from 11 to 41%—approximately the “new normal” in countries as diverse as Sweden, Mexico, and the U.K.

The theory sheds light also on the recent decline of mainline Protestantism. It may be true that the Reformation has always posed problems for the indissolubility of marriage, but only in recent decades has divorce become totally de-stigmatized

within mainline communities. The Christian prohibition on contraception was breached only as late as the Lambeth Conference of Anglicans in 1930—and then only for rare circumstances within marriage. Eventually the rest of the mainline followed suit, and contraception went from permissible to prescribed. The issue of homosexual behavior was treated in a similar way. Again, the story starts at Lambeth. As Robert Runcie, the former archbishop of Canterbury, explained in 1996: “once the Church signaled . . . that sexual activity was for human delight and a blessing even if it was divorced from any idea of procreation . . . then what about people who are engaged in same-sex expression and who are incapable of heterosexual expression?” Eberstadt explains that these communities are declining not only because they have less to offer in the way of doctrine but primarily because their foundation—the natural family—is disappearing. They cannot be fruitful because they do not multiply.

THE FUTURE

Each of these authors indicates certain expectations for the future. Taylor excels at showing the connections between cultural movements as they develop and react to one another. A certain element proper to one cultural movement may be taken over and transformed in a counter-movement. Thus the Enlightenment transformed Christian *caritas* into a kind of purely immanent universal beneficence. For Taylor, important elements of Christianity have been scattered far and wide in Enlightened and post-modern thought. There are also elements that have rarely been part of actual religious tradition, but which could become more incorporated. It is Taylor’s hope that, disaffected by the specter of meaninglessness, people will find new and synthetic expressions of the tradition. He repeatedly cites innovative ecclesial movements such as the Missionaries of Charity, Taizé, and L’Arche. He also calls attention to modern converts whose initial approach to Catholicism was determinative for their contribution to the Church, e.g. Gerard

Manley Hopkins, Jacques Maritain, Charles Péguy, and Thomas Merton. It belongs to Christians to welcome these innovations (or recoveries) and not to exclude them in the name of reform. Taylor contends that the direction of the reform movement begun in the twelfth century—catalyzed by the Reformation, the counter-Reformation, and the Enlightenment—was, at least in part, towards far-reaching rationalism, homogenization, and disembodiment or, to use Taylor's provocative term, "excarnation."

For Gregory, the forecast is grim. A political crisis is threatening, which may not wait for creative breakthroughs of the immanent frame. Indeed the decline of the family that Eberstadt describes is a particular form of this threat. For Gregory, the underlying problem is this: modern liberalism—which resolved early modern conflicts by sidelining Christian doctrine and traditional metaphysics—is now failing, because the remaining influence of traditional ethics is fast diminishing. Consumerism (broadly taken) is corroding Western communities and their moral consensus, and there are no permitted theories with which to defend them. Even the principles of modern polity, viz., human rights, cannot be established or negotiated by the paradigm of modern knowledge, viz., natural science (let alone the disintegrated philosophy now current). Such incoherence is or should be especially embarrassing for institutes of higher learning. Thus Gregory ends his book by recommending that the academy unsecularize itself. Scholars need to stop pretending "as though intellectually serious theology, philosophy of religion, and nonskeptical yet historicist biblical scholarship do not exist." We might add to this list the work of Taylor, Eberstadt, and Gregory.

Eberstadt begins her case for optimism with a quote from Pitirim Sorokin, the founder of Harvard's Department of Sociology: "Calamities generate two opposite movements in different sections of the population. One is a trend toward unreligiousness and demoralization; the other is a trend toward extreme religious, spiritual, and moral exaltation" (1942). Eberstadt offers three ways in which a religious rebound might work. First, the diminished affluence of many Western countries may help to revive the

institution of the family. Less prosperous people are less likely to accept the costs of divorce or single parenthood, and shrinking welfare funds may increase incentives for familial stability. Second, the accumulated knowledge of familial failure may trigger a reaction, especially among the affluent, for whom marriage rates and childbearing are slightly on the uptick. Third, the Catholic Church's strong opposition to the decline of the family may appeal to people disaffected by that decline. In a famous 1972 essay defending the Christian rejection of contraception, the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe observed that Christianity drew people out of the pagan world of antiquity, always saying no to such things as infanticide, abortion, and nonmarital sex. Likewise, what many modern people take to be the signal weaknesses of the Christian creed may prove yet again to be a strong draw.

A FOURTH VOICE

There is a certain confluence of Eberstadt and Taylor here. Taylor's term "excarnation" seems especially apt for much of the sexual revolution, insofar as it corrodes the very bodily bonds of the family. But Taylor never uses it this way; for him the term designates, among other things, the "too timid treatment" of questions of sexuality to which the revolution itself was in part a reaction. Perhaps a rapprochement can be achieved in avoiding these two forms of excarnation. Much of the groundwork has been laid by another recent observer of secularization, St. John Paul II.

Against mind-body dualism and reductive materialism, the late pontiff urged that the language of the body be taken seriously, even celebrated—against the timid rigorism Taylor describes. The pope taught that sexuality is integral to what it means for humans to be made in the image of God, citing especially Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." John Paul used this text and others to teach that man and woman are fundamentally equal in dignity, and that this equality does not preclude their difference.

John Paul argued that this combination of equality and difference enables man and woman to complement each other and, through this fruitful complementarity, to reflect in a radical way the God who is love and from whom creation comes (1 Jn 4:8). It follows that the denial of the complementarity of man and woman is an excarnation that undermines the godliness of humanity—and, notably, the family and society.

In the face of a dwindling moral consensus, which science is powerless to supply, Gregory calls for the academy to unsecularize, but, as Taylor points out, the coming-of-age stories are strong (however unjustified) that close the immanent frame to transcendence. It is the suggestion of Eberstadt and John Paul II that a religious resurgence may come from a resurgence of the family—from the ordinary people of God: fathers, mothers, and children. A difficult prospect, perhaps, but not without Christian precedent. When God first came into the world, he did so through a poor family. Might he return to us Westerners as he came at the first?

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