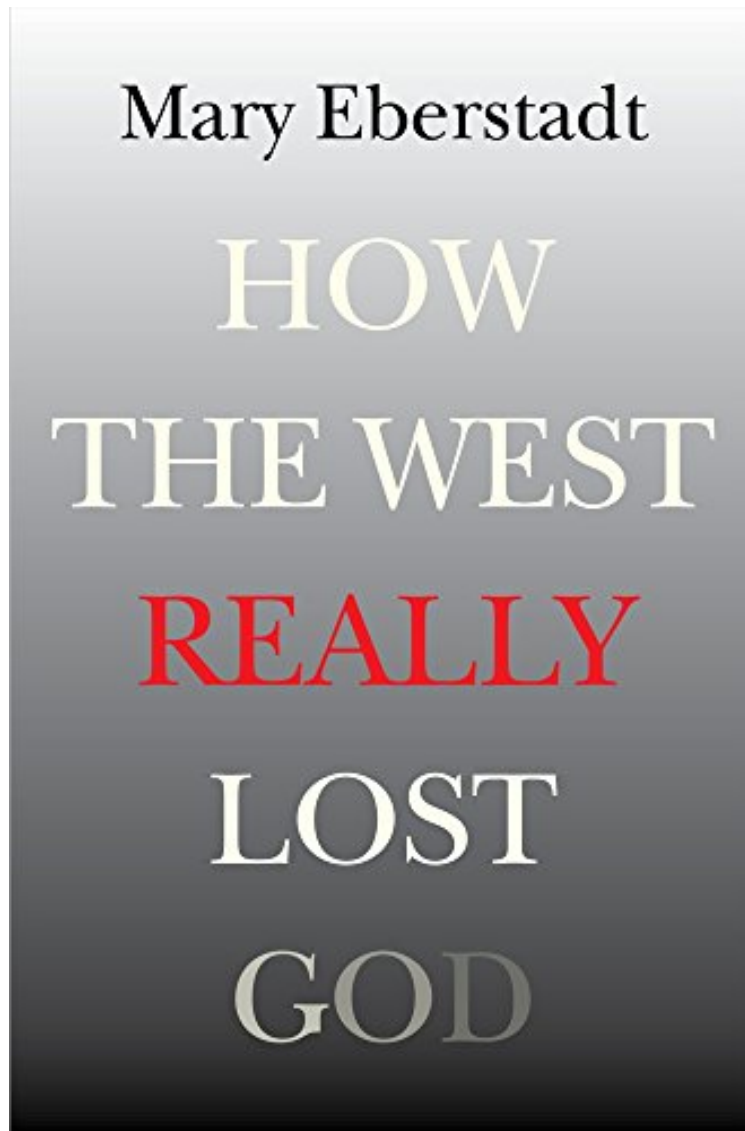


How the West Really Lost God: A New Theory of Secularization

Mary Eberstadt

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Mary Eberstadt : How the West Really Lost God: A New Theory of Secularization before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised How the West Really Lost God: A New Theory of Secularization:

205 of 214 people found the following review helpful. Excellent Analysis With a Few Key LimitationsBy John G. Burford IVMY BACKGROUNDFirst, I should share my own family/religious background because I think it's relevant to a book like this. In some ways, I am a person predisposed to agree with Eberstadt's argument and in some ways I'm not.I come from a mixed family. My mom and dad were both previously married before they married each other. I

have 1 younger full sister and 3 older half-sisters (1 from my dad's previous marriage, 2 from my mom's previous marriage). I was raised in the Episcopal Church by my mom, quit going to church around 6th grade because my mom got tired of dragging 2 kids to church alone every Sunday, and then didn't really go to church at all between 6th grade and my senior year at Princeton. A year and a half ago, during my senior year at Princeton, I converted to Catholicism and am now a devout Catholic.

THINGS I LIKED

- 1. MAIN ARGUMENT IS CONVINCING.** I found Eberstadt's main argument quite convincing. Her basic argument is that the decay of traditional marriage/family is the primary engine driving the decline of modern Western Christianity. After documenting that these declines in traditional marriage/family and Christian religious belief/practice are actually occurring, she proposes 2 primary mechanisms for her argument, aided by copious (albeit mostly footnoted) social science research. The first proposed mechanism is that traditional family life is a conduit for the transmission of Christian values and practice. Christianity's strong endorsement of traditional family life, the transcendent experience of conceiving children, the desire for one's children to have religious/moral instruction, etc. are all powerful incentives for married people with children to go to church. The second proposed mechanism is that non-traditional family life and its resulting non-traditional values form a potent barrier to Christian belief/practice. In short, if you or someone you love is having premarital sex, is pro-choice, is having gay sex, etc., these beliefs/behaviors/associations are powerful incentives to either not identify as Christian or to maintain affiliation but not actually practice. I found this argument convincing for several reasons. First, it explains why unmarried people without kids are much less likely to go to church than married people with kids. Second, it explains why religious observance and fertility are so closely related, both on a national level and on a group level. Third, it explains why some nations' religious observance declined later than others. Fourth, it explains why so much started happening around 1960. Fifth, sex and family are emotionally powerful experiences that actually touch people's everyday lives, unlike theories that attribute secularization to the Enlightenment or to the World Wars.
- 2. PROSE IS CLEAR AND EASY TO READ.** Eberstadt's prose is clear and easy to read. She also has some nice turns of phrase that I enjoyed, like "a great many people have voted with their pills against having babies."
- 3. WIDE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.** Eberstadt is well-read and has a good grasp of the social science literature. The work of Mark Regnerus, Rodney Stark, W. Bradford Wilcox, Robert Putnam, Charles Murray, etc. plays a prominent role in her argument. She addressed most of the counter-examples and objections I had.
- 4. GOOD ORGANIZATIONAL FORMAT.** I liked the book's organizational format. I liked how she took a chapter to examine whether secularization was actually occurring, that she took a good amount of time to examine the weaknesses of alternate secularization theories, etc.

THINGS I DIDN'T LIKE

- 1. NOT ENOUGH DATA IN BODY OF TEXT.** My main issue with this book is the same issue I had with Eberstadt's book "Adam and Eve After the Pill": it assumes an audience that is both emotionally receptive to her general message and that has a passing familiarity with the statistics and trends that she cites. This is okay if she is content with this book being read almost entirely by the choir, but if she wants to convince skeptics, she will need to incorporate more statistics/graphs into the actual text instead of simply footnoting them. I think she did this for readability's sake, but I think it was the wrong decision. For instance, one of the points crucial to her case is that well-educated, affluent Americans currently have significantly higher church attendance than poor Americans, and that this is related to the recent marital decay that has devastated America's poor while largely sparing its rich. This is important because it contradicts the theory that modernity/affluence/education inherently lead to greater secularism. This point is hammered home convincingly in Charles Murray's "Coming Apart", and I think Eberstadt would have done well to re-present an abbreviated version of Murray's case for the sake of readers unfamiliar with his work. She does mention the book, and shares a few statistics, but I think they are too few.
- 2. TOO MUCH FOCUS ON THE RULE, NOT ENOUGH ON OUTLIERS.** I also think the book focuses too much on the large-scale trends and not enough on the small-scale exceptions. Meaning, she mostly focuses on the overall trends in family formation and religious practice on a national/international scale, and not enough on the groups that have proven resistant to these trends. On the more exotic end, this would include groups like the Amish and Hasidic Jews. On the more mainstream end, this would include groups like Modern Orthodox Jews and the Mormons. Why examine these groups? Because they are Western religious groups that are exposed to the same pressures (invention of contraception, legal abortion, no-fault divorce, etc.), and yet have maintained high marriage rates, high fertility rates, and high religious attendance rates. As such, they are valuable case studies in what a religious group can do to slow or reverse these secularizing trends without waiting for society as a whole to change. This could have fit well into the "Case for Optimism" chapter.
- 3. NEEDS LONGITUDINAL DATA.** I think Eberstadt's case would greatly benefit from some longitudinal data tracking church attendance as people go to college, get married, have children, get divorced, etc. If the data shows that people have kids first, THEN resume church attendance (which would fit with everyday experience), that would be powerful evidence for her argument that family decline causes secularization, and not the other way around. I'm not sure how much of this data is currently available, but her case's power is necessarily limited without it. As it currently stands, Eberstadt's case is mostly circumstantial (as she admits), even if it is stronger, on balance, than competing theories of secularization.
- 4. OCCASIONAL OMISSIONS.** Eberstadt's discussion of marriage/family breakdown curiously has no discussion of the rising rate of premarital sex and pornography use. She also rarely brings up abortion. These seemed like odd omissions.

SUMMARY I enjoyed this book and would

recommend it. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Excellent Work By Aussie Mark This is a well presented argument which is both an easy read and maintains the reader's interest. The central contention is that academics and writers who applaud or lament the decline in Christianity in the West have missed an obvious link between Christianity as a beliefs system and the traditional family as the building block of Western culture. The decline in the family unit in the West has hastened the decline of Christianity, runs the argument, and she explains why this is something that should be of concern. She presents much data to justify her contentions and maintains an objectivity throughout that never reveals whether the author is Christian, agnostic or atheist. For instance, her chapter explaining how Christian believers benefit society more than non-believers is presented from an economic viewpoint and without any of the extremist or biased language that religion debates seem prone to. The author is clearly concerned to avoid sparking any of the spiteful hatred that asking and answering some of the questions she does may cause. Most of her data comes from Europe and the USA and she compares and contrasts the declines in family and Christianity in both areas, especially since the 1930s, and how and why they differ. It is a well-thought out and presented work and should give any reader pause for thought about what its lessons may teach the future of Western civilisation. 7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Bravo! A 'Tour de Force'! By John Mccarthy Mary Eberstadt's *How the West Lost God* is as accessible as it is compelling. The basic premise of her book is that religious practice and the intact, male-female natural family are mutually reinforcing social phenomena such that, sociologically speaking, the weakness of the family correlates with the weakness of religious practice, and vice versa. Ms. Eberstadt halts before calling her theory a proof, but at the same time she argues that an abundance of circumstantial evidence points to, but doesn't prove, a causal relationship. So, in the end, her theory of secularization does not intend to negate the many other factors involved in the all-but overwhelming power of secularization as a western social phenomenon, but it does intend to add the 'collapse of the intact family' and the 'collapse of institutional Christianity' as two other important factors to be amended into any comprehensive theory of secularization. Part of what makes her book such a compelling and persuasive read is that it bristles with insights of commanding interest. For example: 1. She argues that Catholicism and Mainline Protestant Christianity have contributed and continue to contribute to the collapse of both religion and the family by their progressively ever more soft-pedaled teaching regarding the family, divorce, contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage, etc. 2. She argues that the state, in taking over many of the function that were once largely the functions of religion and the family, such as hospitals, orphanages, care of the poor and the aged, has indirectly and progressively contributed to the collapse of religion and the family. 3. She argues that by reason of the collapse of the family and religion, we are now inevitably trending toward the emergence of a "post welfare" world because demographically-speaking, the governments of the west simply cannot sustain the welfare commitments that are currently available. 4. She argues that Western democracies, contrary to their own best interest, continue to weaken and undermine social and political support for the intact family by reason of their economic and support for abortion, same-sex marriage, out-of-wedlock single parenting, contraception, etc. 5. Finally, she points out that although almost all current trends favor the continued collapse of the family and the collapse of western institutionalized religion, historical humility persuades her that these trends are not inevitable and, that in fact, economic and political calamities often reinvigorate both religion and the family. Bravo, Mary Eberstadt! And Thank You!

In this magisterial work, leading cultural critic Mary Eberstadt delivers a powerful new theory about the decline of religion in the Western world. The conventional wisdom is that the West first experienced religious decline, followed by the decline of the family. Eberstadt turns this standard account on its head. Marshalling an impressive array of research, from fascinating historical data on family decline in pre-Revolutionary France to contemporary popular culture both in the United States and Europe, Eberstadt shows that the reverse has also been true: the undermining of the family has further undermined Christianity itself.

An absolutely brilliant and strikingly fresh portrait of the double-helix of faith and family, coupled with a potentially game-changing analysis of the why and how of secularization, all written with the sparkle and empathy that characterize the work of one of America's premier social analysts." George Weigel, Distinguished Senior Fellow, Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, D.C. You cannot understand the real philosophical problems of the West which have been mounting for 40 years without reading Mary Eberstadt's new book *How the West Really Lost God*. Jonathan V. Last, author of *What to Expect When No One's Expecting: America's Coming Demographic Disaster* *How the West Really Lost God* is a clear, compelling and ultimately convincing presentation of the relationship between faith and family. It's not a call to action. But it doesn't need to be. The Church has already told Christians what to do. The book just dispels any lingering doubts about the necessity of doing it. Emily Stimpson, *Our Sunday Visitor* Every Christian leader who's interested in engaging today's culture (and who shouldn't be?) should have this book on his or her desk. Her research and historical perspectives are fascinating, and I'm confident that they will give you enormous new information that will help you engage today's non-believing culture more effectively. Phil Cooke, *The Christian News Journal*