“Jesus rules over us, [with] a radical suspicion of violence and a commitment to servant leadership.”

But Camosy also writes this: The application of a principle is not like taking a taxi but rather like riding on a bus—you have to follow it wherever it goes. And a consistent and nonviolent animal ethics goes a long way. Beyond forgoing meat, what about cosmetics that have been tested on animals? What about taking medicine derived from laboratory-animal experimentation? Or adopting a puppy and in some way “materially cooperating” with the evil that is puppy mills. Camosy acknowledges that the honest application of these is countercultural in the extreme, but it is also a true imitation of “Christ’s self-emptying, his rejection of sinful appetites and—ultimately—his holiness.”

Christianity is not easy, and Camosy’s argument is not just for love of animals, but for consistent conduct of Catholic principles. Recall Flannery O’Connor: “What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.”

S. M. Wesley
Columbia University Press


The secularization thesis holds that religious enthusiasm in the Western world was at its peak in the Middle Ages and has been in a slow decline ever since. Until the past few decades, this was the conventional wisdom in sociology, as most believed that the inevitable consequence of modernity is the decline of religion. The work of Emile Durkheim is central to the foundation of the secularization thesis; he represented the traditional function of religion as symbolizing the identity of a community—a metaphor of social order. Max Weber maintained that the “routinization of charisma” and the increasing dominance of science would destroy religion.

Yet, sociologist Peter Berger’s classic essay in First Things, “Secularization Falsified,” maintains that “Religion has not been declining. On the contrary, in much of the world there has been a veritable explosion of religious faith.” And, although sociologist Rodney Stark’s entire body of work disputes a linear decline of religion—providing evidence that churchgoing has increased rather than declined over the centuries—many sociologists maintain that secularization continues, especially in the West.
Anne Hendershott

Mary Eberstadt, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, extends the debate over the decline of religion in her book, *How the West Really Lost God*. Providing evidence that the decline of religion in the Western world is real and sustained, Eberstadt defies conventional sociological “wisdom” by postulating that much of the decline of religion is caused by decline in family formation.

Indeed, conventional sociology has postulated that religious decline—secularization—leads to family decline as people first begin to lose their commitment to religion, and then choose not to form families or have children. There is much sociological data that supports the idea that church attendance is strongly correlated with being married. Every sociologist knows that sociological surveys demonstrate that those who are married are more likely to attend Church than those who are unmarried; and those who are married with children are even more likely to attend Church than those who are unmarried or married without children. The relationship is strong. But Eberstadt cautions us that the causal chain may not be what most of us would presume.

Flipping conventional sociological theory on its head, Eberstadt argues that, rather than religious declines causing families to decline, it may be more accurate to say that the increase in unformed or broken families that has occurred since the 1960s is what has caused churches to decline. Drawing upon an image used by scientists James D. Watson and Francis Crick, discoverers of the structure of DNA, Eberstadt’s central thesis is that faith and family make what she calls a “double-helix,” with each requiring the other to reproduce. She suggests that “family and faith are the invisible double helix of society—two spirals that when linked to one another can effectively reproduce, but whose strength and momentum depend on one another” (22).

For evidence, Eberstadt looks to Western Europe—and to Scandinavia in particular—where the unmarried Western family was first introduced. Denmark and Sweden are two of the least religious nations on earth, and those living there are least likely to form families. Citing a sociological study of the countries, Eberstadt points out that “only 10 percent of Danes and Swedes believe in hell, for example . . . the lowest percentages in the world; the rate of weekly church attendance in both countries is also lower than any other.” Almost no one surveyed for the study believed the Bible was divinely inspired” (45). While 68.8 percent of the Swedish people belong to the Church of Sweden (down from 95 percent of the population in 1940), and 90 percent of all Swedes are still buried with a church service, few attend services. Only 400,000 of the roughly 6.6 million members of the Church of Sweden say they attend services at least once a month, and
a dismal 15 percent of church members say they believe in Jesus Christ. In an article published in Living Church, H. B. Hammar, former Dean of Skara Cathedral, said that “of the 3,384 churches in Sweden, only 500 or so are used at most once a month.”

Still, there are some sociologists who would dispute Eberstadt’s thesis that religious faith has declined quite as much or as consistently as she suggests. The Churching of America, 1776–1990, by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, maintains that overall church attendance has increased rather than declined during specific periods throughout the centuries. Still, Finke and Stark share Eberstadt’s contention that some churches will not survive. Their research reveals that the more a religious institution compromises with society and the world, blurring its identity and modifying its teaching and ethics, the more it will decline. The mainline Protestant churches that have declined the most dramatically since the 1960s no longer provided meaning for their members. There was no longer a reason to attend—or to believe. As Ross Douthat’s 2012 book, Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics, points out, “today, there are more Muslims in America than Episcopalians.” The absolute number of Roman Catholics has stayed strong, but weekly attendance at Mass has plummeted.

Eberstadt seems to agree with Douthat—and in a chapter titled “Assisted Religious Suicide: How Some Churches Participated in Their own Downfall by Ignoring the Family Factor,” Eberstadt points to the complicity of churches in their own decline: “Just as the shrinking and weakening of the family across Western Europe was contributing to religious decline, especially with the acceleration of that process in the 1960s, so at the same time did many Christian churches behave in ways that in retrospect appear to have been self-destructive, at least from the point of view of holding onto their flocks. They initiated one doctrinal change after another that further weakened the ties between family and church—a process that surely accelerated the decline even more” (140).

In her concluding chapters, Eberstadt points out that the United States is now where Denmark and Sweden were a couple of decades ago, as more than 40 percent of all American births are to unmarried women. In a chapter titled “The Future of Faith and Family: The Case for Pessimism,” Eberstadt draws upon social science data to show that fewer people are getting married, fewer people are having children, and fewer people who are having children are sustaining intact two-parent homes for them. She predicts that if trends continue, these continuing family declines will lead to the continued decline of religion. Maybe not. Trends do not always continue, and even Eberstadt acknowledges that in her concluding chapter on “The Case for Optimism,” where she provides possibilities for recov-
She suggests that the recovery could come through “default” when the growing economic crises may force families to begin to reclaim some of the duties that have been transferred to the welfare state. Families will need to take back caregiving to the young and elderly once the state can no longer afford to maintain the behemoth welfare state it has created. Or, in an even more optimistic view, Eberstadt suggests that there may come a time when we begin to appreciate once again Christianity’s respect for marriage and the family, and the sacredness of life—including the life of the unborn. This will be the time—and Eberstadt offers us some hope for this time—when we begin to reverse the decline.

Notes


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Christopher Kaczor’s excellent new book is best read as a companion to his Ethics of Abortion (2010), although its opening chapter helpfully summarizes several arguments that all human beings possess intrinsic worth prior to being valued by others or the value they achieve through excellent living. Many chapters were previously published in the National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly and elsewhere as responses to critics of dignity. Its subsequent broad engagement with philosophers, medical associations, and government agencies makes it something of a primer on how the Catholic natural law tradition engages the wider field of bioethics.

Chapters 1–8 concern dignity at the beginning of life. Their brevity and incisiveness would make them suitable for undergraduate logic courses. A typical example of Kaczor’s meat-and-potatoes approach to writing, drawn from the evaluation in chapter three of the American Society for