

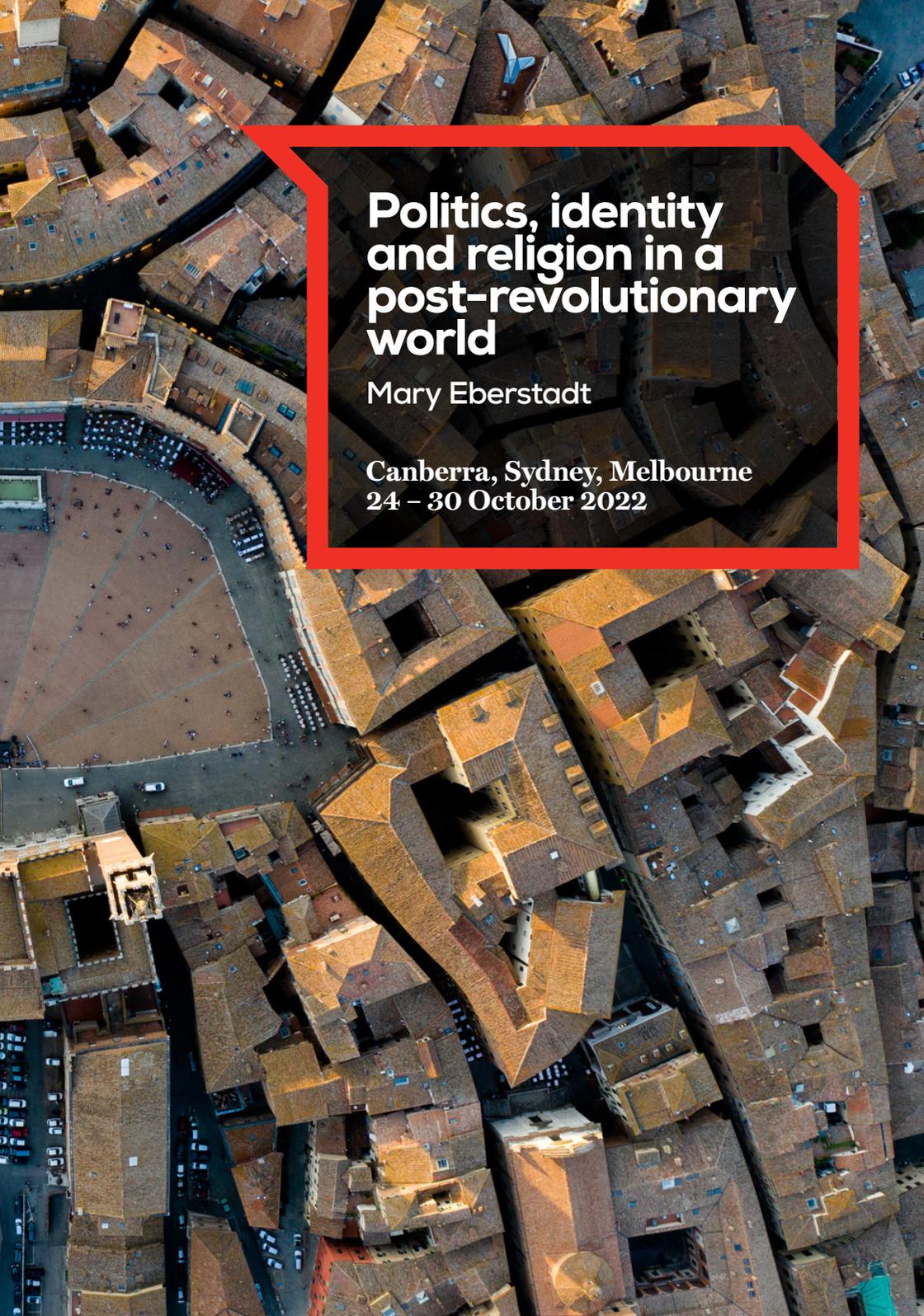
# Politics, identity and religion in a post-revolutionary world

Mary Eberstadt

Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne  
24 – 30 October 2022





An aerial photograph of a dense urban area, likely in a Mediterranean or European city, characterized by terracotta-tiled roofs and narrow streets. A large, open square or plaza is visible on the left side of the image. The text is overlaid on a red, stylized frame in the upper right quadrant.

# Politics, identity and religion in a post-revolutionary world

Mary Eberstadt

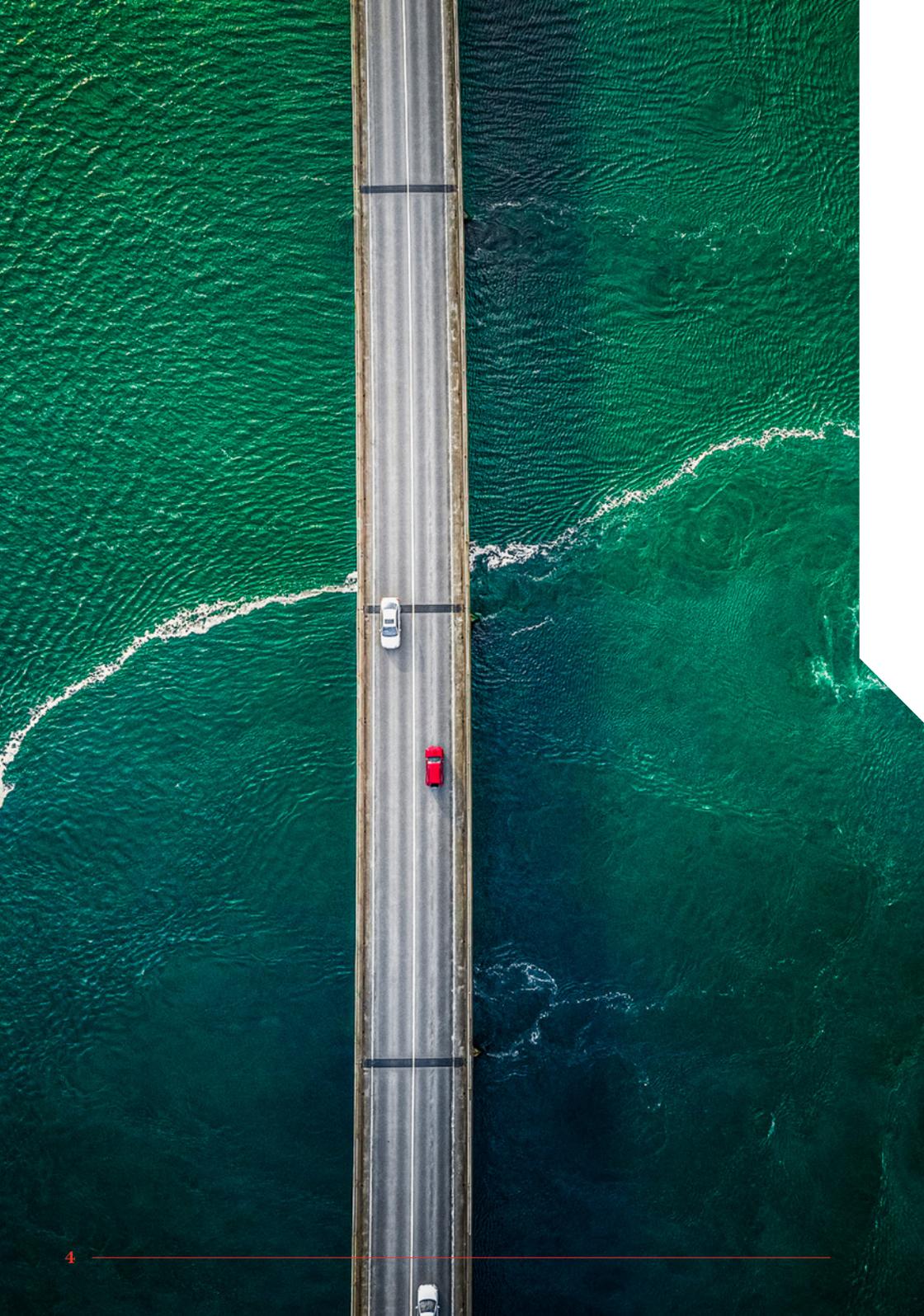
Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne  
24 – 30 October 2022





## Contents

- 05 Preface
- 06 Mary Eberstadt
- 07 The future of  
humanity passes by  
way of the family
- 14 Standing firm against  
identity politics
- 19 What are the roots of  
today's political rage?
- 24 Understanding  
secularization in the  
census
- 35 PM Glynn Institute



# Preface

In October 2022, the PM Glynn Institute at Australian Catholic University (ACU), hosted a speaking tour by one of America's foremost Catholic public intellectuals, Mary Eberstadt. The primary purpose of her visit was to deliver the Greg Craven Lecture on Ethics and Politics. Her topic for this lecture was 'Understanding secularization in the census'. Whilst in Australia, she undertook a number of other speaking engagements, the texts of which are reproduced here, together with the Craven Lecture. These engagements included the following:

- 'What are the roots of today's political rage?'  
Delivered at Parliament House, Canberra, at a luncheon hosted jointly by ACU and the Saint Thomas More Forum;
- 'Standing firm against identity politics'  
Delivered at the Centre for Independent Studies at a public conversation with the Reverend Peter Kurti;
- 'The future of humanity passes by way of the family'  
Delivered at the Catholic Leadership Centre in Melbourne at a luncheon hosted by the Most Reverend Peter A. Comensoli.

The addresses in this volume have been arranged thematically. They begin with Mrs Eberstadt's thoughts about the family, then progress to her approach to society more broadly (in particular, 'identity' and society) and, finally, her remarks about responses to the state ('political rage').

Mrs Eberstadt also delivered a lecture on 'How the West Really Lost God' at the Mint in Sydney for the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation and Campion College. As this lecture largely covered much of the material contained in the Craven Lecture, it is not reproduced in this volume.

While in Australia, Mrs Eberstadt was interviewed by Tom Switzer for ABC Radio, Peta Credlin for Sky News, and the Honourable John Anderson AC for his podcast series, as well as giving interviews for *News Weekly* and *Catholic Weekly* newspapers, and these interviews are available on their respective websites.

# Mary Eberstadt

Mary Eberstadt is a Distinguished Fellow of the PM Glynn Institute. She holds the Panula Chair in Christian Culture at the Catholic Information Centre and is a Senior Research Fellow at the Faith and Reason Institute, both in Washington DC.

Mrs Eberstadt is an American writer whose contributions to the intellectual landscape traverse genres. An essayist, novelist and frequent public speaker, she is author of several books of non-fiction, including *How the West Really Lost God: A New Theory of Secularization*, *Adam and Eve after the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution*, and *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics*.

Her social commentary draws from fields including anthropology, intellectual history, philosophy, popular culture, sociology and theology.

Her books and essays have been translated into Spanish, French, Italian, Polish, Arabic, Dutch, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Hungarian and Turkish, and her novel, *The Loser Letters: A Comic Tale of Life, Death, and Atheism*, premiered as a stage play at the Catholic University of America in 2016.

Central to Mrs Eberstadt's diverse interests are questions concerning the philosophy and culture of Western civilization and the fate and aspirations of postmodern humanity.



# The future of humanity passes by way of the family

In conversation with Archbishop Peter A. Comensoli  
25 October 2022



**We are here today to speak about “the family.” In many sophisticated corners of the West, that phrase would be met with a shrug, at best. Some ask: Haven’t we moved beyond that rigid old institution? Other critics might respond more harshly: isn’t the traditional family a nest of neuroses? A zero-sum game in which children contest for scarce resources? A place where women are subjugated, prevented from reaching their full potential, including in the paid marketplace?**

Still others these days, at least in the United States, would urge that we approach the question of “the family” with the same kind of hyper-consumerism taken to evaluating material products. After all, they say, we have alternatives now to that ancient primal form of community. Thus, some urge individuals to de-camp and disown their given families, and to embrace what are called “chosen” families instead. Some point children and adolescents toward so-called “glitter” LGBTQ “families.” Others devise so-called “families” of friends rather than relatives, and so on. In much the same way, so-called “street families” are common substitutes for the real thing among fatherless boys and feral runaways in numerous American cities.

All of which is to say that the institution of the family as Catholics understand it is now profoundly countercultural. For that reason, it continues to be assailed in our time by disparate forces within our secularizing cultures to whose worldview it poses a threat. In fact, for reasons to be discussed, it is fair to say that this institution is under attack in the societies of the modern West as never before.

In a sense, that should not surprise us. As the first and most primal human institution, the one in which most people learn their most profound lessons of love and loyalty, loss and sacrifice, the family has been the object of attack by utopians and totalitarians

throughout history. Socrates said that the ideal society would take children away from their parents. Marx and Engels demanded the family’s abolition. Communist Russia and like-minded dictatorships tried, and succeeded, in disrupting the family’s primacy, especially in the critical realm of education.

This list could go on. But we can cut straight to the point. Throughout these many centuries, one institution has stood fast by the view that the family is uniquely sacred – that marriage is not a contract but a covenant; that pregnancy and birth participate in a plan that is nothing short of divine; and that the family itself is a prism for that same plan that draws men and women up from the earth and toward eternity itself. And that institution is the Catholic Church.

Today, I am here to share some perhaps surprising but essential news. Even as critics continue to assail both family and faith, Church teaching on the family is being vindicated. That vindication is not issuing from theology or philosophy. It is instead comprised of empirical evidence assembled by perfectly secular sources – evidence showing what happens when societies do not place a sacred value on family, as our societies increasingly do not. In a time when many religious believers feel anxious and on the defensive, when other losses for the Church seem to be mounting, the idea that the Church is scoring a major win these days might seem dubious. But it is real – as real as the fact that this same vindication is ignored by those who don’t want to see it. Let us consider four broad areas of such evidence, the better to see this vindication clearly.

First: many decades of social science have vindicated the idea that the sexual revolution beginning in the 1960s has had terrible consequences. This apprehension was most clearly voiced by the Church in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which reiterated longstanding teaching against artificial

contraception. Yet even the authors of that encyclical, prophetic though they were, could not have foreseen just how much social and personal chaos would become compounded during the decades following the widespread adoption of artificial contraception.

Hopeful sexual revolutionaries thought that the birth control pill would strengthen marriage. Instead, both divorce and cohabitation skyrocketed as never before. Some also argued that contraception would help people by preventing abortion. Sixty-eight million-plus abortions in the United States alone since *Roe v. Wade* put quite the dent in that case. All over the West, marriage and family have imploded such that today, having no father at home has become an unremarkable norm. Meanwhile, the children who are at home, fatherless or not, are far less likely to know the consolations of siblings than before. And an entire library of social science now six decades in the making continues to testify to the behavioral, emotional, educational, and other fallout brought on by broken homes – a library as resolutely ignored as it is robust.

This tragic litany could continue, but the point is already plain. Today we can see in retrospect what no one in 1968 saw coming – the atomization and fragmentation of society that would follow the sexual revolution as day follows night. This isolation is a tragedy no one saw coming. This kind of misery hasn't been seen before. And it's one more indication that whatever people may think of the Catholic Church, there is mounting empirical evidence that Paul VI and others were right in seeing that the sexual revolution would wreak havoc on human beings.

Second, we also possess abundant evidence of another kind that no one could have foreseen before the revolution took hold. Jettisoning Christian teachings about the family, as our societies largely have done, has made many millions of people miserable not only on

account of broken homes, but for another reason. The decision to live as if family were a consumer choice rather than the most important human institution on earth has exacted steep costs not only on children, but at the other end of life: i.e., old age.

These costs are the deeper meaning of one of the most telling academic phenomena of our times: the explosion of what are called “loneliness studies” in every Western nation on earth.

So, for example, “Loneliness is becoming a common phenomenon in France,” to take an example from *Le Figaro*. Citing a study on the “new solitudes” by the Fondation de France, that article also named what it called the prime driver of this loneliness: “family rupture,” especially divorce. In a similar vein, a study “Predictors of Loneliness Across the Adult Life Span in Portugal” also cited divorce as increasing the likelihood of loneliness – though it did not ask whether having children in the picture might ameliorate the problem. Oddly, one can read through many “loneliness studies” without seeing reference to children, which is quite a striking omission. But that is what happens in a world where children have come to be seen as a burden rather than a blessing: their absence in turn becomes a terrible burden all its own.

Outside the Catholic Church, in the secularizing societies that do not enshrine the family, the problem of loneliness is nevertheless so pressing that those same societies cannot help but notice it. In Sweden, a 2015 documentary on *The Swedish Theory of Love* questioned the dominance of “independence” in that country as an ideal. It seems more a curse than a blessing when one-half of Swedes now live in households of one. As a report put it of one particular “lonely death,”

“As the Swedish authorities scrutinize the case, they discover that the man has no close

relatives or friends. It is highly likely that he lived lonely and alone for years, sitting solitary in front of his TV or computer. After a while, they discover that he has a daughter, but she proves impossible to locate... It becomes apparent that he actually had quite a lot of money tucked away in the bank. But what does that help when he had no one to share with?"

One last snapshot, this from Germany and an article in *Der Spiegel* titled "Alone by the Millions: Isolation Crisis Threatens German Seniors." It reports:

"Over 20 percent of Germans over the age of 70 are in regular contact with only one person – or nobody. One in four receives a visit less than once a month from friends and acquaintances, and nearly one in 10 is not visited by anyone anymore. Many old people have no one who still addresses them by their first name or asks them how they are doing."

Such human poverty, which Pope Francis himself has decried, abounds in societies awash in material wealth. This contradiction, too, could not possibly have been foreseen in full by those who argued for and against *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Yet without doubt, what unites these sad portraits is the sexual revolution, which by the 1970s was operating at full throttle in Western nations, driving up divorce rates, driving down marriage rates, and emptying cradles. It does not take a demographer to connect the dots; the evidence of our senses will do.

Third, Church teaching about the family is vindicated in our time in one more way, this one outside the bounds of social science. The more the surrounding decadence darkens the horizon of today's Western men and women, the more the ennobled vision put forth by the Magisterium shines in contrast.

After all, look at our societies. Are they better off, post-sexual revolution, having largely tossed out the Good Book? Are these liberated fellow human beings of ours markedly happier, now that they are free of rules and children and church?

To the contrary: evidence abounds that there is something unnatural and inhuman about the way many now pass their days. Social dysfunctions like addiction are rising across the better-off countries of the world. In the United States, we've lost millions over the past two decades to an opioid epidemic that turned into a heroin epidemic and now a synthetic fentanyl epidemic. A rapacious search for corporate profit started this ruination. But one must wonder about the extraordinary demand for self-medicating that has kept it going for so long. Once more: might dispensing with marriage and babies, thus emptying Western lives of other people, account for some of this cost?

And drugs are only part of what any impartial observer can see across the Western landscape today. Psychiatric problems like anxiety and depression have been increasing for years, especially among the young, including well before the pandemic. (In fact, the rise in psychiatric trouble across the modern West was one of the first puzzles that drew me to some of the writing I've done, trying to get to the root of *why*.)

In sum, a lot of men, women, and children are suffering in our time. Their trials go largely ignored in a wider world that seeks to keep the sexual revolution as status quo. But these same people are suffering in ways that *can* be addressed by the Church, which offers a guide to life, and an elevated view of humanity and its worth, that many of those suffering may never have heard before.

The dominant secular culture sees human beings as sexual animals to be used and thrown away. It sees euthanasia – death – as an answer to the supposed problem of life. Christianity opposes these pagan encroachments with its every breath. It teaches that life is good, period, and that human beings are infinitely precious and made in the image of God. These are diametrically opposed versions of the human person – and when people have to choose, at least some will reject the idea that they are mere animals, if the choice is only put to them.

Fourth, let us also look briefly at two ways in which Church teaching about the family offers solicitude toward women, in particular, as the indifferent secularist culture does not.

First is the elephant in the room – and on laptops and smartphones everywhere: pornography. The Catholic Church, and practically the Catholic Church alone among all other global institutions, condemns that thing. Once upon a time, prominent feminists like Andrea Dworkin stood shoulder-to-shoulder with moral traditionalists like Edwin Meese, united in finding pornography inimical to humankind. Today's secular mainstream is instead “anti-pornography.” At best, it views those who *object* to pornography as the problem. At worst, it defends pornography as one more fast track to liberation.

Even so, the fact remains that many girls and women are not nearly as unconcerned about pornography as secular materialism demands. That is one more fault line running between women and the secular movements that claim to protect them, but do not. It is the Catholic Church who actually stands on the side of women here. That fact is nothing to hide. It should be shouted from Catholic schools, pulpits, and faithful universities far and wide.

Then there is another grotesque project that subverts the secularist claim to put women first: gender-cide. Around the world, in a pattern unfolding since the invention of the sonogram, millions more female fetuses are destroyed than males – destroyed *because* they are female. How compassionate and pro-woman is that? If one *were* devising an actual “war on women,” it would be hard to improve on a strategy that pre-emptively keeps millions of us from seeing daylight in the first place. Yet the same activists who are adversaries of the Church take the same view of gender-cide that they do of pornography: they are more opposed to the people who resist that phenomenon than they are to the thing itself.

I often wonder if the Church could join in forging a new consensus among many women – and many men – just by getting all parties to agree to three simple points: that humanity has taken a mechanized, industrial turn about sex; that this wrong turn is making plenty of people miserable; and that both men and women deserve better – including by entertaining what the Church has to say about all that. Today's often-blind search for authenticity among the secularized young, especially, may be an underused asset on the side of truth.

In closing, a few words about hope, and some thoughts on how we, as Catholics, can make the case for the family in this fallen and confused postrevolutionary world.

The case for hope begins, paradoxically, in the social destruction all around us that *Humanae Vitae* rightly warned about. History shows that social degradation has existed during other eras, often when society was on the verge of great renewal and reform movements. The so-called “gin alleys” of eighteenth-century London gave rise to Victorian moral renewal. The United States has been home to a series of religious awakenings sparked by people who wanted to help others live a more human life. Moral renaissance happens – and it happens all the time – because human nature is not simply animal nature. The U.S. social awakening that became the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is one more example in which religious conviction challenged a toxic social order; priests and nuns and pastors were on its front lines.

One more reason for hope is that men and women throughout history have turned to Christianity for refuge and fellowship and a home – because they can't find refuge and fellowship and a home anywhere else. The same is true today. The overbearing, secularist culture increasingly averse to Christianity is *itself* drawing people to God. Finally, from the point of view of those who defend the Church, I believe the question

of what *we* are to do amounts to a two-word answer: *don't capitulate*. Don't soft-pedal Church teachings about the family at a time when their truth is being highlighted as never before, including inadvertently. And don't burden the struggling faithful already tackling that revolution with the fact that some Catholics now seek to abandon the moral code of almost two millennia's standing.

The arguments for standing tall are several: social, historical, moral, and theological.

First, to the social argument. Even if we were cavalierly and wholly unconcerned with theological truth, backpedaling on the traditional defense of marriage is bad for society. That's why I've emphasized the small mountain of social science out there. The fracturing of the family has empowered the predatory and further hurt the weak, including, most of all, children. Catholics do not want to send the signal that their fate is a matter of indifference. Nor does the Church want to send the signal to married people who may already be struggling that their sacrifice is now less valuable than has been held for two thousand years.

The historical argument is also clear. The historical fact is that even if the Church *could* jettison parts of the moral code, and draw the smiley face that embarrassed Catholics would prefer to draw over it, that capitulation wouldn't help the Church. In fact, history shows quite the opposite: it would hurt the Church, exactly as it has hurt the Protestant churches that have been running exactly that experiment for decades now.

The churches that did most to loosen up the traditional moral code of Christianity are the same churches that have ended up suffering most for that effort – demographically, financially, morale-wise, and otherwise. Some are on the brink of actual extinction. As a recent article in the *Independent* put it, speaking the thought for many, “Will the last person to leave the Church of England please turn out the lights?” It is a question into which other church names will soon be substituted, including those of the Mainline.

Conversely, this is *not* a question anyone asks about certain other churches that have not rejected the traditional moral code, but have instead held it more or less fast – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for example; or the traditional-minded evangelical churches; or the Pentecostals; or the Anglican churches of what is now called the Global South.

Succumbing to the temptation to abandon Church teaching about family and sex has also weakened these churches demographically. Ignoring the injunction to be fruitful and multiply has resulted in graying parishioners and empty pews across the Western world. It has weakened them financially, as the failure of worshippers to replace themselves has left those churches with an ever-shrinking base of contributors – the same problem facing the West's aging welfare states. And it has weakened the same churches in a wider sense of mission and morale.

The moral argument for standing firm likewise could not be more obvious. The Church today is being asked to have mercy on people who struggle when they are living outside the Church's code, and often in outright defiance of it. But this request for mercy surely must not trump other requests – for starters, mercy toward the children whose lives will be better off if their parents make the continual sacrifice of staying together. Or mercy toward the souls who will be misled, and jeopardized, by authorities who treat sin as if it is not sin.

Finally, there is the mercy owed to human beings who are drawn into the church precisely *because of* that code itself, who find in it a lifesaver and not a noose, who are firm in the conviction that their own very salvation depends upon it. These now include former victims of the sexual revolution themselves – the walking wounded coming in and out of those proverbial field hospitals, the people who are believers not because they want to jettison the Christian moral code, but because they want to do something more radical: own it. The Church of today and

tomorrow is being built more and more by these very witnesses themselves.

Many of these plead openly that the Church keep *being* a sign of contradiction. These are witnesses who must be heard at an hour when the Church has put questions of the family front and center, and who are terribly demoralized when other Catholics act as if those moral teachings they bravely defend are on the wrong side of history. There are also people like Anny Donnewald, a former prostitute recently profiled in *Christianity Today* who has gone on to found a ministry for other women exploited by the so-called adult entertainment industry. There are organizations like the Catholic group Courage, and others that do good, despite the nonstop recrimination aimed their way.

And there are witnesses elsewhere too. I think of two men who attended a conference on the social costs of pornography a few years back. Each testified before scores of strangers about what pornography had cost him personally – mainly, the loss of love. They are witnesses to the wreckage of the sexual revolution, and exceptionally courageous ones.

All these men and women and many others like them are living, human signs of contradiction to the times, and most especially to the new intolerance. They are part of the growing coalition of people who defend faith in all its thorniness *not* because they have known nothing else, but precisely because they *do* know the revolution and reject its promises as false. They have nowhere else to go but the Church – and the Church cannot abandon these people struggling to be redeemed and stay redeemed without ceasing to be the Church. As Cardinal George Pell has emphasized, “The last word does not come from the world, from contemporary understandings, but from within the tradition as authorized by the successor of Peter and the successors of the Apostles.”

Christianity has faced enormous obstacles throughout history. The mere fact that the

Roman empire ended up largely Christian and, it should be said, divine favor on the Church. The success of missionaries in bringing that faith to people who believed differently in almost every language on earth is also testimony to the ability of the faith to speak across time and culture straight to the human heart. It is also true that one by one, the overt tormentors of the faithful, and most of all those who claimed to have the mantle of history itself on their shoulders, have themselves ended up as history’s rejects. The Reformation didn’t kill the Church. The French revolution couldn’t kill the Church. Global Marxism-Leninism, with which Christianity contended all through the century past, couldn’t either.

Looked at that way, it may seem absurd to wonder whether the sexual revolution could inadvertently accomplish what overt adversaries could not. And yet the question is not as absurd as we would like it to be. Like Communism, the threat posed by the revolution is global. But unlike Communism, the threat posed by the revolution is not contained within geographical bounds. It operates within Western societies. It is the force that drives every religious-liberty case today, and the many to come – because these cases all amount to a battle over one question only, which is the sexual revolution and the silencing of its critics.

How wonderful that the Church has stood on the right side of this fight unflinchingly, and for so long. What a tragedy it would be for the entire world if at this very moment, Catholics themselves were somehow not to understand that vindication of longstanding teaching. So let us do everything in our power to tell those truths for the sake of restoring at least some of what’s been lost. Let us celebrate in the right way, and with gratitude, the Church that has done more than any force on earth to protect and defend the structure in which human beings thrive earliest and most: the family.

# Standing firm against identity politics

In conversation with Peter Kurti  
24 October 2022



**Our subject tonight is the red-hot subject of identity politics. A lot has been said about identity politics in recent years, from all political directions. On any given day, news stories abound with references to newly formed political groupings based not on traditional ideas of compromise and give-and-take, but instead on absolutist insistence. We are informed that characteristics like race and gender and ethnicity now countermand longstanding norms of justice, and trump ordinary politics. In the United States, several such factions are constant staples of the news: Black Lives Matter, white nationalist groups, the many satellites orbiting the universe of LGBT, and other camps, left and right and otherwise, all differ in their worldviews and their goals.**

To list these together is not to suggest moral equivalence. It is instead to observe that diverse as their political goals may be, all these groups share two features. One, expressed nonstop wherever videos and microphones are found, is rage against real or imagined injustice. The other is the notion that the ends they seek cannot be achieved through conventional means in our self-governing societies.

Many people have asked what this new kind of politics is *doing* to us as a country. Tonight, I would like to focus on a different question, which is what the nonstop obsession with identity is *telling* us – about ourselves, our society, and the social changes beneath the news cycle that have led the West to this divisive place.

In the first part of what follows, we'll examine the rise of identity politics. In the second, I'll propose a theory about how that rise came to be.

Begin with the widest aperture. The search for self, the need to know *who we are*, is a universal question. It animates many of the greatest works of art and literature in the human patrimony. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is famously centered on that very

question. So is classical drama surviving from ancient Greece, especially the Oedipus cycle. The entire country of Australia, like that of the United States, looks to be an enormous petri dish for the study of how people identify themselves within a multi-ethnic society, comprised in part of a majority who came to it from elsewhere.

The point, at least on the surface, is simple. Every culture and every individual, from time immemorial, tries to answer that question, *Who am I?* And today, not only in the United States but across the Western world, many people are finding that question harder to answer than ever before.

That is what the clamour of identity is all about. That is what we are here to understand.

In one sense, of course, questions of political identity are eternal. Fluctuation in political identity is an enduring fact of life – especially in a free country where citizens can and do change their minds and votes. You might vote Labor today and Green tomorrow, or vice versa. You might be a single-issue voter on the issue of climate change one moment, then change your mind and decide that some other issue, like inflation, will decide your vote. Again, *these* kinds of alterations of political identity are nothing unusual. They are healthy signs of a free society at work.

In the same way, political identities derived from loyalties to ethnic or other groups of heritage are also familiar to societies of the West. Group loyalties based on bonds to those who came before us are essential to free societies – especially this greatest melting pot on earth, founded on immigration from all over.

But “identity politics” is a radically different phenomenon from traditional approaches to self-governance. To see why, a bit of history is in order.

That very phrase, “identity politics,” is relatively new. It first appeared in 1977 in a manifesto published by a feminist group called the Combahee River Collective. In that

document, the idea that political identity is based on victimization appears in full for the first time. The authors made several declarations that charted a radical new course for American politics. They declared that they were giving up on making common cause with men. They ruled the conventional family and the conventional community out of bounds. They said, in effect, that the only people they could trust were people just like them, victims who shared the same oppression.

There is a straight line from that manifesto of 1977, say, and the Black Lives Matter rhetoric of today. That movement also stands against the conventional family. It also declares peaceful coexistence with the wider community to be somehow unwanted, even impossible. And like all other identitarian groups, again, left or right, its rhetoric abounds with anger at the world's injustices while running short on practical remedies or policies.

The same is true of identity groups based on features other than race or ethnicity. The political wing of what is called the "LGBTQ community" is just as absolutist, and just as hostile to traditional ideas of tolerance as other identitarian groups. It is also just as insistent on dividing the known political universe into two simple groups: allies and enemies.

This is the first point to note about identity politics: it is born out of loss. Identity politics says, in effect, that the most important thing about an individual is not individual heritage. It is not achievement or good conduct or religious faith. It is instead that person's status as a victim. This claim to victim status can take different forms. Some groups claim to be victims of the so-called patriarchy. Others say they are victims of racial or cultural bias. Still others claim that the very categories of "male and female," "man and woman," amount to attempts to oppress them.

These groups all share three other features as well. One is the insistence that any given faction cannot be properly understood except by people within it. Another is an implied claim that victim status is the new divining rod for truth – not reason or knowledge or empathy or civics. Third and perhaps most important, these groups command and receive absolute loyalty from their members – the kind of unthinking, primal loyalty formerly associated with family. This is a point to which we will return.

What does the proliferation of these groups tell us? My thesis, developed in the book, *Primal Screams*, is that today's people, especially today's young people, have been deprived by radical social changes of the usual ways of constructing personal identity. For that reason, they struggle as most of our ancestors did not for answers to that question, *Who am I?*

Sometimes that deprivation has been accidental: the consequence of deep social trends rocking all of society since the 1960s. Sometimes deprivation has been done on purpose. A host of radical thinkers throughout the last hundred years, especially, have thought that radical changes would be beneficial, the consequences to ordinary people be damned. Feminist Betty Friedan declared the natural family to be akin to a concentration camp. Progressives across the West today compare churches and homeschooling to child abuse.

The point is that many forces have gone into the atomization we see today, some of them defending this indiscriminate de-institutionalization tout court. If we want to understand why our societies seem so fractured and split into factions these days, understanding that many influential thinkers have willed it to be so is a good start.

Let us zero in on the two most important such changes of the past half-century or so in which identity politics was born: changes to the family; and changes to the churches.

First, the family. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, human expectations remained largely the same throughout the ages: that one would grow up to have children and a family; that parents and siblings and extended family would remain one's primal community; and that, conversely, it was a tragedy not to be part of a family. For many in the West today, these facts of life still hold. But it has to be emphasized that for many others, family ties have weakened as never before in history.

Why? In three words, the sexual revolution. The mass adoption of contraception, beginning with the technological shock of the birth control pill, would go on to have massive and compounding social consequences. It has erased the given-ness into which generations are born. The sexual revolution turned behaviors that had once been rare into ordinary facts of life for many millions.

To observe this is not to point fingers or engage in a blame game. It's instead to make a point about arithmetic. Abortion, fatherlessness, divorce, single parenthood, childlessness, the shrinking family, the shrinking extended family: Every one of these post-Pill developments has the effect of reducing the number of people whom we can call our own. Every one of them is an act of human subtraction. And every one of these trends, once rare or unusual, have increasingly become the norm since the 1960s. In fact, in a few decades there won't be anyone alive who does remember life before the sexual revolution re-configured the world in this way – which makes it all the more important, arguably, that we try to understand its transformative power here and now.

To say that these changes have radically changed lives is not to say that about everyone equally. But we share a collective environment. Just as a factory dumping toxins into a lake will affect some fish more than others, for reasons unknown.

Considered together, these acts of human subtraction amount to a massive disturbance to the human ecosystem.

Family reality for many of today's Western people can be summarized in one word: *fewer*. Fewer brothers, sisters, cousins, children, grandchildren. Fewer people to play ball with, or talk to, or learn from. These have been massive and mostly under-attended transformations in the way that human beings live – not only in the United States, but almost everywhere in the world. And these acts of subtraction can be found at every stage of life. Fewer people to celebrate a given birth; fewer people to visit one's deathbed.

And, of course, fewer people with whom to mark these great events, including in the other foremost institution in which humanity from time immemorial has participated: religion. This brings us to the second most transformative change since the 1960s: the decline of Christianity in significant parts of the Western world. This, too, has been a great and parallel exercise in human subtraction.

Around ten years ago, I wrote a book called *How the West Really Lost God* to try and understand how that great splintering occurred. Tonight, let's consider just a few statistics. In 2021, just under 44 percent of Australians called themselves "Christian" in the census. Fifty years ago, in 1971, fully 86 percent still called themselves Christians. From 86 percent in 1971 to just under 44 percent today: In effect, the percentage of the Australian population calling itself "Christian" has been cut in half in fifty years.

Australia is not alone. Every society in the West exhibits the same growing indifference to organized religion. In the United States, as in Australia, the category "no religion" is the fastest-growing subset of all. Much of the same pattern can be found across Western Europe. According to the 2021 Census in what was once called Catholic Spain, just under 13 percent of those surveyed reported attending services "almost once a week." As

for the United Kingdom, though the number of people calling themselves “Christian” still hovered around 51 percent as of 2019, only 27 percent of Britons report that they actually believe in “a god.”

Why does the decline of churchgoing and religious belief matter to the question of identity? As it turns out, it could matter quite a lot.

First, religion hands believers a profound way of answering the question *Who am I?* It is, *I am first and foremost a child of God.* That’s the Christian answer to the question of my identity – that it is not about my sex, or my skin color, but about my relationship to my Creator and cosmos. For Christians and people of other faiths, of course, this way of understanding one’s primordial relationship to others remains. But with the rise in unbelief across Western societies, many people can no longer answer the question “*Who am I?*” by reference to a transcendental realm. Many have no idea there even is such an answer. And so one more way of constructing identity has been taken off the table.

The simultaneous decline of faith and church matters to identity for another reason.

Not only does religion confer an abstract understanding of identity. It also delivers real-life communities made of real-live people – people who worship together, mourn together, sing together, work in soup kitchens together, visit hospitals together, and the rest of the program.

The point here is splitting the human atom into recreation and procreation has produced a people deficit. Simultaneously, splitting the temporal world off from the eternal world has produced souls with nowhere to go. And both collapses have also left us with fewer trusted people from whom to learn.

This is a critical fact about society in the West that is not well understood, I think, and needs to be. We human beings, like other animals, learn from those around us. And like other animals, when we are deprived of our fellow

creatures, we learn less. It is no wonder there are whole new forms of confusion in our time, including even over elemental questions like male and female. The sexual revolution has subtracted the number of role models who are immediately available, and trusted, and who could help to form an answer. Simultaneously, the unchurched revolution removed the building blocks of community from many lives – building blocks of things like cooperation, empathy, common cause, and rules to live by.

The point is that today’s identity crisis has deep but treatable roots. But they cannot be ameliorated without recognizing their source, which is social and familial deprivation. The dispossessed literal and figurative children who have become the footsoldiers of identity politics may not be large in number compared to the rest of America, or Australia. But they will not go away or become productive, participatory citizens until the crisis that has unhinged them, and severed them from their own, is somehow addressed. And addressing it requires first understanding it, which is what we’re trying to do tonight.

# What are the roots of today's political rage?

Address at Parliament House, Canberra  
24 October 2022



**We are here today to look beneath the surface of the unending news cycle, and to discern instead the roots of today's remarkable political rage. Let us open with three brief snapshots.**

On January 6, 2020, as anyone with an internet connection now knows, a mob bristling with weapons and flags and survivor gear broke into the United States Capitol. Much has been written and shown about that event. Punishments have been administered to transgressors under the law. More such sentences are underway. Though various groups were represented that day, the one whose symbology and slogans were most ubiquitous was an internet cult known as QAnon.

QAnon is a conspiracy theory born in cyberspace. Its signature feature is rage against what it believes to be illegitimate government authority. Without QAnon, the Capitol riot might not have happened at all. Note that QAnon is not just an American thing. According to one Canadian researcher, it can now boast cyber-followers in over 70 countries. QAnon is one new face of identity politics: an identity born in emotional fury on the internet.

Vignette 2: In the wake of the leak in May, 2022 of the Supreme Court decision in the *Dobbs* case overturning *Roe vs. Wade* and abortion on demand, unrest once more poured into the streets. Figurative violence and general furor from the pro-choice side exploded across the airwaves. In another first for America, some Supreme Court Justices found their homes picketed, their family information threatened repeatedly with online disclosure, or doxing, and even photos of one family's school shared around menacingly on social media.

This unprecedented attempt at interference with the rule of law was not just a fringe thing. Prominent political leaders – some of them lawyers! – pronounced the result of the *Dobbs* case “unacceptable,” “dangerous,” “a tragic error.” Some suggested, literally,

that the decision shall not stand. This rhetorical undermining of the rule of law was accompanied by a massive outpouring online and elsewhere of irrationalism and rage – against the Court, against the so-called patriarchy, against anyone at all who demurs from the taking of unborn life at any stage and for any reason.

Vignette 3: in summer of 2020, following the death of a man named George Floyd at the hands of police officers, unrest once again poured into American streets, this time on an unprecedented scale and marked by signature fury. Of some 10,000 incidents that summer, according to the first thorough non-partisan analysis, 500 or so turned violent. Though an outcry against police brutality began these protests, many quickly morphed into something else captured on innumerable videos: lusty screaming, enthusiastic looting, violence, and mayhem – anger unbound.

All three of these vignettes, and others appearing in recent headlines, would have been unthinkable not that long ago. Though hailing from different parts of the political spectrum, they share several features in common. They are all the products of identity politics – a notion of politics which claims that moral authority lies in victimhood, and thereby trumps the supposedly spurious authority of the law.

These identitarian groups share other characteristics as well. Whether based in feminism, gender, ethnicity, survivalism, or other coordinates, group identity in each case is protected and enforced by punitive reprisals, especially on social media. These groups are also seized upon by emotionally vulnerable populations, as many biographical accounts of the Capitol rioters and BLM supporters alike have made clear. They are both fueled by, and fuel, family disruption. All share other common denominators: family strife induced by fidelity to the identity group that has replaced the family; the notion that “reality” is somehow different than one was ever told; the suspension of ordinary reason for the sake of belonging;

and, always, slavish attachment to the internet.

Those of you who are lawmakers, especially, must have wondered over this transformation, including in Australia. How have so many areas of Western politics come to be transformed from ordinary wheeling and dealing to absolutist insistence on grievance and victimhood? What are its real roots? Here is a theory.

As the vignettes with which I opened suggest, and as many other examples could too, not only the United States but the entire Western world is in the throes of an identity crisis. Many children of the contemporary Western world, including adult children, are triply disenfranchised. Thanks to decades of trends that have acted as battering rams on hearth and home, they are estranged from or only tentatively connected to their families. They are estranged from or only tentatively connected to their countries; in a turn that I have seen no one anywhere explain satisfactorily, patriotism continues to fall among the young not only in the United States across the West. And they are estranged from or only tentatively connected to their churches, an institution of which many are now as unknowing as they are, say, of Greek mythology or Robert's Rules of Order.

What is different about our time, as opposed to fifty years ago, is that today these individuals have achieved a new critical mass – a critical mass evident in their influence in today's politics. They have found their fellow raging sufferers and formed online and other substitute families; and they have burst as a destructive force onto the national consciousness *en masse*, left and right, as never before.

In sum, a void has formed that has never existed before. Into it, identity politics speaks a seductive language of everything many Western citizens are now missing: community, family, belonging. That is the real origin of today's identity politics. These

groups spring from different longings – some based on ethnicity, others on erotic attachments, still others on boutique politics of postmodernism. But all share something essential: they operate as figurative families and communities in an era when actual families and communities are in disarray and decline.

Now, especially since we are under the aegis here of St Thomas More, let us take up the question of part two. How are Christians, in particular, to respond to this relatively new phenomenon? What, in light of Christian teaching, should the believers among us bring to this broken world where so many struggle to find an answer to such basic questions? Following are a few suggested lines of thought.

The first is understanding one fundamental fact. The view of humanity embedded in identity politics is diametrically opposed to that of Christianity. Identity politics divides the world into oppressors and oppressed. It demands giving up on the people who are not like us. Christianity from its very inception demands the opposite. Some of the best-known parables in the Gospels concern exactly this open and loving approach to the world, which was, and remains, new and radical by any standard of history. The Good Samaritan is good for this exact reason: because he rescues someone from a group opposed to his own. Christians are commanded not only to love, but to love those who are *not* our own, *not* like ourselves. The founding notion of identity politics, to regroup according to victim status and abandon relationships with others, is incompatible with a Christian approach to the question of who people are and what people ought to do in the world.

Identity politics is also inimical to Christian teaching in another way. In a world ruled by identity politics, there is no redemption. This is why politics so often feels unbearable these days. Identity politics does not leave anyone a way out. Every person is cast either as oppressed, or as oppressor. And

for oppressors, there is no escape from this earthly damnation.

This is the deeper meaning of that phrase, “structural racism.” Of course racism exists. To Christians, racism is a sin. But that sin is not the same as insisting on the false idea that racism remains embedded in society through and through, no matter what. Many of us resist this condemnation. We are right to. We hope others will join us.

Like many Americans, I hail from ancestors who were immigrants. None of them were even in the United States until long after the Civil War had ended. Many Americans, like many Australians, are bewildered to hear that they are part of a malignant oppressive force, including because our ancestral histories confute that charge. Yet even this sort of objection does not spare anyone the charge of “structural racism.” If everyone in the supposed oppressor class were to give all that they had to those who locate themselves in the oppressed class, those in the oppressor class *still* could not be exonerated. They would remain forever damned as “structural racists,” wandering eternally in some circle of social hell, like Paola and Francesca in Dante’s *Inferno*. And again, many people sense intuitively that cancel culture is just wrong.

Here, too, the Gospels indicate just how distant this view of humanity is from that of Jesus. Repeatedly, men and women in parables and elsewhere are saved, or at least offered a shot at salvation, despite having transgressed deeply. The prodigal son and the woman caught in adultery are both offered a second chance, even though both violated bedrock teachings of Judaism and Christianity.

There are other examples of the clash between seeing ourselves as embattled victims at war with one another, or seeing ourselves instead as Christians, first. In a time when anti-religious prejudice is on the rise across the West, we can no longer assume that others in society understand

that distinction. So it falls to us, including us gathered today, to calmly but without fear clarify what the Church actually teaches.

Again, the fact that a secularizing culture is increasingly unknowing of these basic facts puts the burden on the rest of us. There’s loose talk today across the West suggesting that Christians are racists. There’s plenty of talk about Christians being bigots. Others charge that the churches are biased and authoritarian and anti-woman.

There has been little pushback from Christians on these toxic stereotypes – and there needs to be. The truth is that according to the Church, hatred of other people for their inherited characteristics, or indeed for any reason at all, is a sin. The truth is that Christianity includes members of all shades and voices. One of the most vibrant Christian territories on the planet today is tradition-minded, sub-Saharan Africa. Tradition-minded Christians around the world look to a new generation of tradition-minded African prelates for leadership and hope for the future. What kind of racism does that?

When beliefs on points like these are challenged, believers should not stand down. Some may get fired for not caving. But not every Christian in our countries can be fired. And the only alternative to standing up is standing down – caving and being fired anyway.

Here are more points worth airing rather than hiding. Religious history is long and tarnished with transgressions. But it is also the engine of the best and most profound transformations of Western history. Abolitionism, the movement to abolish slavery, was born in the churches, most notably those of England, New England and upstate New York. Catholic and other clergy were on the front lines of the American civil rights movement. Generations of poor children in the inner city have been lifted into a better life thanks to education in Catholic schools. Martin Luther King Jr, cannot be understood apart from his magnificent

role in exactly this tradition of American religiosity.

Or consider the point another way. White nationalism, like other movements founded on racialism, is an enemy of the Church. Certainly, white nationalists in the United States know this. Their movement is as pro-abortion as any contemporary so-called feminist. It despises Christianity as weak – as did Nazism. We should remember that the next time someone calls the Church “racist.” Up to and including today, it is the churches that have been the go-to of first resort for American blacks, Hispanics, and other minority groups whose deepest needs can never really be met by politics of any kind, let alone the divisive politics of today.

Another sort of take-home from today’s discussion is less abstract, and more immediate. It is the question of how we people of today, are to live in a world marred by unquie political and social divisiveness.

Recall the earlier observations about the simultaneous declines of family and religious faith, and the effect that this kind of weakening has had on people’s sense of self. If the analysis is correct, then some of the West’s most fundamental problems today are springing from an emotional sinkhole, a place of profound loneliness and disconnection. As attachments to family and religion have weakened, and substitutes have come to be sought online and in the streets, real-life connections have become rarer than before.

Economists say that when a commodity has become rare, that means it is more valuable than ever. The same is true of real-life human relationships. Many young people today postpone marriage. Many postpone having families. The wider, secular culture tells them these acts of human disengagement are good ideas. Some even counsel that for the sake of the planet itself, humanity should not reproduce itself.

If the analysis proposed here is correct in any measure, exactly the opposite is true – and it is commensurately important to impress some corollary truths on everyone in our orbits who will listen to us. Marriage is good. Earlier marriage should enjoy a comeback. Children are not only good, but grand. They are nature’s own insurance policy against the loneliness and anomie that is diminishing the lives of many fellow citizens. And for those involved in policy, nothing would seem more important these days than devising incentives to encourage family formation and child-bearing, including experiments against which citizens who are secularist-first will object. But incentivizing marriage and children is the only way out of a society that is racked by the ever-growing absence of the same.

The point is simple. Subtracting people from individual lives and communities has exacted social and personal costs that Western influencers and authorities are only beginning to understand. And the most efficient way to *avoid* those costs is to build up the communities of which one is already a part – the families into which we are born, the families we create, the associations like those present today that offer everything our atomized fellows now need, and lack: community, trust, bonds based not on rage and loss, but on common cause and reason.

Bereft and atomized people wander among us, primed for loyalty and fanatical attachment to *something*. Reading through accounts of QAnon believers is no different than reading through accounts of people caught up in other forms of identity politics. They are sending up a collective howl for a social order that more and more of them have never seen. It falls to us who are not atomized, who are armed with remedial and radical teachings of two thousand years’ standing – to point the way toward the place they, like their fellow human beings, are really seeking.

# Understanding secularization in the census

Greg Craven Lecture on Ethics and Politics  
26 October 2022



**Our subject tonight sounds highly particular: understanding the statistics on belief and unbelief in the latest Australian census. In fact, it is anything but parochial. These up-to-date numbers offer a window through which to view nothing less than one of the greatest social experiments in recorded history.**

That experiment has been ongoing in the Western tradition under different guises for centuries now. It is known to some as Matthew Arnold's "low, receding roar" of religious faith. To others, it is the process of what is called "secularization," or the ceding to non-religious authorities of territories once considered God's, and God's alone. At its most sweeping, this experiment amounts to doing what human beings before us have not done, which is to live as purely material beings, without referent to a transcendent realm. Even more specifically, this experiment means that many live today as if Christianity does not matter in societies whose laws and customs have been rooted in Christianity for many centuries. For our purposes, we shall use the language tonight of sociology, and speak simply of "secularization."

Last week, on one of the plane rides that brought us from the U.S. to Sydney, I happened to read a short book published in 1983 called "Can God Survive in Australia?," by the late Anglican bishop Bruce Wilson. As the title suggests, the trends that are preoccupying many believers in 2022 were already visible nearly four decades ago. Bishop Wilson assembled data on various fronts, especially from the 1950s through the 1970s, on subjects such as infant baptism, attendance at Sunday Schools, professions of belief, attendance at religious services, and so on. Invariably, all were diminishing over time. As he also notes repeatedly, something about the mid-1960s, in particular, seemed to have accelerated the process. This critical point, about which Bishop Wilson's book amounts to a harbinger, will be revisited in more detail further on.

I mention it now just to say that the fact of Western religious decline is far from new. Even so, judging by the 2021 Australian census, secularization is now galloping at a pace that even the most prescient observers might not have foreseen. In 2021, just under 44 percent of Australians called themselves "Christian" in the census. Only 20 years earlier, in 2001, 68 percent did so. Twenty years before that, in 1981, 74 percent of those surveyed described themselves the same. And fifty years ago, in 1971, fully 86 percent still called themselves Christians. From 86 percent in 1971 to just under 44 percent today: In effect, the percentage of the Australian population calling itself "Christian" has been cut in half in fifty years.

Australia is hardly alone. To the contrary, every society in the West exhibits the same growing indifference to organized religion. In the United States, founded in large part by Protestant religious refugees, some 63 percent of the population now calls itself Christian; forecasters expect that number to fall below 50 percent in a few more decades. There, as in Australia, the category "no religion" is the fastest-growing subset of all. Much the same pattern can be found across Western Europe. According to the 2021 Census in what was once called "Catholic Spain, just under 13 percent of those surveyed reported attending services "almost once a week." As for the United Kingdom, though the number of people calling themselves "Christian" still hovered around 51 percent as of 2019, only 27 percent of Britons report that they actually believe in "a god." This litany could continue; the data abound. But one does not have to be a statistician to realize that quite beyond numerical measurement, other signs also suggest that the Christianity, once the cornerstone of these same societies, has now become a monument in the Western public square perpetually open to defacing and attack. The virulence of the new atheism that rode the bestseller lists in the first decade of the twenty-first century was one barometer of that transformation.

Another is the stark rise in religious liberty cases. Yet another is the fact that the common language of Christianity, and even glancing acquaintance with its rituals and stories, is receding among the increasingly atomized and disconnected Western young.

This list, too, could go on. But let us cut instead to the question raised by these trends: What has happened here? How have societies that once feared God now come to jeer God? What is causing secularization?

Like others, I have found in that question a central preoccupation not only of this moment in history, but of my own work. One result was a book published around ten years ago called *How the West Really Lost God*. That book proposes an answer to that question that runs counter to the standard answers proposed so far. Tonight, I would like to revisit its thesis, including with new evidence from Australia and elsewhere. The analysis to follow falls into three parts.

The first will explain the alternative theory of secularization delivered in *How the West Really Lost God*. The second part will examine three contributing forces to secularization that have become even more apparent since the book was written, and that bear heightened scrutiny. In closing, we will consider some hopeful news. If this analysis is correct, then despite the fact that so much ails the West today, one big and perhaps unexpected finding looks to be right: the so-called “inevitability thesis” of religious decline is wrong. The idea that the epitaph has been written for religiosity in the West is wrong. And to believers looking for a way out of what seems to be a permanent spiral of decline, the news that this spiral is *not* necessarily permanent should be welcome and encouraging, as I hope we see further on.

But first, back to that opening question: what causes secularization?

This is, on the surface, a simple inquiry. It is only three words long. It seems as if the all the towering apparatus of modern sociology,

with its metrics and spreadsheets and innumerable data, ought to be able to answer it handily. And yet, at the same time, “What causes secularization?” is also a subversive question. It turns the conceptual tables on the long-running Western conversation about Christianity upside down. Ever since the Enlightenment, sophisticated thinkers have held that religious belief is the outlier, the weird thing, the artifact that needs to be “explained.” Our question tonight – “What causes *secularization*?” repudiates that framing.

And with historical justice: evidence from all over shows that humanity, generally speaking, is theo-tropic. People across cultures lean toward God. As Archbishop Anthony Fisher observed in his 2022 Erasmus Lecture, “secularizing societies are, if anything, bucking against the world trend. While about 1-in-6 of the world’s people now has no religious affiliation, it is projected that by 2060 that will have shrunk to 1-in-8. Without being smug about it, atheism is in much graver danger of extinction than theism.” Humanity across languages and time bends toward belief in transcendence, some understanding that the material reality is not the totality of reality itself. What makes Western men and women so different from all those who came before?

*How the West Really Lost God* approaches this question, first, by inspecting the prevailing theories of secularization, and finding them insufficient. In other words, to understand secularization, one must first understand what has *not* happened here.

Begin with what is probably the most common theory for why people stop going to church. Many people, scholarly and non-scholarly alike, held to one or another version of what might be called the dominant theory of religious decline – that material prosperity drives out God. Many have come to believe that religion is Marx’s famous “opiate of the masses” – a consolation prize for the poor and backward.

If this conventional account of secularization were sound, then one would reasonably expect that the poorer and less educated people are, the *more* religious they would be.

But the fact is that these stereotypes are *not* correct. One can find too many cases in which the opposite correlations obtain. Consider just three, in passing.

One is the record on religiosity in London between the 1870s and 1914. In a book called *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City*, British historian Hugh McLeod documents that among Anglicans in London during that period, “the number of ... worshippers rises at first gradually and then steeply with each step up the social ladder.” The poorest districts tended to have the lowest rates of [Church] attendance, and those with large upper-middle-class and upper-class populations had the highest. In *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800-2000*, British historian Callum G. Brown makes the same point about religiosity in the U.K. during those years: contrary to stereotype, “the working class were irreligious, and that the middle classes were the churchgoing bastions of civil morality.”

The same pattern describes the United States today. In a book called *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, sociologists Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell offer more statistical evidence. Even during the 1960s, as overall decline began to accelerate, those at the upper end of the social-economic ladder led those on the lower in church attendance. As the authors observe, “this trend is clearly contrary to any idea that religion is nowadays providing solace to the disinherited and dispossessed, or that higher education subverts religion.” To name one more example, the same trend is well documented among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons: religious participation *increases* as income and education go up.

The point of this statistical excursion is not to invent a neo-Calvinist stereotype connecting

earthly success to divine favor. It is rather to observe that intuition alone is an unreliable guide to charting the course of secularization. As the counterfactuals show, prosperity and education alone do not necessarily drive out God. As a footnote, this same perhaps unexpected fact was noted by Reverend Bruce, in describing the Australian scene of the 1980s. He observed the same: that “the more educated [Australians] had a higher rate of church attendance than the less educated.”

If material prosperity does not drive people away from church, as is commonly supposed, what does? *How the West Really Lost God* takes up several other dominant lines of thought and found these, too, limited in their explanatory power. Yes, as some have observed, the horrendous effects of the two world wars of the twentieth century caused many across the world to question religious faith. Yes, to point back earlier in time, industrialization and then mass mobility have loosened the ties to religious institutions in which faith is practiced and transmitted. Yes, in spades, the clerical sex scandals of the 2000s and beyond gave disgusted observers who were already on the fence a rationalization for leaving Christianity behind for good.

But neither these nor other thoroughgoing theories explain the dramatic fact agreed to by almost all analysts of Western religious decline, one that obviously demands explanation: *something* happened in the early to mid-1960s that accelerated secularization as no other force in time. Except for the few thinkers who believe religious decline is not happening, every other researcher staring at this puzzle, including those names already mentioned tonight, sees the same fact: belief and practice across the West enter steep decline between 1963 and 1966. Why?

The argument of *How the West Really Lost God* is that the standard accounts of secularization have missed something crucial. That is the symbiotic, irreducible relationship between the vibrancy of the churches on the one hand, and the vibrancy of the family

on the other. What is commonly supposed is that people who are religious are more likely to have families, and large families, because religion tells them to do so. *How the West Really Lost God* turns that supposition upside down. It argues, and I believe proves, that something about living in families, and participating in the signature events of families – birth, death, and self-sacrifice among them – is a big part of what drives people to church. In sum, the book argues, the social atomization and family implosion that followed the widespread adoption of the birth control pill have not been neutral forces for the churches. They have instead become the engines of secularization in our time.

To put the point another way, one that should give heart to the believers among us: Western Christianity is in decline for reasons that have nothing whatsoever to do with the truth-value of religious belief. It's not prosperity that makes God harder to see. It's the increasing absence of familial figures who serve to sharpen the human vision of the divine.

As a matter of anecdote, many people report that they are never closer to belief than they are a delivery room, or at a deathbed. History affirms that there is more than anecdote at work here. To study timelines is to see that religious vibrancy and family vibrancy go hand in hand. Conversely, so do religious decline and family decline: where you see one, expect the other.

Plainly, something about living in families increases the likelihood that people will go to church and believe in God. In fact, there is more than one such "something." First, family life encourages religious life because mothers and fathers will seek out a like-minded moral community in which to situate their children. Childrearing is hard work, and the enormity of the undertaking weighs heavily on most parents.<sup>1</sup> In this prosaic way, the creation of a family literally drives some people to church. Conversely, *not* living in a family removes the

strongest possible incentive people have for searching out a transcendental framework to explain the elemental forces of family life: birth, death, sacrificial love. How can we expect today's post-revolutionary young to take up church, when many, on account of shrinking and absent families, will reach middle age without ever having held a baby, or cared for an elderly relative, or attended a funeral?

\*

The statistical record of the past decade bears the thesis out. Given the continuing upheaval of the family, and the move to postpone creating families of one's own, *How the West Really Lost God* would have predicted more "none of the aboves," not fewer. And that's what we have. Let us now move on to part two of this discussion, considering certain forces propelling secularization that have come into sharper view.

One highly significant social fact that bears on the question of secularization has gone almost entirely unnoticed. That is the relationship between the well-documented decline in Western churchgoing, especially among Millennials, and the simultaneous rise of a toxic public force on campuses across the Western world known as cancel culture, or what I earlier dubbed "the new intolerance."

Here, again, sociological attention to this aspect of secularization is overdue. The connection between the rise in unbelief among twenty-somethings and the rise of punitive anti-Christian social codes is obviously more than a coincidence. It is well known, and well documented by social science, that many students, not only in America but all over, lose their religion in college.

An atheist or other nonbeliever might propose that this happens because college is where students learn higher reasoning, and higher reasoning drives out the superstition of faith. That kind of answer might seem to

<sup>1</sup> A Baptist minister and radio host once told me that almost every new person who enters his congregation is a mum or dad with a baby in arms.

make perfect sense – except that it’s refuted by the facts. In fact, as established already, better-educated people are actually more likely than those with less education to be found in church.

No, something else is going on in the numbers about faith and people in their teens and twenties. The more likely dynamic is that thanks to the new intolerance, the social and other costs of being a known believer in the public square mount by the year – and students take note. Intimidation in higher education, multiplied over many years and campuses, is an unseen engine of secularization. The new intolerance gives intimidated people, including those raised in a faith, one more reason not to go to church. From New York to Paris to Sydney to Buenos Aires, it already is doing just that.

What is to be done about this novel problem of social intimidation on elite campuses? A friend and colleague, R.R. Reno, editor of the magazine *First Things*, recently offered a tough response. He said that his magazine will no longer hire applicants from exactly those institutions. He explained his reasoning in the *Wall Street Journal*, worth quoting here: “The atmosphere of intimidation in elite higher education is intense... I don’t want to hire a person well-practiced in remaining silent when it costs something to speak up. [T]oday’s elite students aren’t going to schools led by courageous adults. Deprived of good role models, they’re less likely to mature into good leaders themselves.”

His is a radical approach. But it is one worth entertaining at a time when the social costs for religious belief are rising, and when some students faced with hostility abandon their faith not because they have thought through all the problems of the theology, but simply because they are scared. In essence, Rusty Reno suggests altering the incentives system that drives promising students to choose elite and godless institutions over others. This is a modest but good start toward the kind of

thinking the churches need more of.

Second, secularization continues to be driven by the fact that people are marrying later and having children later, if they have children at all. In *How the West Really Lost God*, this fact was noted. It bears emphasizing again here as these trends appear even more entrenched than before. The median age of marriage in the United States continues to rise. By 2022, it is over 28 years of age for women, and for men, it is over 30 years for the first time.

This, too, interferes with the possibility of hearing the sacred. From time immemorial, mothers and fathers have regarded the creation of new life as the zenith of their own lives as human beings. The human patrimony reflects this primordial fact in all eras and incarnations; the Western canon perhaps exceptionally; from Greek tragedy to Shakespeare to Tolstoy and everywhere in between, this civilization’s art and literature are unthinkable apart from the elemental ties of family and children. But beginning with urbanization, and especially since the near-ubiquitous adoption of contraception across Western societies, the very idea of children has been slowly but radically transformed. Yesterday’s blessing has become today’s optional burden.

This non-participation in Creation undermines attachment to Christianity in more ways than one. Simultaneously, the broken situation from which many among us hail creates a resentment among some for what has been lost. Today’s “nones” may thumb their noses at the churches – even as the same churches teach the beauty of intact families, which many of these same people have not known and from which they would have benefited.

A third force behind secularization remains as unavoidable as it was ten years ago, and looms even more largely. Christian teaching is on a permanent collision course with the sexual revolution. In effect, the West is running the experiment run in evangelized ancient Rome – only in reverse. Then,

Christianity spread with extraordinary speed. Now, re-paganization is doing the same.

The non-marital lives made possible by today's technologies are drawing consumer-minded people out of the Church, and into the re-paganizing culture. Consider a bit of statistical proof. In 2021, when polled about why they were leaving Catholicism, Statistica Research Department found that 64 percent of Italian respondents said that they disagreed with the Church's position on "social issues." Which "issues" are most likely objects of dispute? Feeding the hungry? Caring for the poor, or the rest of the social justice agenda to which Christians are ordered? Of course not. Here as elsewhere, "social issues" equals one cause only: sexual expression unimpeded by a disapproving religious authority.

We need to understand that fundamental point. It has both negative and positive implications. On the negative side, it means that the Church faces an uphill climb of a kind that did not exist before the 1960s. The promise of sex without consequences – the promise of the Pill & Co. – may be the strongest collective temptation humanity has ever faced. And there is no end of the clever forms of self-delusion that men and women will indulge in to convince themselves that the post-revolutionary order is the only order. They will be aided in that effort by some within clerical ranks, who long for the so-called culture wars to be over, who are tired of being told they are on the wrong side of history, who yearn like most people to be liked in all the better places.

Understandable though all the pressure for capitulation may be, it nevertheless defeats the higher purposes of redemption and salvation as well as the earthly purpose of a fruitful life. Animal science shows us that when animals are radically separated from their families, they become dysfunctional. Famous experiments on family deprivation among Rhesus monkeys proved as much. Animals that cannot bond to one another

and learn from one another as animals are made to do become confused and enraged and destructive. This is why there is rising awareness of animal welfare, all around the world: because science has demonstrated that non-human animals have fascinating and intricate societies of their own, beginning with their own familial situations.

What's needed is to apply that same insight to *Homo sapiens*. For six decades now, humanity has been running a disruptive experiment on our own kind. We have absorbed messages inimical to our well-being, such as that families are problematic and negotiable; that having offspring either does not matter, or that reproduction may even be a bad thing; that we should "choose" the people who are nearest and dearest to us – just as we can "choose" to end the lives of our fetuses, our grandparents, and others who are smaller and weaker, if that is what we "decide" under laws perpetually reinvented by the state.

These messages are not only potentially disastrous. They are disastrous in practice. Today's ongoing experiment in fractured, non-familial living has given rise to the crisis of loneliness that is omnipresent in the materially rich nations of the West. It is surely behind the heavy use of psychotropic drugs for depression, and many other ailments, that are now at record levels, especially among the young. It is responsible for increases in crime, truancy, behavioral trouble, and other consequences of homes without fathers and other protective adults. Most violent criminals come from broken homes. All social scientists, therapists, judges and lawyers know this. Many just pretend for political reasons that it does not matter.

And now for the bright side of this analysis, for there is one: It is not science that is driving people away from Church. It is not resistance to the Beatitudes. As the defeat of Communism ought to have affirmed for good, here is no such thing as History with a capital H.

To the contrary: the decline of faith, particularly Christian faith, is not foreordained. This point is not well understood, and not understood at all by people who are secularist-firsters. But it brings us to an important and, I believe, irrefutable bit of evidence against such historicism.

Far from showing a steady decline throughout the twentieth century, religiosity was on a marked upswing during the fifteen or so years following World War II. That catastrophic carnage was in fact followed by a religious boom – one that occurred not only in the United States, but across the West, very much including Australia, New Zealand, Western Europe, and other territories trending toward secularization today.

Those postwar years were such that Will Herberg, the most prominent sociologist of religion in America, could observe in his classic book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* that the village atheist was a figure of the past, and that even agnosticism seemed to be waning. That is how resurgently observant America in the 1950s had become.

This same religious boom was also pan-Western in scope. It applied to the vanquished as well as the victorious, the neutral as well as everyone else, the economically devastated as well as the prosperous. In the public realm, the rhetoric of leaders was pro-Christian in a way that today strikes us as unbelievable. Christianity's vibrancy in those years is affirmed by its commercial clout; witness the extraordinary popularity of Christian themes in mid-century Hollywood blockbusters.

This is not to say that the 1950s were a golden era. Christians do not believe in golden eras or temporal paradise. It is instead to make a point that is overlooked in the sociology of secularization: the religious boom of the immediate postwar era *in and of itself* refutes the notion that Christian decline is inevitable. Religion waxes and wanes in the world – strong one moment, weaker the next.

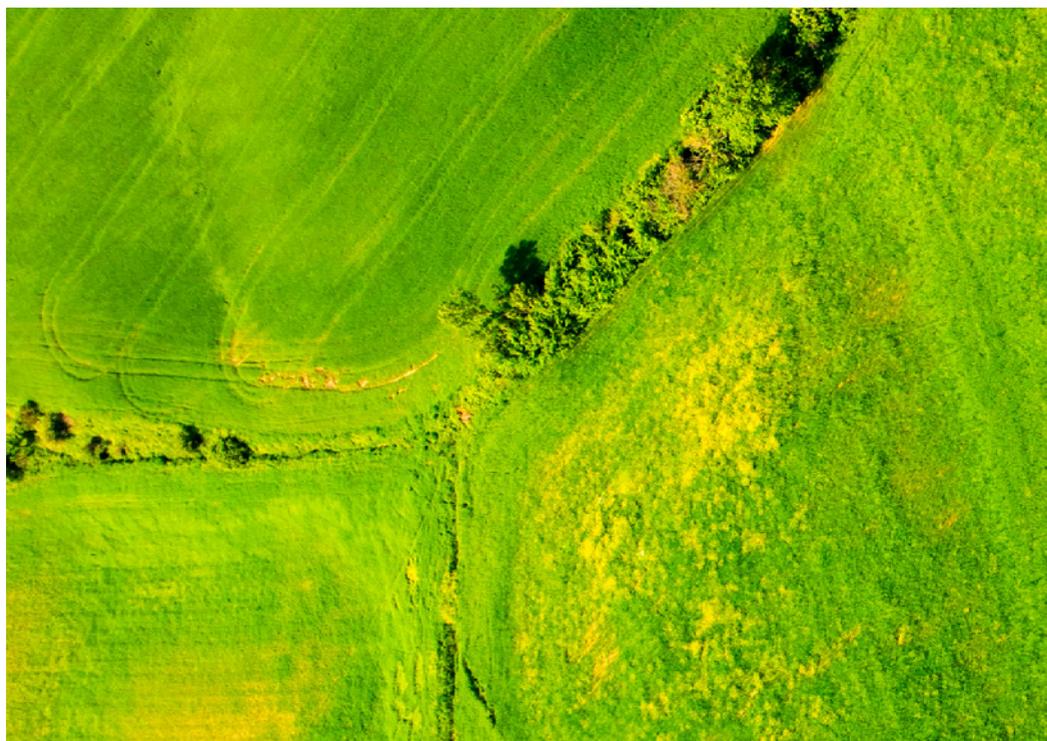
And the course of that waxing or waning depends on what marriage and family are doing at the same time.

This knowledge should not only comfort believers, but also brace them for the struggles present and to come across the West. Secularization does not only mean emptying churches. Secularization, and the forces now driving it, amount to net losses for human beings in the forms of primal and social association, deep bonds, people to live and die for, and love.

Contrary to what secularist neopaganism proclaims, we do not need fewer people in our lives, but more – more to learn from, more to love, more for whom to sacrifice. Many Western leaders think they have moved “beyond” religion. They have not. They have instead traded the faith that molded Western history for a diminished view of humanity that allows for no redemption and no escape.

Yet this same abandonment, and its fallout, also bolsters the case for faith. In a way that is not widely understood as yet, and someday will be, the political and social turmoil of Western nations today tells us something important. It amounts to implicit vindication of core teachings of Christianity. The Church teaches that the family is sacred. The dominant secular creed of our times says that it is optional at best, and a hothouse of pathologies at worst. Christianity teaches that the women are co-participants in the sacred act of creation. The secular creed says that women should put career first and marriage and motherhood second, if at all. Christianity says that we are brothers and sisters on earth with unique eternal destinies in the cosmos. Secularism says that we are random collections of molecules, to be tolerated or disposed of however the strongest in our societies see fit.

In this struggle between two visions of how to live, important new proof has now been added to the ledger. The divisiveness of our politics, the shattering of firm identities among the young, the ongoing rise in mental



trouble, drug addiction, and loneliness: these are not mere car crashes to pass by. They are signs. They amount to proof all their own that living without God is not improving Western societies. It is instead tearing some individuals apart and making many people unhappy, even as secularization robs them of the language for understanding suffering.

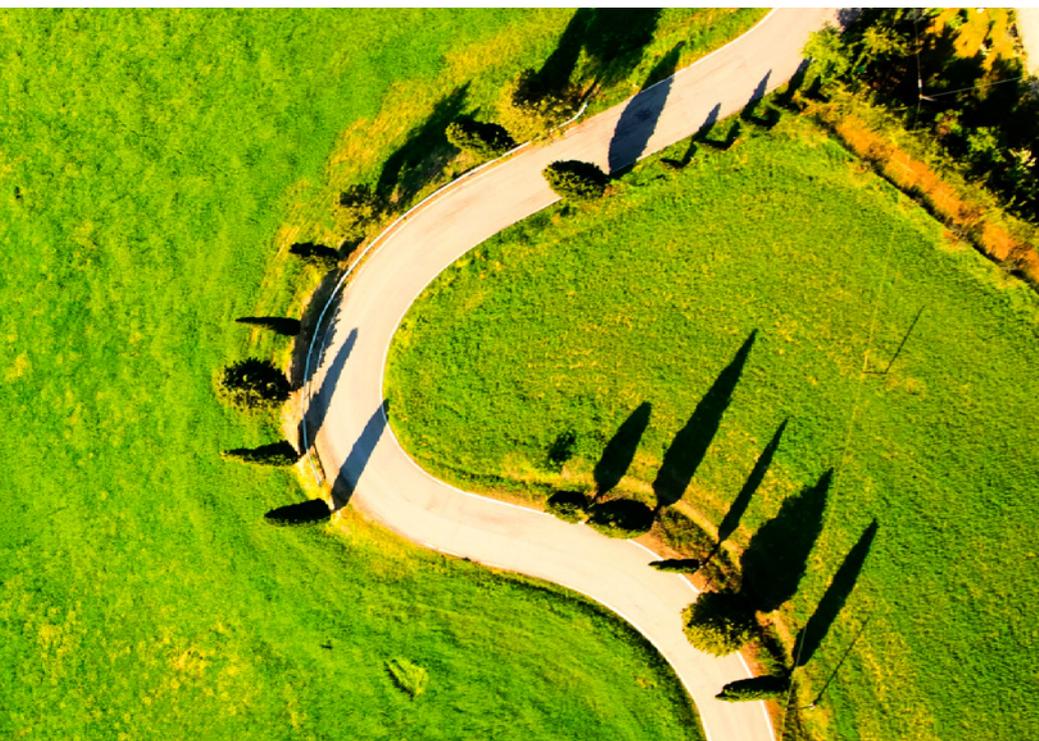
We need to honor that fact. The troubled voices of our age do not rage in vain. They bear a message, however unwittingly, for the rest of society. They are sending up primal screams for a world more ordered than many of today's people now know – including a world ordered to principles of mercy, community, and redemption.

In closing, one final thought about hope. Ever since Friedrich Nietzsche put forth the notion of “the death of God,” that metaphor has

ruled the collective Western consciousness. Many believers themselves have absorbed the historicist message that they are a dwindling minority on the wrong side. There may even be limited numerical truth in that notion.

The numbers on attendance and the rest might continue to fall as much between now and 2062 as they did between 1972 and today; recall Pope Benedict's prediction of a smaller, holier Church as one possible future.

Even so, the conclusion from this discussion of Australia's latest census numbers should give heart: nothing about modern Christian decline proves that Nietzsche got it right. The central fact witnessed in the West by more and more people, especially since the 1960s, is not the death of God. It is instead that Western humanity has grown increasingly hard of hearing. Quarantined from their own



kind by repeated acts of human subtraction, many have moved far from the accustomed audible range of the sacred.

But this isolation, pressing as it is today, need not be a permanent feature of the human condition. As the costs of atomization mount, so will wider understanding of its roots. And as has happened from the very beginning, at least some of the suffering atomized themselves will come to long for a better way. They will come to wonder whether something thought lost can still be found, after all. And like converts throughout history, some will find their way in. The job for the rest of us is to understand what really ails them, and to open the door where we can.



# PM Glynn Institute

The PM Glynn Institute was established in 2016 as a public policy institute paying careful attention to the philosophical and ethical questions in public debate. Building on the success of this work, the institute now also serves as ACU's think tank for public ethics.

## **BRIDGING DIVIDES**

The institute's focus is public policy for the common good, and its contributions to policy discussions and public debates encourage discussion across the divides of political, intellectual and religious life, to help build a good society where everyone can flourish.

## **PUBLIC POLICY**

The institute has produced recommendations on policy issues such as protecting religious freedom, the provision of palliative care, constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the role of schools in fostering social cohesion.

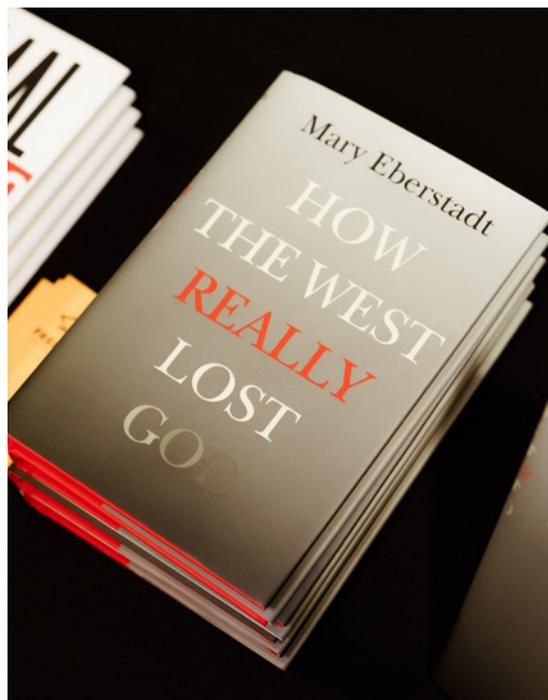
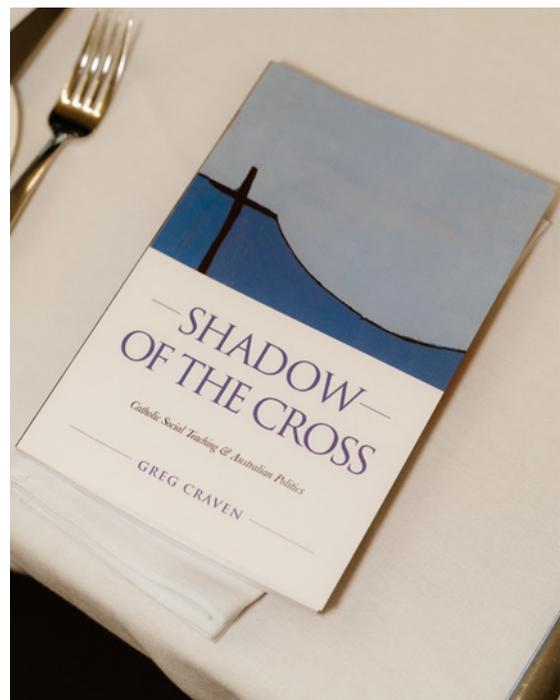
## **PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY**

Through its imprint, The Kapunda Press, the institute has also produced a range of publications discussing larger issues such as religion and democracy, the future of human rights, political tribalism, and the major political traditions in Australia.

## **INTERNATIONAL ADVISORS**

The institute is supported by international advisors drawn from North America, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, with expertise in public ethics encompassing law, history, higher education, philosophy, sociology, public policy, interreligious affairs and political science.





**POLITICS, IDENTITY AND RELIGION  
IN A POST-REVOLUTIONARY  
WORLD**

**MARY EBERSTADT**

Canberra, Sydney Melbourne  
24 – 30 October 2022

PM Glynn Institute  
Australian Catholic University  
2022