



## Loss of Faith and Loss of Family

America “is becoming less religious as a whole,” the respected Pew Survey on religion recently reported, “and it’s happening across the board.” The number of adults who identify themselves as Christian continues its long-noted decline: from 86% in 1990, to 76% in 2008, to 71% in 2014—a 15% drop in the last quarter century, 8% of that in the last seven years.

During that same period the so-called “nones”—people who have no religious affiliation—grew by 8% and now make up 23% of the population. (The Catholic share is 21 %.) And as “nones” age, they become more secular—that is, even less religious. In 2007 25% identified themselves as atheists or agnostics; in 2014, 31% did.

This falling away from faith occurs simultaneously with the falling apart of the family, and not by accident. Sociologists would have us believe that religious decline *precedes* family decline. As Mary Eberstadt puts it, “people *first* lose their Christianity, and *then* change their habits of family formation.”

But society-shaping influence flows the other way as well. Deliberate withdrawal of cultural support for the traditional family fosters and accelerates the withdrawal of personal commitment to traditional faith. In the religiously “neutral” secular state “equality” replaces “responsibility” as the overarching standard to shape expectations

for family life. Officially promoted social acceptance of contraception and cohabitation, of easy divorce, of the redefinition of marriage—all encourage young people to sever their connection to traditional family formation and leave their Christianity behind them.

The choice is clear because Christian faith is inextricably embedded in a multi-layered *family* story from beginning to end. The drama of salvation falls into fragility with Adam and Eve, rises on the path to redemption with Abraham and Sarah, rejoices with Mary at the birth of the Christ Child, and exults with the Bridegroom at the wedding feast of the Lamb.

In the world of the fragmented modern family, however, more and more people have less and less personal experience of these biblical bases of faith. Jesus' trust in the love of His Father will be puzzling to children who grow up without the guidance of a male parent in the home. And people who have never held or cared for a baby in this world of falling birthrates and abortion on demand may not be readily disposed to extend protection to the child in the womb. Loss of family goes hand in hand with loss of faith.

Pew Survey statistics confirm the effectiveness of these secularizing pressures, but they take no account of features of family life that lead people *toward* church, not away from it—experiencing the sacred in the birth of a child, for example, or feeling the need for moral community to raise children well. Those who are drawn by such attractions to family life constitute a multitude unmeasured by Pew in 2014.

Sometimes a look back helps us to look ahead. What if there had been a Pew Survey of American religion in 1798? It would have shown Catholics to be but 3% of an overwhelmingly Protestant population and would surely have projected a future of Catholic decline. No one reading the results would have predicted that the century to come would see the greatest missionary expansion in the history of the Church and that Catholics would be the most numerous American Christians by 2014. But that is precisely the future that came to be.

The Pew Survey tells us about trends. As Catholics we need to seek the truth beneath the trends—the truth that binds God, marriage, and family together. For it is by living the truth, not by following trends, that we are set free.